Japan and Turkey Boost Cooperation in Central Asia

Pragmatism has long been the backbone of the Japanese presence in Central Asia, expressed in billions of dollars in direct bilateral financial assistance and multilateral financing through the Asian Development Bank and other financial institutions. However, Japan has not yet learned how to firmly convert the returns on financial and other assistance provided to the region into political leverage.

Therefore, Japan relies on engagement with extra-regional players to expand its presence in Central Asia. And in this context, the outlines of the growing cooperation between Turkey and Japan in Central Asia, sharing responsibility with Ankara in promoting Tokyo’s association with the region, should be considered. And so, several Japan-Turkey and other, bigger consortia have emerged in the region in infrastructure, energy, and chemical industries, implemented in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The complementary nature of these projects is that the Japanese side is usually responsible for the financing and, in some cases, provides technology, whereas the Turkish companies act as subcontractors.

Since 2000, Ankara and Tokyo have held periodic consultations on the stability and development issues in Central Asia. There are various examples of Turkish and Japanese companies and consortia working together on projects. In particular, Turkey’s Calik Holding and Japan’s Mitsubishi Corporation in 2015 began participating in the construction of a carbamide plant in Turkmenistan with a capacity of 1.155 million metric tons per year, with plans to export its products by sea. A Japanese-Turkish consortium to develop the Galkynysh Gas Field, a vital element of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, operates in this Central Asian country. It includes Japanese companies such as JGC Corporation, Mitsubishi Corporation, Itochu, Chiyoda, Sojitz, and Turkey’s Calik Holding and Ronesans Endustri Tesisleri. By acting in such a joint consortium with Ankara, Tokyo expects to reduce
its risks, as Turkey in this cooperation acts as a kind of pilot, one of the few countries with relatively privileged relations with Turkmenistan.

The Japan-Turkey tandem in Central Asia is not limited solely to Turkmenistan. In October 2016, Mitsubishi Corporation and Calik Holding began work on the construction of the Turakurgan TPP in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan, funded by a loan from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). In 2019, the first unit of the Turakurgan TPP was launched. In 2020, after testing, a second unit also started producing electricity. Today, the Turakurgan TPP operates at full power, producing an average of 915-920 MW of electricity. This is about 45-50% (2000-2500 MW) of the average consumption of the valley regions and 9-10% of the Republic’s consumption.

Another example of joint Japanese-Turkish cooperation in the region is the construction of a suspension bridge in Semey (Semipalatinsk), East Kazakhstan Region, in 2001 by the Japanese company IHI and the Turkish Alsim Alarko.

However, Japan-Turkey interaction in the region is not confined to commerce; Turkey has long been a partner promoting other Japanese projects. It is well known that the Turkish presence in Central Asia is not limited to its political and economic interests, and is associated with promoting the values and ideals of Pan-Turkism, aiming at the cultural and political unification of all Turkic peoples. This political movement, both secular and nationalistic in its nature, is actively spread widely by the current Turkish authorities. However, as previously noted in NEO, 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. In Japan’s relations with the countries of Central Asia, pan-Asianism is actively used as a value-based component, not as explicitly as pan-Turkism, but rather as a manifestation of a kind of Asian solidarity. In Japan, a popular idea among nationalist historians and ethnographers is that the roots of the Japanese nation are not in the Korean peninsula but somewhere in the region of present-day Central Asia and Mongolia. However, Japanese and Turkic languages and mentality do have a lot in common. Japan clearly intends to rehabilitate its regional assignment in the Central Asian context, as it has failed to establish itself in a comfortable status in its "home" region of Northeast Asia. As the Kyrgyzstan expert, Esen Usubaliev, once stated, Japan can be seen as an "Asian Israel": the neighboring countries respect it and simultaneously try to challenge it.

Therefore, the use of soft power tools has become necessary in Japan-Turkey cooperation in Central Asia. In 2007, the Japan Central Asia Friendship Association (JACAF) was established to implement projects in education funded by the Japanese Fund. It is worth noting that the first head of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was the Turkish Ambassador to Japan, who, according to Japanese experts, took the model of the Japanese International Development Agency (JICA) as a basis for TIKA. But since 2016, Turkey has not participated in the association’s activities, in which the educational programs of the Gülen movement referred to as FETO, an Islamist fraternal movement led by Fethullah Gülen, had played an active role.

However, the Turkish leader’s unpredictability and assertive manner, which caused apprehension with many of Turkey’s allies, is a sort of deterrent to Japan’s cooperation with Turkey and the Central Asian region. A certain distancing of Tokyo from Ankara has also been evident recently due to the growing Chinese economic influence in Turkey. At the same time, Tokyo is well aware that it will be difficult for Japan to do without a pilot in Central Asia.

Therefore, in addition to Tokyo’s traditional emphasis on its exports of technology, infrastructure, and capital in the development of Central Asian diplomacy, its cooperation with Ankara in the region will have to continue.

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