



 Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (l) shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi during the first Central Asia-Japan Dialogue Summit in Tokyo, Japan, on December 20, 2025.

• EAST ASIA FORUM

SCO — as well as through bilateral mechanisms. Attacks on Chinese enterprises in late November and early December last year highlighted how closely China's security is linked to stability in Central Asia, as well as the broader global implications of instability in the region. Central Asian states themselves are interested in security cooperation. The aforementioned Action Plan notes Japan's readiness to contribute to stability in the region, particularly along the Tajik-Afghan border. In 2023, Japan introduced a new security assistance framework known as Official Security Assistance (OSA). Although Central Asian countries are not yet included in this program, expanding it to cover the region may become relevant in the future.

Japan's areas of comparative advantage (case of Tajikistan)

Japan's strategy in Central Asia initially focused on preventing excessive dependence of the region on its larger neighbors, while identifying areas where Japan could realistically compete. Geographic distance and the economic conditions of Central Asia — including a weak investment climate and low income levels — limited the development of strong trade and economic ties with Tokyo.

At the same time, the region faced numerous socio-economic and political challenges following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and required support for comprehensive development and long-term stability. Japan chose to focus on this area, where it could offer a competitive advantage. Tokyo began providing financial assistance, technical support, and expertise to Central Asian countries in areas such as combating transnational crime, healthcare, environmental protection and disaster prevention, water management, energy, trade and investment, transport and logistics, and poverty reduction.

To advance its regional objectives, Japan adopted the Silk Road Diplomacy strategy in 1997 and launched the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue in 2004. Japan has mainly implemented its regional policy through Official Development Assistance (ODA), administered by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

In Tajikistan, JICA's project portfolio over the first 30 years of its activities (1993-2023) included 49 projects with a total value exceeding \$427.4 million. Of this amount, \$97.2 million was allocated to technical assistance and \$330.2 million to grant aid.

One of JICA's key programs involves training Tajik civil servants in Japan to improve their professional qualifications. Each year, JICA provides 15 scholarships for Tajik officials to pursue master's or doctoral degrees, as well as training courses for around 100 participants. More than 2,500 specialists have already completed training in Japan and currently hold positions within the Tajik government.

JICA also implements projects in Tajikistan in areas such as infrastructure development, healthcare, cross-border cooperation, poverty reduction, and

agriculture. Its project portfolio includes the modernization of Dushanbe International Airport; improvements to road maintenance equipment in Sughd Region and eastern Khatlon Region; projects aimed at improving living standards in Tajik-Afghan border areas (jointly with UNDP); rural development projects in the Tajik-Afghan border zone of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region; the Food Security Project for Vulnerable Farmers (2KR); and projects providing specialized medical equipment for the control of infectious diseases (EPI), implemented in two phases.

Summit outcomes: new Japanese approach?

Before drawing conclusions from the summit, it is important to consider the broader context. Today, Central Asian states are interested not only in receiving development assistance but also in attracting investment and advanced technologies across different sectors of their economies, as well as in building full-scale economic partnerships. Governments in the region are promoting initiatives in digitalization, artificial intelligence, green energy, infrastructure modernization, and transport connectivity. Central Asian countries are also seeking to diversify their foreign relations and attract new sources of support. From this perspective, Japan — one of the world's leading innovative economies with significant financial and technological resources — is an attractive partner. It is within this framework that the first Central Asia + Japan summit should be understood.

Japan, for its part, is increasingly viewing Central Asia through a geopolitical and geo-economic lens. During the summit, Prime Minister Takaichi stated that the region has strategic importance and strong potential in geopolitics, economic security, and business cooperation. Under the Tokyo Declaration adopted after the summit, Central Asian states ex-

pressed support for strengthening Japan's role in global affairs, for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and for reform of the UN Security Council, where Japan seeks permanent membership. Prime Minister Takaichi also announced Japan's intention to invest approximately \$20 billion over the next five years to support private-sector projects in Central Asia. She highlighted the development and diversification of rare earth supply chains, deeper cooperation in artificial intelligence, and the expansion of key transport corridors such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

Central Asian leaders also expressed interest in cooperation in priority areas. Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev emphasized his country's readiness to create favorable conditions for Japanese investors and identified nuclear energy, green energy, rare earth metals, logistics, and digital technologies as promising sectors. Supporting Japan's initiatives in artificial intelligence, he proposed hosting a regional platform at the Astana Hub technopark and the Alem.ai International Center. Overall, more than 60 bilateral documents worth over \$3.7 billion were signed during his visit. Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev called for expanding the presence of Japanese investors in the region. He proposed creating an investment fund for infrastructure and industrial development in Central Asia, as well as establishing a regional network of Japanese technoparks to support industrial cooperation and technology transfer. He also suggested creating a Central Asia-Japan digital hub for cooperation in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital solutions, and invited Japan to participate in major transport projects, including high-speed railways, highways, airports, and digital transport corridors. The leaders of Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan also expressed interest in cooperation in key areas, including energy, transport, the green economy, artificial

intelligence, and human capital development. As for the broader impact of the summit and Japan's attempt to shape a new regional agenda, it is too early to draw firm conclusions. Similar initiatives in Central Asia often do not lead to significant changes in the regional balance of power and remain largely declarative. Japan will also face strong competition from established regional actors. Whether Tokyo will be able to compete effectively remains an open question, and for now, cautious assessments appear more appropriate.

Overall, more than 150 documents involving both public and private sectors were signed following the summit. Moreover, the Tokyo Initiative CA+JAD (Central Asia + Japan Advanced Dialogue) was launched, and the Tokyo Declaration was adopted. In conclusion, several key points can be highlighted:

1. Against the background of global changes driven largely by China's rising power, Japan is reassessing its international role, with the containment of Chinese influence becoming a central concern for Tokyo.
2. Within this strategy, Central Asia — due to its geographic location, resource base, and growing diplomatic importance — may serve as a strategic rear area for Japan.
3. For Central Asian states, increased Japanese interest is also beneficial as it supports diversification of foreign relations and access to additional resources.
4. For more than 30 years, Japan has pursued a soft power approach in Central Asia, focusing on socio-economic and political development. Today, however, Tokyo appears to be moving toward a more active policy aimed at strengthening its geo-economic and geopolitical position in the region.
5. At the same time, it is still too early to speak of a full shift in Japan's regional policy. It remains to be seen whether current expectations of a "new era" of relations will translate into concrete results or remain largely rhetorical.

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The map shows the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

• TIR



 The main highway connecting the Tajikistani capital of Dushanbe with the Afghan border is being expanded with JICA's assistance. The project is aimed at improving connectivity with neighboring countries and is expected to boost economic activity.

• KUNO TAKESHI/JICA