Pan-Asianism of Japan in Relations with the Countries of Central Asia

Through assessing the latest developments in Central Asia (CA), one can frequently find a discussion of the region being influenced by Pan-Turkism, in various commentaries. This is a secular nationalist doctrine actively disseminated by current Turkish authorities and it refers to the concepts about the need for political consolidation of Turkic peoples based on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic commonality.

However, apart from Pan-Turkism, Pan-Asianism, an ideological and political movement calling for unity, integration, and hegemony of the Asian peoples, is an essential factor in developing the situation in Central Asia that Japan intensively uses. The ideology of Pan-Asianism, based on the belief that Asian values should take precedence over any other, particularly European values, had witnessed immense growth in Japan in the previous century. The most remarkable flourishing of Pan-Asianism occurred during World War II when Japanese propaganda taught this ideology in the Asian territories occupied by Japanese troops as part of the idea of “The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” It is worth noting that among nationalist historians and ethnographers in Japan, there is a general idea that the origins of the Japanese nation may be traced somewhere in the region of modern-day Central Asia and Mongolia rather than on the Korean peninsula.

Immediately after the Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese authorities emphasized the need to cultivate an Asian spirit, as opposed to Western domination in defining Japan's future role in Asia. In the proclaimed "Asia is One" thesis, the
Japanese mission in Asia was no longer seen as establishing control over it, but as stimulating its "awakening," "reconstructing Asia," up to and including the creation of Pax Japonica to save Asia from "white imperialism."

Pan-Asianism became actively implanted in Central Asia by Japan after the collapse of the USSR when Tokyo began to shape and implement policies toward the region, attention to which was driven by Japanese long-term economic and political interests. The Land of the Rising Sun was interested in gaining access to the region's fuel and energy complex and, above all, to raw material deposits. Japan's heavy dependence on foreign hydrocarbon supplies has led it to seek unhindered access to such resources in Central Asian countries and to establish reliable oil and gas transportation routes for its own supplies. For this reason, a key challenge for Japan in Central Asia has been the development of alternative export pipelines. In particular, Japan proposed several pipeline projects to access Central Asian hydrocarbon resources, mainly through China.

In 1997, Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto presented an updated vision of Japanese international relations, its centerpiece being the re-creation of the Great Silk Road that had once served as a bridge between Japan and the West. Central Asian countries had a key role in charting the new path. In addition, in relation to Central Asia, Japan launched the Central Asian Initiative aimed at including local countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD in 1993 and the Silk Road Diplomacy Program of Action in 1998 to support a democratic transition, promote economic reform, and reconstruct transport infrastructure and exploration of natural resources.

Unlike the US or EU countries, the apparent feature of Tokyo's policy is economic gain, but the political importance of developing relations with Central Asia has also always been implicit. This was particularly evident with establishing the regular high-level diplomatic dialogue "Central Asia + Japan" (5+1) in the capital of Kazakhstan in 2004 on Tokyo's initiative. In its first joint statement, the participants clearly outlined the international status of the new diplomatic format, which has become the central platform for the agreement of the most promising areas of relations. In today's plan, they include: political dialogue, intra-regional cooperation, business promotion, intellectual dialogue, and cultural exchanges. This "5+1" format was subsequently actively supported by other countries in their relations with Central Asia, especially the USA, the European Union, India, China, and others.

In putting forward this initiative, Tokyo was first and foremost counting on the support of the countries of the region in its movement to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The states of the region, on the other hand, were eager to develop relations with Japan as an alternative source of financial and technological support free from geopolitical oaths.

Within a relatively short time, Japan has managed to establish itself firmly in the Central Asian region. Its activities here initially emphasized a common Asian identity with these countries. As a result, cultural and racial similarities and, consequently, particular emotional affinities became an integral part of official rhetoric. Moreover, unlike in East Asia, Japan's reputation is not tarnished by its experience of military aggression in this region. Even more so, Central Asian residents remember tens of thousands of Japanese prisoners of war present in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan after World War II. There remain buildings erected by their hands, such as the Central Telegraph and the Ministry of Culture in Tashkent, the Academy of Sciences in Almaty, and the Farkhad Dam in Tajikistan.

Japan, a country that has renounced the use of military force in resolving international disputes and rarely resorts to economic coercion (sanctions), relies on the potential of "soft power," including traditional and modern culture, business models, innovations, and other aspects, in its activities in Central Asia. Japan advocates "democracy through development," believing that economic prosperity would be translated into improved democracy and human rights. In part, this approach is attributed to the fact that democracy was introduced in Japan from outside during the post-war reform of the political system. Therefore, in furthering democracy in Central Asia, Japan is promoting Western values with an Eastern flavor, which is much more appealing to local regimes than the rigid approach of Europe and the United States.

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that Japan's rise as a Central Asian ally capable of assuming the role of regional leader is generally consistent with the United States' policy of maintaining a "balance of power," especially as an economic and political-military counterweight to Russia and China. There is much evidence of US-Japanese concerted action in Central Asia, including several instances in which Japan has played a supporting role in securing an American presence in the region. For example, after the events of September 11, 2001, US authorities officially acknowledged the need for financial assistance to Uzbekistan. They asked namely Japan to do this because it was expected that "Uzbekistan would play a key role in the military campaign against neighboring Afghanistan."
Meanwhile, even before that time, Japan's total investment in the country's oil and gas industry and transport infrastructure (railroads, construction, and modernization of highways and airports) had exceeded $1.6 billion by 2001. At the same time, it is clear that Japan helped maintain Uzbekistan's loyalty to the United States and made it possible for Tashkent to decide back in the day to open Karshi-Khanabad Air Base as part of its declared war on terrorism. To further strengthen ties with Uzbekistan, in 2002, first the United States and then Japan (under apparent pressure from Washington) signed an agreement on strategic cooperation with Uzbekistan, and then, to intensify external economic assistance to this Central Asian country, Japan, with the active role played by the United States, signed an agreement on the development of economic cooperation with, and assistance to economic reforms in, Uzbekistan. Notably, Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian country with which Japan has signed a separate economic cooperation agreement.

Although in 2005, Uzbekistan demanded the closure of the US Karshi-Khanabad airbase, leading to the deterioration of Uzbek-American relations; in contrast, cooperation between Japan and Uzbekistan continues to remain at a reasonably high level. And one can be sure that should the situation inside Uzbekistan change, Japan will make every effort to facilitate the resumption of close cooperation with the United States, and perhaps even in the military sphere.

Japan has also seriously assisted the United States in establishing another American military base in Central Asia in the recent past, at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan. In 1996, Japan gave the first $5 million grant to modernize the airport, and in 2000 it completed Phase 2: Extension of the runway to accommodate heavy cargo aircraft, construction of modern terminals to receive and dispatch cargo, replacement of radar equipment, and so on. A total of about $55 million was allocated to resolve purely technical issues about the possibility of stationing US troops in Kyrgyzstan.

In this regard, it should be emphasized that, from the very beginning, Japan's policy in Central Asia was not only a part of its foreign policy in the world, solving its own problems of Pan-Asianism in the region, but also a complementary element of US policy in Central Asia, ensuring the promotion of American interests there.

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