



JAPAN IN CENTRAL ASIA: DECLINING PARTNER OR KEY PLAYER?

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SPEAKERS:

Temur Umarov is an expert on China and Central Asia, and a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center

Tomohiko Uyama is a professor of modern history and politics of Central Asia at Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (Hokkaido University)

Timur Dadabaev is a professor of international relations and the director of the Combined MA and Ph.D. program in Japanese and Central Eurasian Studies at the University of Tsukuba

Umarov: Hello, everyone. Welcome to our webinar at Carnegie Moscow Center. We today are privileged to have one of the best experts on Japanese and Central Asian relations in the world; I would not be afraid to say that. It is crazy times right now, but we will stick to the plan, and this, our event, is the first in the pipeline that we are planning to have in the coming months and that will be taking a closer look at Japan's relations with post-Soviet space. And I'm very happy to open this series of events with the Japan's relations with the region where I come from, with Central Asia, and I'm very happy to have two great experts with us today. So, it's Tomohiko Uyama, professor of modern history and politics of Central Asia at Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University, and Timur Dadabaev, professor of international relations and the director of the combined MA and PhD program in Japanese and Central Eurasian Studies at the University of Tsukuba. My name is Temur Umarov, I'm a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center.

Today, we want to talk about Central Asia's foreign policy and Japan's role in it. And many people, when talking about the place of Central Asia in the world, its ties with other countries, many countries recall China and Russia, and sometimes West, but in my opinion and in opinion of several experts on this topic, the role of Japan many times is underestimated. And today, I think, we will try to put some focus on why Japan should be considered when thinking about Central Asia and why it's important. Because, at least if we take a look at Central Asia from geographical point of view, we will see that, of course, it's sandwiched between China and Russia, but at the same time this puts Central Asia in a position where the only way to successful development is diversifying its foreign relations. And here I think that Japan is playing a great role.

So let me give the floor to our first speaker, Mr. Tomohiko Uyama. And as we discussed before the event, let us first put our listeners and ourselves in a background of these relations between the five countries of the region and Japan. Can you tell us about that?

Uyama: Thank you, Temur, for your invitation to this great event and for your kind introduction. Let me share my screen.

Well, we can talk about Japan-Central Asia relations from various points of view, but today I select the topic "Japan-Central Asia Relations in the Post-Colonial World, or Colonial World," because I was provoked by the title of Dr. Timur Dadabaev's recent book, "Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations."

So, generally in Japan, as in the West, the importance of Central Asia has been explained by its natural resources and geopolitical importance, but they have not been linked to concrete strategies. Rather, the continuity with Asian diplomacy was prominent in Japan's diplomacy for about fifteen years after the independence of Central Asian countries. Japan used the term "Silk Road diplomacy" to emphasize the ancient connections and cultural similarities between Japan and Central Asia. Japan strengthened relations with Central Asia through development assistance and economic cooperation, using experience that Japan had gained over many years in other Asian countries. And the famous idea of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue, launched in 2004, was also based on Japan's experience with ASEAN.

I'm not only a political scientist, but also a historian, especially I study imperial and colonial history. Let me briefly talk about the history of Japan's Asian diplomacy.

Before World War II, the Japanese Empire actively built relationships with Asian peoples in an attempt to become a leader in Asia while promoting Westernization of itself. But it collided

with the United States and Britain, and spread the war to various parts of East and Southeast Asia, and caused great damage to Asian peoples.

After the war, Japan abandoned all its colonies and became a medium-sized nation-state, but the idea that Japan had its own role for the development of Asia remained. As the Japanese economy revived and developed, economic assistance and investment in Asian countries were emphasized, partly as the atonement for the imperialist past. On the other hand, Japan's attitude toward Asia was not without neocolonial elements. Economic expansion into Southeast Asian countries was sometimes perceived with distrust, and some Japanese actually took a derogatory attitude toward Asian people.

And when we talk about Japanese-Central Asian diplomacy, we can see it from the viewpoint of decolonization, and notably we can emphasize that Japan's approach is quite different from that of Western countries. So, while the United States tried to promote the departure of the Central Asian countries from Russia in the 1990s, Japan sought to strengthen the independence of these countries by supporting their economic development rather than eliminating the influence of Russia. To that end, Japan took the initiative to put the Central Asian states on the OECD's [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] DAC [Development Assistance Committee] list and provided a large amount of ODA [official development assistance]. Unlike Western countries, it did not place much emphasis on democratization and was rather critical of radical market reforms recommended by the IMF, and favored Uzbekistan's "step-by-step" reform line.

And Japan also sought to make Central Asian countries "pro-Japanese," partly in compensation of the situation that Japan's relations with some East Asian neighbors are complicated, and also in order to gain more votes in favor of possible entry of Japan into the Security Council of the United Nations as a permanent member. And we can note that many of the diplomats, bureaucrats, and politicians involved in Japan's early Central Asian diplomacy were very enthusiastic, but a few people said, half-jokingly, for example, "Kyrgyzstan is a Japanese colony." Overall, however, the neocolonial element was not prominent in Japan's Central Asian diplomacy.

And as you know, the concept of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue presupposes a multilateral dialogue with all the Central Asian countries, urging their own initiatives and mutual cooperation.

The "5+1" dialogue framework was subsequently imitated by other countries, like the United States, South Korea, India, recently China, and so on, but the "Central Asia plus Japan" is not simply five plus one; it is unique in its intention to assist in decolonization by supporting the voluntary efforts and mutual help of Central Asian countries. And around the time of the proposal for this dialogue, the number of personnel in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JICA's [Japan International Cooperation Agency] departments in charge of Central Asia, as well as embassies and JICA's offices, was also increased. However, at that time, tensions often arose between Central Asian countries, especially between Uzbekistan and other countries, and multilateral dialogue faced difficulties.

And moreover, Central Asian countries expected Japan to invest, but as the Japanese economy stagnated for a long time, Japanese companies were uninterested in unfamiliar and high-risk investment destinations. Later, moreover, ODA budgets were reduced. Some countries in Central Asia, which have grown economically, have also placed less emphasis on aid and

economic cooperation. So Japan, of course, is continuing routine activities in Central Asia quite actively, but new initiatives have not [been] seen in recent years.

And when we talk about Japan's foreign policy, we cannot neglect the U.S.-Japan alliance. Some people in Central Asia and Russia think that Japan represents the interests of the United States in Central Asia, but, as I mentioned earlier, Japan and the U.S. have very different approaches to Central Asia.

One aspect of Japan's cooperation with the United States in Central Asia is that it sought to encourage Central Asian countries to strengthen relations with Afghanistan and South Asia, but due to the turmoil in that country, this did not work very well.

But Central Asia's priority for Japan is indirectly related to U.S.-Japan relations. With the rise of China becoming a major issue for Japan in recent years, Japan is focusing on cooperating with the United States to prevent China's expansion. While Central Asia, which is far from Japan and where the United States cannot exert its influence, is not a priority region, Japan has emphasized the importance of the Indo-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia, Oceania, and South Asia.

And we have to take into consideration that Japan is an economic power, but in the military aspect it itself is a semi-colonial country subordinate to the United States, and in order to prevent the threat of China, Japan has to increase its cooperation with the United States.

Having said all this, Japan is one of the few countries that continues to cooperate with Central Asian countries at the grassroots level, such as local economic development, education, and medical care. In this regard, Japan plays an important, although modest, role in further decolonization of Central Asia.

Today's Central Asian countries have lost their former omnidirectional diplomatic balance and are overly dependent on Russia and China. Reliance on Russia narrows the extent to which Central Asian countries can make their own decisions, especially in a situation where Russia disregards the sovereignty of other post-Soviet countries, as it does now against Ukraine. There is also a great risk that sanctions on Russia will hurt the economies of Central Asian countries. Japan needs to provide more full-scale support to reduce dependence of Central Asian countries on great powers. If Japan cannot significantly increase investment, it should accept students and workers from Central Asia on a larger scale and systematically.

Thank you.

Umarov: Thank you very much, Mr. Uyama. Yes, I think what we see is that Japan was actually one of the first foreign actors that took a great, important role when it comes to Central Asian multi-vectoral policy and took part in making it even available for Central Asian countries to have different options when it comes to their relations with the world. And here I also encourage everyone to read the research that Mr. Dadabaev is doing in his book "Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations," that actually is talking about this very difficult situation where Central Asian countries find themselves in, that they are stuck in between great powers of Eurasia that are there and are very active in the region.

Thank you very much, and I now want to switch to the more modern situation and take a look at what is going on between Japan and Central Asia right now, as we now have this great

background. What are the interests of Japan in Central Asia right now? Mr. Timur Dadabaev, the floor is yours.

Dadabaev: Thank you very much. Firstly, I would like to thank Temur Umarov for taking this initiative and turning our attention to this important regional player, which is often underemphasized in our studies. I am also very privileged to share this panel with Professor Uyama, who provided us with the general and very comprehensive outline of Japanese initiatives in historical perspective. In that particular sense, it's rather easier for me now to discuss particular issues relating to contemporary Japanese involvement in Central Asia.

At the same time, I think this involvement is very broad and diverse, so it's very difficult really to cover all the aspects. Therefore I thought that I would draw your attention to the issues of why Central Asia is important to Japan and why Japan is important to Central Asia, from the point of view of corporate interests.

Now, before we go into this detailed discussion of particular projects and areas, I thought that there are certain stereotypes that we need to overcome when we consider Japanese presence in Central Asia.

The first thing that I would like to emphasize is that, as Professor Uyama has already indicated, Japan has been ODA superpower in this part of the world. and that the advances of Japanese assistance towards countries of Central Asia are undisputed. However, we cannot discuss, we cannot consider this to be equaling Japanese corporate presence. So we need to divide the ODA presence and corporate presence in Central Asia by Japan.

The second point is that very often, and Professor Uyama already talked about the connection between Japan and the U.S., whenever Japan and Japanese foreign policy in Central Asia is discussed, there is always this discussion that Japan is a forepost of U.S. and Western interests in Central Asia. I think this is not very accurate. It would be inconsiderate and perhaps ignorant to speak of Japanese economic interests in Central Asia as those which are in line with the U.S. and Western economic interests.

The third point is that there is this narrative, which was very popular in mid-90s, especially at the time of Prime Minister [Ryutaro] Hashimoto, when Central Asia and generally Central Eurasia was considered the area which would serve as an alternative or perhaps as a region which helps to diversify the market for oil and natural gas for domestic consumption in Japan. And I feel that this narrative is also a bit outdated. We are not talking about oil and natural gas being imported into domestic market of Japan, and this is not the economic agenda of a majority of players as we see it.

The fourth point is that when I read literature on Central Asia in general, there is this feature of Great Game narrative being played by Russia, West, China, and others. However, in my own research, and this is also confirmed today by Professor Uyama's talk, Japanese presence is not necessarily connected to this notion of rivalry with China, Russia, and South Korea. Rather it needs to be seen as othering, attempt by Japan to do its own thing, while it is aware of what others are doing. And so this is a very important point.

And the final point is that there is this narrative that because of the distance, Japanese businesses are not necessarily interested in Central Asian markets. However, again, I mean, this is not also very accurate, because there are many Japanese businesses doing or conducting their enterprises in Latin America, in Africa, in other parts of the world, which are much

farther than Central Asia. So I would argue that these stereotypes need to be accounted for, and then we need to provide the counternarrative about what is the Japanese presence there.

So in terms of the numbers of Japanese enterprises and companies present in Central Asia, we need to emphasize that Kazakhstan is by far the largest in terms of the interests attracted by the Japanese corporate community. As you can see here, the number of the Japanese companies registered as residents in Kazakhstan is 52, followed by Uzbekistan and then Turkmenistan. However, when you compare this number to the numbers of Russian or Chinese companies, these are incomparable numbers. So, what we need to understand here, for Japan, in terms of the content of the projects, it's the quality rather than the quantity that country is trying to aim at.

In addition, Japan runs its own Japan External Trade Organization office in Tashkent, and JICA office in Tashkent. JETRO is a very important organization, because, ideally, this is the organization which is responsible for matching the enterprises in Japan with their counterparts in Central Asia, or at least provide the information about the areas which might be potentially interesting for the Japanese corporations. Whether logistically this is happening is a different question. At least institutionally it's there.

And then we also have these Japanese centers, it's kind of a hybrid type of organization, in Tashkent and Bishkek these are run by the Japanese side, in Almaty and Nur-Sultan these are run by the Kazakh counterparts.

So this is the general structure of the presence of the Japanese actors in Central Asia.

In terms of the interests and the areas in which we see a very active Japanese involvement and interest in Central Asia, I emphasize in this particular talk three particular areas. These are education as a thriving business for the Japanese corporate community, the old and new energies, and the potential for the environment as a business.

In terms of education as a thriving business, we need to understand that normally when we talk about the Japanese assistance to educational institutions, there is this image of providing of ODA and this assistance being part of the ODA. However, the paths that I'm emphasizing here are purely business model-oriented ones.

For instance, the first example is this Japan Digital University, which is established by the Japanese company called Digital Knowledge, and this is complete investment based on their own finances. They've established this university in Uzbekistan, together with the University of World Languages, and the idea is very interesting in the sense that they provide IT training, and IT is one area which currently in Japan is lacking or there is a significant lack of the specialists who work in this area. So what they do, they provide the first two years of training, and then for the next two years they offer opportunities for students to work while being in Uzbekistan, without coming to Japan. And only the most successful ones are then offered the opportunity to travel and migrate to Japan. So this could be actually the model, because all of these people are tuition fee paying individuals who are involved in this educational circle. So for the Japanese Digital University this is a business enterprise, they are basically selling their education. On the other hand, it also provides opportunities for the students.

The second sort of track that I see as booming currently is this notion of Japanese language school recruitment. You might be surprised why would people be interested in going and learning Japanese language. However, I term this as a language migration. And ideally this is

the type of education which provides the language training, and then students are offered part-time work opportunities while they study. However, what happens, as we look into the Chinese or Vietnamese cases, is that often these language schools turn into part-time study and full-time work type of experience. And so these schools actually are in tens of thousands. In around 2017, there were 50,000 students attending the schools. And they pay full tuition, and so they are attracted by the fact that they can earn while also studying at these institutions.

And the third type of the educational set of opportunities, which are closely connected to the business opportunities, is something called technical interns. This offers students who have certain proficiency in Japanese language up to five years of training in agriculture, construction, elderly care, et cetera, and after that time they either need to pass the examination and then obtain full-time employment or return to their countries and ideally have the social remittances that they can use in their home societies.

Now, this system is not problem-free. And people do understand that. However, recently, I know for a fact that the so-called migration platform is being currently constructed between Central Asia and Japan to connect potential employers and employees, so that the problems that the system actually faces would be overcome and this would be a win-win situation both for Japan and for Central Asia. As you know, Japan is not necessarily a very migrant-friendly society. But on the other hand, Japan needs foreign workers. And so there is this attempt to balance between supply of working force and at the same time ensuring that these people return after a certain period of time to their home countries. And so I thought that this would be a very good example of balancing that Japan is attempting to achieve.

The second point is this approach to traditional energy resources. And when I speak of traditional energy resources, many people would imagine inputs of oil and gas from Central Asia to Japan, but I think, again, this is an outdated economic agenda which needs to be overcome. What we currently look into in terms of traditional energy resources is more an attempt by the Japanese engineering companies to sell their technology to the Central Asian consumers. And so I provided here two examples, but there are many more.

The first example is by Kawasaki Heavy Industries. They have developed this gas turbine cogeneration system which allows for reduction of emissions by half and the increase of the efficiency of fuel by 30 percent. Which in the conditions of Central Asia is one of the biggest problems, because the aging Soviet infrastructure does not allow for the efficient usage of available resources.

The second example is this modernization of operation systems. And this is, again, it's like a software of how the energy system is managed. And so the idea here is that this community energy management system, which is being imported, has these three elements: the home energy generation, building energy generation and management, and factory energy generation and management. So it allows for the energy to be generated from solar or from other alternative resources locally and used locally. But when you have excessive energy, then that could be controlled and managed centrally. So this is quite revolutionary, in a sense, for Central Asia, and this kind of technology actually provides for that decolonizing alternative, not in terms of giving these countries the opportunities they didn't have, it provides them with the know-how and technology of how to manage their own societies in a way they didn't know how to do in the past.

And in terms of new energy and environment, I emphasize really new technologies. The one example that I give here is hydrogen. Many people are quite surprised about hydrogen, because they would say, “Well, why would Central Asia need hydrogen while it has enormous reserves of traditional energy resources?” However, as you well know, the biggest markets for Central Asian traditional resources are Europe and China. Japan already announced its attempts to decarbonize its economy; EU is decarbonizing its economy; China is also committed to the task of decarbonization. So after a while you may have a lot of traditional resources, but you wouldn’t have markets to sell it. So the hydrogen actually allows, technology of hydrogen allows for these countries to reprocess their available resources into green and gray hydrogen. Not very ideal, blue hydrogen is the best, but it’s produced out of the renewable energies. But what I’m trying to say here is that this hydrogen technology is now recognized in Central Asia as important frontier. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have their own road maps to introduce this technology. They are discussing this with United Arab Emirates and South Korea. Japan, on the other hand, is one of the leading countries in hydrogen technology. And Kawasaki Heavy Industries is one, but there are many others. And so that would be one frontier, and I also know that there are these negotiations currently going on between the governments on introducing this technology.

And finally, the environment as a business. And there is this notion that the countries of Japan and Central Asia can cooperate in creating this Joint Crediting Mechanism. Any contributions by Japan to reduction of emissions in Central Asia, by offering these countries technologies and the know-how about how to reduce these emissions, would then also be counted as Japanese credits that would allow Japan to reduce its own emission indicators and achieve this carbon-neutral economy. And so currently there are twenty-three countries having this agreement between Japan and themselves on this mechanism. I know that Central Asian governments are also trying to achieve this and negotiating their way into this system.

Now, in terms of financial public instruments and private resources, there are instruments that we have no idea of their existence. For instance, the private-public partnership, something called Kanmin funds, provided by the government of Japan, but these are not run by the government of Japan, and these are established to allow the Japanese corporations to either acquire their counterparts in, for instance, regions like Central Asia or establish joint ventures with them. And in terms of the scheme, this is very close to what Chinese government used to do by providing Chinese corporations with the funds. However, the major difference is, Japan is a liberal market economy, and so the operations of these funds, they are driven by economic profit and benefit.

JBIC [Japan Bank for International Cooperation] provides loans to the Japanese enterprises, even those with the high-risk projects. NEXI [Nippon Export and Investment Insurance] ensures that these investments are secure. And NEXI is allowed to provide for 85 percent of the insurance, while the rest needs to be done by the local governments. Very often, from my own experience, I realize that local governments don’t even know that they need to have some kind of scheme to provide the insurance for investments.

NEDO [New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization] is the organization which is facilitating transfer of technology into the private sector. Japanese megabanks, they have offices in Almaty and Tashkent. For instance, Sumitomo or Mitsubishi UFJ, which has offices in Almaty. They are constantly searching for opportunities to invest into profitable projects.

So, in that particular sense, I see a lot of instruments that can be utilized, but the problem in the whole area lies in the following two aspects.

The first thing is that there is a lack of economically valuable information on the region. Very often we hear to the reports of the government, we have the governmental officials visiting Japan and presenting their countries, but there is this assumption that you can present a certain area and the Japanese corporations are going to jump on it, because it's so attractive. Without actually providing estimates of feasibility, information on favorable tariffs, the detailed information. And I think without this kind of information, Japanese corporate community would not be willing to go in. And I think this part is not so much about Japan, this is the part that Central Asia needs to take care of.

I think, in terms of solutions, information desks in partnership with EU can be very efficient. The Strategic Partnership Agreement, which is conducted between EU and Japan on third markets, as well as this Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure, can be one way to go in order to provide Japanese corporate community with more information and success stories about how Europeans succeeded in Central Asia, and that may pave the way for the Japanese to go in.

The second point is about the lack of interest from the larger corporations. In a different study I had this opportunity to interview the representatives of large Japanese corporations, and very often what we hear from them is that Central Asia is not as significant in terms of the populations, in terms of the size and margins of profits. So from that we can actually take the point that perhaps the mid-level enterprises are the better target for facilitating the entry into the Central Asian markets as opposed to the large Japanese corporations, because, as I've said, large corporations require large margins.

And the final point is a very interesting point made by the JETRO representative about this concept of "made by Japan in Central Asia." This is something kind of interesting, because this concept allows for Japan to invest into the production cycles which are not required to reimport these products back to Japan, but spread this throughout the markets in Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and other countries which are bordering Central Asia. So, I think, that would be another way to go for the middle-level enterprises to make their presence in Central Asia meaningful.

Now, in terms of the educational migration, we have this book coming, so if anyone is interested into how the patterns of migration impact the benefit and profits of the corporations, please go visit and get acquainted with this book. And for EU-Japan relations as decolonizing factor, this book on decolonization in Central Asian international relations would be perhaps handy. And finally, for EU partnership in third markets and partnership for quality infrastructure, see this report which has just been released in December, I authored it with a group of my colleagues from Europe and Japan. And this actually provides a number of projects which could be alternatively considered to the current structure of relations between Japan and Central Asia.

I will stop here. Thank you very much.

Umarov: Thank you very much for this very detailed observation of the relations and interests of Japan in Central Asia. I will now switch to a Q&A session, and I will encourage our listeners and those who watch us to send us your questions. If you watch us in Zoom, use the

Q&A function; if you watch us in YouTube, use the chat. You can also send us the question to our Twitter, but don't forget to mention us @CarnegieRussia.

The first question, and I think everyone is thinking about this and we cannot ignore this elephant in the room. As we talk, the Ukrainian crisis is unfolding, and we really don't know what is going to happen even in several hours, but what we know for sure, that what is happening right now will have enormous effects on Russia and of course on Central Asia. What first comes to mind is, of course, the economic consequences of the current crisis on Russian economy, and as we all know, Central Asian economy depends a lot on Russia. We remember how in 2014 it affected the attractiveness of labor migrants from Central Asia to come to Russia. Now it seems that during the pandemic it has become much harder for Central Asian people to decide where to go. But, after new sanctions are going to be presented very soon, I think Central Asian people will have to choose for other places to work in. So, what do you think about that? Whether Japan will be a more attractive place for Central Asian people to go to, after the Russian economy will be not so attractive. And what are other effects of the current situation on Central Asia and Japan's relations?

Who wants to take that question? I guess we can start with Timur Dadabaev.

Dadabaev: Thank you very much. I'm not really a Russian specialist, although I do follow what's happening in Russia, for obvious reasons. I only have several observations on the whole thing.

The first thing is: Ukraine for Russia is framed as existential problem. So without resolving it, as today President Putin said, this would define Russian future. This is the way he defined it. Whether it is true or not. This is the framing. For Central Asia, Ukraine is not existential problem. So there is no reason for Central Asia, in any way, to go and engage into any kind of adventures that Russian leadership got itself into. So that's the first point that I would like to emphasize. And so Kazakh leadership already emphasized that it's not planning to recognize these new republics, and I'm pretty sure that the remaining parts of Central Asia would follow the same sort of approach. It's a very Central Asian approach, isn't it, to say, "Well this is your problem, it's not our problem, so we will pretend it doesn't exist." So in that sense, I think, Russian reality is not Central Asian reality. However, as you correctly pointed out, the Central Asian economies are going to be impacted, especially so when it comes to Kazakhstan. Less for countries like Turkmenistan, countries which are not sort of connected to this.

Whether Japan can be the alternative—we don't have to think of Japan as alternative. We always have to think about it as one country with which Central Asians need to continue to develop their relations in the areas which are profitable for them. So it's not really an alternative, it's not the choice that we have to make, whether it's Japan or Russia. Whatever happens to Russia, it's part of the Russian agenda. Central Asia has its own agenda, and this agenda does not put these countries into exclusive game of whether choosing Japan or other countries.

That would be my take, thank you.

Umarov: Yes, I agree with you on that. Moving back to what we were talking about, I want to ask Mr. Tomohiko Uyama about the essence of Japan's relations with Central Asia. It seems that from the very beginning Japan institutionalized its relations with Central Asia. It was the first country to introduce this format when only five countries of Central Asia plus Japan are

working together, in 2004, and after that we see that all other foreign actors just copied this format. And during his presentation Timur Dadabaev also mentioned a lot of different instruments that Japan has in Central Asia, different institutions that are working on the ground. So it brings me to think that no matter who's in charge in Japan or in Central Asia, the relations will continue to develop, because they are institutionalized and they are not based on personal approach between the leaders or between the political elites. What is your take on that? What do you think the role of this personal or partisan group here when it comes to relations between Japan and Central Asia?

Uyama: Well, you are right that Japanese policy in general does not heavily depend on personality. There is an episode about Nazarbayev's first visit to Japan. When Nazarbayev met the prime minister of Japan, the prime minister said that "Well, I have decided to resign." So Nazarbayev and other Kazakh delegates were deeply shocked, because they thought that the result of their visit will be nullified. But the Japanese ambassador guaranteed Nazarbayev that all the promises will be kept by the Japanese side.

So, generally, Japanese policy, including policy towards Central Asia, is institutionalized and stable, but still personal factors matter, and especially in the Central Asian case. The first generation of bureaucrats and politicians who engaged in Central Asia, they wanted to make Central Asian states pro-Japanese, and they themselves wanted to leave their names as founding fathers of these relations. And after that, such personal zeal somewhat lessened. So, of course, Japan has been always more or less active in Central Asia, and as Dr. Dadabaev said, new activities such as decarbonization are also appearing, but personal factors that stimulated the development of Japanese diplomacy in the 1990s are now almost absent, well, are not so conspicuous as in earlier period.

Umarov: Yes, a very good point about not being stick with the current leaderships in Central Asia, because this is, when it comes to, for example, China's interest in the region or China's actions in Central Asia, a lot of criticism is pointed out that China does not want to institutionalize its relations with Central Asian countries, because it's not profitable for Beijing, and Beijing prefers bilateral relations more than multilateral, because when it's one on one, it's easier to make different negotiations and put some pressure on the partner. So here seems that Japan is taking a different approach, and that is why, maybe this is one of the reasons why the society in Central Asia looks at Japan quite differently. In my memory, we have never seen anything like anti-Japanese protests anywhere in Central Asia, but if we take a look at what is happening with the sentiment towards China or Russia, there are a lot of examples of people being mad about different projects that these countries are implementing in Central Asia and things like that.

So I want to ask maybe Mr. Dadabaev about what are the areas where Japan can find its kind of niche in Central Asia where it's irreplaceable. If we compare... I understand that you don't like different comparisons and stuff like that, but it really comes at the end to this: Why is Japan important for Central Asia? What are the spheres where Central Asian countries cannot replace Japan with, for example, China, which is very dynamic in the region?

Dadabaev: Thank you very much. The first point is about this comparison. It's not that I don't like the comparison. I think, on the other hand, comparison is the only way to know how one country differs from the other. So in that particular sense, I think, comparison is a very good thing. What I reject, on the other hand, is the attempt to place Japan into the structure of rivalry. Because it's not there. Simply because what Japan is trying to do is not the same as

China or as Russia. Japan is doing what it has in mind, and of course it is aware of the Chinese and Russian approaches, or South Korean for that matter, but it does have its own vision. So in that particular sense I argue that comparisons are important, but we need to avoid these structures.

Now, in terms of the place of Japan and how unique it is for Central Asia when compared to others, one thing that I would like to emphasize is that, due to the fact that Japanese economy is not as it used to be in the early 90s, it cannot afford the kind of infrastructure projects that China can. Due to its location, Japan has a different agenda. Because, you know, it cannot build railways. And it's fine for China to build railways. Some people think that Japan is against it. Not necessarily so. Actually many Chinese railways are used by the Japanese companies to deliver goods to Central Asia. So in that particular sense, I hear quite a lot from the representatives of business community that what China is doing in terms of infrastructure is not necessarily hurting the Japanese business community.

On the other hand, what we see, which is very different in approach of Japan, is transfer of technologies. One thing that emphasizes, and in my talk I gave you several examples, Japan is bringing a modernizing in existing infrastructure, so as not only to give a new facility, but also to provide a know-how which did not exist in the region. Not because Japan is so altruistic. Simply because Japan sees this as a more efficient way of utilizing resources.

So that would be one thing. Another—environment. I was quite surprised to find out that Almaty did not have hazard maps about the earthquakes or the landslides, before Japan actually offered through JICA. Which is quite significant, I think, because it's about life.

The third point is about the facilitation of the human exchange, as I have said, which benefits not only Central Asia, but also Japan. And I think this is very important. In early 90s, we always talked about what Japan can do for Central Asia. There was this naive understanding that Japan needs to do something for Central Asia. I think we came to the point that Central Asian countries need to realize: no one needs to do anything for them. It's their own obligation to do so. And Japan, China, and other countries are there to facilitate, to help out. But initial ideas should come from them. And I think we are having really hard time, on the Central Asian side, understanding this. Because quite often, even when we have corporate interest present among the Japanese corporate community, there are no viable projects available to offer. And so there is very little that Japan or Japanese corporate community can do in that kind of situation.

So, to sum up, I would say, know-how, knowledge transfer, the human-to-human relations which benefit Japan and Central Asia, and the environment. These are the areas which are irreplaceable perhaps when compared to China.

Umarov: Yes, thank you for that. And I really agree with the idea about Central Asian countries not realizing the fact that they have to kind of act, and also I, for a lot of times, see this in researches of different experts, so when it comes to Central Asia, many actually do objectivize Central Asia and say that they are not making decisions for their own and stuff like that. But what we see right now, in my opinion, is that Central Asia has never been so self-sufficient or independent in a way that Central Asian countries decide what countries will be present in the region and what the future foreign affairs will be.

And here we also see that Central Asia, as the whole post-Soviet space, is kind of in the middle of transition period. We see crises one by one happening for the last several years. I

don't remember so much attention being paid to Central Asia in the last decades or so. We've seen, several years ago, the power change in Kyrgyzstan, we saw Nazarbayev's stepping down in Kazakhstan in the very beginning of this year crisis, now we are in the middle of power transition in Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan is changing very rapidly; at the same time we see that Afghanistan is on fire. So, does all of this chaos affect Japan's presence in the region? And whether those unpredictable cases here and there change the way Japan is interacting with Central Asia. What do you think? Maybe Mr. Uyama.

Uyama: Well, indeed, there have been a number of crises, violent events in the region recently, and I think Japanese experts and officials are now analyzing these events. So it's hard to predict what these events will affect in Japan's policy, but my personal opinion is that such events are basically rooted in domestic situations of each country, but in a broader sense it is also related to the weakening of Western influence on the region, in the sense that people in Central Asia, on one hand, have already lived for a long time under authoritarian regimes and now have almost no help from outside to change the regimes, but still various sources of discontent remain.

So I think Japan again has to play a role to diversify not only diplomatic orientations of Central Asian countries, but also the ideas of nation building, state building in Central Asia. We can let the people know that the Chinese model or the Russian model is not the sole model for the development of Central Asia, and also the Western model is not also the sole model. And of course Japan itself is experiencing difficult times now, but still we can provide many alternative ideas about politics, economy, social relations, and so on. So I think now is the time for Japan to activate Central Asian policy.

Umarov: Thank you very much. I guess we will end on this note, unfortunately we are out of time. Of course this topic can be discussed for hours, and I encourage our listeners to follow this topic about Japan's relations with Central Asian countries on our website at Carnegie Moscow Center, and also to follow what Timur Dadabaev and Tomohiko Uyama write about that topic.

On that I would love to thank everyone, especially our experts, thank you very much for making yourself available. And, yes, stay safe, everyone.

Dadabaev: Thank you very much, the pleasure was ours really.

Uyama: Thank you very much, it was also a great pleasure.