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ЖАПОНИЯНЫН ОРТО АЗИЯ МЕНЕН КЫЗМАТТАШТЫК МЕХАНИЗМДЕРИН  
ӨНҮКТҮРҮҮДӨГҮ УЧУРДАГЫ АБАЛЫ ЖАНА КЕЛЕЧЕГИ

СОВРЕМЕННОЕ РАЗВИТИЕ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ ПРОДВИЖЕНИЯ ЯПОНИЕЙ МЕХАНИЗМОВ  
СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА С ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИЕЙ

THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS OF JAPAN'S PROMOTION  
OF COOPERATION MECHANISMS WITH CENTRAL ASIA

**Кыскача мүнөздөмө:** Акыркы жылдарда «C5+1» механизми маанилүүлүгүн арттырып, ири державалардын катышуусунун көбөйүшү жана диалог деңгээлинин жогорулашы менен мүнөздөлөт. «Орто Азия + Жапония» кызматташтык механизми Орто Азиянын беш өлкөсү менен тышкы мамлекет тарабынан түзүлгөн биринчи «C5+1» структурасы болуп саналат. Ал институционалдаштыруу, төмөндөө, туруктуу өнүгүү жана өзгөртүү жана трансформация деген төрт этаптан өтүү. Азыркы учурда Жапония Орто Азияга стратегиялык көңүл буруусун күчөтүп, дипломатиялык диалог деңгээлин көтөрүү, институционалдык дизайын жакшыртуу жана кызматташтык темаларын кеңейтүү аркылуу бул механизмди өнүктүрүүдө. Келечекте Жапония менен Орто Азия өлкөлөрүнүн «C5+1» механизми аркылуу өз ара аракеттешүүсү мүмкүнчүлүктөр менен кошо сыноолорго да такалышат. Кийинчерээк Жапония бул чөйрөдө Орто Азия өлкөлөрү менен практикалык кызматташтыкты тереңдетүүгө басым жасоосу керек, ошондо дипломатиялык мамилелердин туруктуулугу жана тынч өнүгүүсүнө жардам берет.

**Аннотация:** В последние годы механизм «C5+1» постепенно приобретает значимость, характеризуясь растущим участием крупных держав и повышением уровня диалога. Механизм сотрудничества «Центральная Азия плюс Япония» стал первой структурой «C5+1», созданной внешней страной с пятью центральноазиатскими государствами. Он прошел четыре этапа: институционализацию, спад, стабильное развитие и корректировку с трансформацией. В настоящее время Япония уделяет все больше стратегического внимания Центральной Азии, продвигая развитие механизма за счет повышения уровня дипломатического диалога, совершенствования институционального дизайна и расширения тем сотрудничества. В будущем взаимодействие Японии

и стран Центральной Азии через механизм «C5+1» сталкивается как с возможностями, так и с вызовами. В дальнейшем Японии следует сосредоточиться на углублении практического сотрудничества с центральноазиатскими странами в рамках данного механизма для содействия стабильным дипломатическим отношениям и мирному развитию.

**Abstract:** The "C5+1" mechanism has gradually gained prominence in recent years, marked by the increasing participation of major powers and the rising level of dialogue. The "Central Asia Plus Japan" cooperation mechanism was the first "C5+1" framework established between an external country and the five Central Asian nations. It has gone through four phases: institutionalization, downturn, stable development, and adjustment and transformation. Currently, Japan's strategic focus on Central Asia is growing, and it is promoting the mechanism's development by elevating diplomatic dialogue levels, refining institutional design, and expanding cooperation topics. In the future, engaging with Central Asia through the "C5+1" mechanism presents both opportunities and challenges for Japan and the Central Asian countries. Moving forward, Japan should focus on enhancing practical cooperation with Central Asian nations under this framework to foster stable diplomatic relations and peaceful development.

**Негизги созддор:** Жапония; Орто Азия; аймактык дипломатия; кызматташтык механизми

**Ключевые слова:** Япония; Центральная Азия; региональная дипломатия; механизм сотрудничества

**Keywords:** Japan, Central Asia, regional diplomacy, cooperation mechanism

## Introduction

Central Asia, with its abundant natural resources and strategic geopolitical location, has become a key arena for both competition and cooperation among major global powers. As a leading Asian economy, Japan has actively engaged in diplomacy with Central Asian nations. In recent years, it has steadily strengthened ties with the five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan - proposing various diplomatic initiatives targeting the region. These include the "Silk Road Diplomacy" (1997), the "Central Asia Plus Japan" Dialogue Mechanism (2004), the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (2006), and the "Diplomacy That Looks at the World from a Broader Perspective" (2012), which also encompasses Central Asia and beyond. The year 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and the five

Central Asian nations. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that it would take this opportunity to comprehensively advance bilateral exchanges and cooperation across political, economic, social, and other fields. Historically, Japan has been one of the earliest countries to focus on regional economic cooperation and integration in Central Asia. Since establishing diplomatic ties with the Central Asian states in 1992, Japan has proposed various diplomatic initiatives targeting the region, such as the "Central Asia Plus Japan" Dialogue Mechanism. In fact, the first "C5+1" cooperation framework formed between an external power and the five Central Asian countries was the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism, established in 2004.

Over its 20-year evolution, the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism has achieved notable results in institutional development, agenda-setting, cooperation content, and project implementation,

becoming a key platform for multilateral engagement between Japan and Central Asia. A review of its development reveals distinct phased characteristics, including periods of institutionalization, downturn, stable growth, and adjustment and transformation. With the increasing establishment of "C5+1" dialogue mechanisms between external powers and Central Asian nations, it is essential to examine the trajectory, current status, and future trends of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism - the earliest of its kind. Against this backdrop, this study will outline the development of Japan's efforts to advance the "Central Asia Plus Japan" framework and analyze its prospects moving forward.

#### **Evolution of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" Cooperation Framework**

Among the "C5+1" cooperation frameworks established between external powers and the five Central Asian countries, the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism, created in 2004, was the first of its kind. Japan's ability to pioneer this format with Central Asia can be attributed to two main factors: First, Japan drew upon its experience with ASEAN to engage Central Asian states in collective dialogue and cooperation. Building on its established mechanisms for interacting with Southeast Asian nations, Japan sought to replicate this model by fostering multilateral dialogue and partnerships with Central Asia, ultimately leading to the creation of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" framework. Second, Japan recognized the strategic value of Central Asia and aimed to expand its influence through institutionalized multilateral engagement. By establishing this mechanism, Japan gradually defined its role within Central Asia's regional cooperation landscape.

In recent years, Japan has gradually shifted the narrative of its foreign aid objectives toward

promoting human development, security, poverty reduction, and other social issues. In Central Asia, Japan's diplomacy has focused on political dialogue and economic cooperation, with Official Development Assistance (ODA) serving as a key instrument for advancing diplomatic engagement, expanding market access, and enhancing influence - factors that have contributed significantly to the success of Japan's regional diplomacy. A notable example is Japan's "One Village, One Product" (OVOP) initiative in Kyrgyzstan, which supports 29 production groups around Lake Issyk-Kul, benefiting approximately 250 people. This program has not only created employment opportunities and raised income levels in rural Kyrgyz communities but has also helped cultivate a positive image of Japan. Additionally, it has facilitated the introduction of Japanese brands such as Muji into the Kyrgyz market. Furthermore, Japan's embassies in Central Asian countries annually select students from host nations and recommend them for scholarships provided by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), enabling them to pursue studies in Japan.

Japan's regional cooperation policy toward Central Asia has evolved through the administrations of Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe, Yoshihide Suga, and Fumio Kishida. Following Abe's tenure, subsequent cabinets largely maintained his strategic approach, continuing to prioritize Central Asia's regional economic cooperation while emphasizing Japan's commitment to "high-quality infrastructure" development. Through the "Central Asia Plus Japan" dialogue mechanism, Japan has sustained its support for the region's growth. Over its two-decade existence, the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism has achieved measurable progress in institutional development,

agenda-setting, cooperative initiatives, and project implementation, establishing itself as a key multilateral platform between Japan and the five Central Asian states. Since the 1990s, Japan's diplomatic relations with Central Asia were initially limited to economic aid, technical assistance, and personnel training. However, in the 21st century, Tokyo introduced a series of strategic visions—including "Eurasian Diplomacy," "Silk Road Diplomacy," "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," and "Diplomacy That Looks at the World from a Broader Perspective" - refining its regional economic cooperation policy through ODA and investment partnerships. Since 2019, Japan has leveraged the "Central Asia Plus Japan" platform to deepen multilateral collaboration in tourism development, logistics, transportation, and regional security. Bilaterally, engagements have become more tailored, with Japan advancing differentiated cooperation tailored to each Central Asian country's priorities.

#### **Institutional Development of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" Cooperation Framework**

During the formative period of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" cooperation mechanism, Japan and the five Central Asian countries gradually established a framework for exchange and collaboration. In August 2004, Japan and the Central Asian nations held their first foreign ministers' meeting, marking the birth of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" dialogue mechanism. This signified Japan's approach to engaging with Central Asia as a unified regional entity. The meeting outlined three cooperative principles: "respect for diversity, competition and coordination, and open cooperation," and declared five key objectives for the dialogue mechanism. During this period, the "Central Asia Plus Japan" framework developed

a multi-tiered dialogue structure, including foreign ministers' meetings, senior officials' meetings, and the "Tokyo Dialogue" laying the groundwork for bilateral exchanges.

Between 2004 and 2007, the mechanism held two foreign ministers' meetings, four senior officials' meetings, and one "Tokyo Dialogue," establishing its operational foundation, functional scope, and objectives. This phase achieved basic institutionalization, elevating Japan-Central Asia relations to a new level. The development and institutionalization of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism largely depended on Japan's growing strategic focus on Central Asia as the leading actor in this framework. Japan began formulating targeted Central Asia policies, primarily through economic assistance and Official Development Assistance (ODA), to build bilateral and regional ties with the five Central Asian states. In 2002, then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi emphasized the need to "pay attention to Central Asia" and proposed the "Silk Road Energy Initiative", strengthening strategic engagement with the region. By 2004, Japan and Central Asia formally established the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism, making that year a milestone in Japan's diplomatic strategy toward Central Asia.

#### **Evolution and Enhanced Engagement in the Central Asia Plus Japan Framework**

Following a period of stagnation, the "Central Asia Plus Japan" cooperation mechanism gradually entered a phase of stable development. During 2008-2012, Japan's domestic political turbulence led to declining strategic attention toward Central Asia, resulting in a downturn for the mechanism. Institutional development and collaborative initiatives largely stalled, with even the regular foreign ministers' meetings being postponed. Between 2009 and 2012,

Japan underwent three leadership changes. While maintaining economic engagement with Central Asia—particularly in resource extraction and infrastructure development—this "resource diplomacy" approach diluted the mechanism's original cooperative spirit. Instead, it revealed Japan's tendency to instrumentalize the framework as a vehicle for expanding its political and economic interests in the region, sparking discontent among Central Asian states. Compounded by Japan's inward-focused political shifts and prioritization of relations with major powers and neighboring countries, Central Asia occupied a peripheral position in Tokyo's foreign policy agenda. In summary, this period - marked by the global financial crisis and Japan's domestic instability - saw the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism stagnate with minimal progress.

Following Shinzo Abe's return to power, Japan renewed its strategic focus on Central Asia within its diplomatic framework, leveraging the "Central Asia Plus Japan" cooperation mechanism to strengthen ties with regional states and enhance its geopolitical influence. During 2013-2019, the mechanism demonstrated positive developments in both institutional design and cooperation scope. A landmark 2015 tour saw Abe visit all five Central Asian nations, resulting in multiple economic aid agreements designed to consolidate Japan's regional presence.

Japan has prioritized agriculture and connectivity as key cooperation areas. During the 6th Foreign Ministers' Meeting in May 2017, Japan and the five Central Asian nations signed the Regional Transport and Logistics Cooperation Roadmap, with Tokyo pledging 24 billion yen in assistance. The joint statement from this meeting notably: Marked the first mention of North Korea-related issues ; Emphasized humanitarian problem-

solving. Reflecting the mechanism's growing attention to regional security matters. In May 2019, the 7th Foreign Ministers' Meeting adopted the framework's second action plan, addressing: Trade and investment ; Transportation networks ; Tourism development ; Regional security cooperation ; Sustainable development. This plan signified the mechanism's advancement to a new developmental phase. With the Abe administration's stable governance, Japan strengthened both the institutionalization and functional implementation of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" framework.

Looking ahead, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is scheduled to attend the first Japan-Central Asia Summit in August 2024, with planned cooperation expansion into: Decarbonization initiatives; Human resource development programs; Logistics network optimization. Through this mechanism, Japan has deepened multilateral collaboration with Central Asia across tourism, logistics and regional security, demonstrating the framework's steady institutional maturation.

### **Development Trends of the Central Asia Plus Japan Cooperation Framework**

Since 2020, the "Central Asia plus Japan" cooperation mechanism has entered a period of adjustment. After the Abe administration stepped down, the subsequent Suga and Kishida administrations have shown a relatively lower strategic focus on the Central Asian region compared to the Abe era. Japan and the Central Asian countries have only held three foreign ministers' meetings, two senior officials' meetings, and one "Tokyo Dialogue." Although two foreign ministers' meetings were held consecutively in April and December 2022, no specific cooperation documents or strategic frameworks were formed. The lack of substantial content in multilateral

cooperation in these meetings has resulted in minimal practical effectiveness for Japan's multilateral cooperation with Central Asia.

However, with the shift in the international situation and changes in the dynamics of great power competition, Japan has gradually adjusted the "Central Asia plus Japan" cooperation mechanism to adapt to the development and changes in regional and global situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan and the Central Asian countries held a special foreign ministers' meeting via video conference in August 2020, reaching several agreements on cooperation in medical equipment, technical assistance, medicine supply, and infectious disease prevention.

During the 14th Senior Officials' Meeting held in June 2021, Japan and the Central Asian nations not only reaffirmed traditional cooperation areas but also conducted in-depth discussions on public health, medical care, and healthcare collaboration. A significant milestone was achieved in September 2023 with the inaugural Ministerial-Level Economic and Energy Dialogue under the "Central Asia Plus Japan" mechanism. Key outcomes included: Joint commitment to accelerate the development of carbon neutrality roadmaps for 2050 and beyond ; Establishment of bilateral credit mechanisms ; Mobilization of public-private financing to support energy transition initiatives. These developments mark a substantial enhancement of bilateral cooperation in economic and energy sectors, reflecting the mechanism's evolving focus on sustainable development.

As the "Central Asia Plus Japan" cooperation mechanism marks its 20th anniversary in 2024, Japan is undertaking a comprehensive review of the framework's future trajectory. Tomohiko Uyama, a leading Japanese

expert on Central Asian affairs, observes: "2024 may represent a pivotal turning point for Japan's Central Asia policy". An analysis of the mechanism's current developmental trends suggests Japan faces critical challenges in advancing institutional upgrades, particularly regarding:

First, enhance the diplomatic level of the "Central Asia plus Japan" cooperation mechanism and improve its institutional design. In 2023, Japan began discussions with the five Central Asian countries on elevating the "C5+1" foreign ministers' dialogue mechanism to the level of heads of state, with plans to hold the first "Central Asia plus Japan" Leaders' Summit in August 2024. This indicates that Japan is intentionally seeking to upgrade the "Central Asia plus Japan" cooperation mechanism by raising its level.

Second, expand the agenda of the "Central Asia plus Japan" cooperation mechanism. Originally, this mechanism was centered on development, emphasizing economic and people-to-people cooperation. However, Japan currently stresses that the unique geopolitical location of Central Asia means that economic and social development cannot be separated from security issues. Japan is increasingly "taking on corresponding responsibilities" in the security domain, which has become an important part of its efforts to promote this mechanism. To this end, Japan has indicated that while strengthening economic ties, conducting "energy diplomacy," and upgrading infrastructure in Central Asia, it will also enhance cooperation on "investment in human resources" and "quality of growth." Gradually, it will expand interactions on security issues, incorporating topics such as the Afghanistan issue, the North Korea issue, the Ukraine issue, and regional security order into the framework of dialogue and cooperation.

Third, adjust the asymmetrical relationship within the “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperation mechanism. The establishment, development, and evolution of the “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperation mechanism have been largely dominated by Japan. However, with the increasing autonomy of the Central Asian region, in order to enhance the cooperation willingness of the Central Asian countries, Japan has consciously sought to change this asymmetrical situation. Japan is intentionally promoting a shift in the form of the “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperation mechanism from Japan-dominated to bilateral consultation, demonstrating a focus on common interests in terms of the mechanism, agenda, and projects.

### **Conclusion**

Japan's diplomacy towards Central Asia and the gradual advancement of the “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperation mechanism are progressing, but there are still challenges in promoting stable cooperation. As a resource-scarce island nation, Japan began to look towards Central Asia in the 1960s in search of the mineral resources needed for its high-speed economic growth. Its investments in areas such as mineral resources and energy development have a long history. Through the “soft power” of its talented individuals with successful experiences in political, economic, and legal aspects, Japan will leverage its strengths and use the cooperation mechanism to tap into the important resources of the “Silk Road Economic Belt.”

However, Japan and the Central Asian countries are geographically distant from each other, resulting in high transportation costs for trade and investment. They are also at different levels and stages of economic development, with relatively weak inter-industry demand. Moreover, the participation of Japanese private enterprises in economic cooperation with Central Asia still needs

to be further increased. Additionally, considering geopolitical factors, Japan's economic and trade cooperation with Central Asia must follow the United States' strategic deployment in the region and navigate the geopolitical competition with Russia. Therefore, it is unlikely that Japan will achieve significant breakthroughs in its economic and trade cooperation with Central Asia in the short term.

In summary, through the “Central Asia plus Japan” cooperation mechanism, Japan continues to expand its relations with Central Asian countries in the fields of economy, politics, and culture. However, against the backdrop of geopolitical competition and the rivalry among major powers, the cooperation mechanism still faces many challenges. In the future, Japan is likely to continue to deepen economic cooperation while seeking more strategic space in geopolitics.

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