

Japan–Central Asia Relations in the (Post)Colonial World

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How does Central Asia matter to Japan?

- In Japan, as in the West, the importance of Central Asia has been explained by its natural resources and geopolitical position.
- However, it is difficult to import natural resources from inland Central Asia into Japan. The geopolitical significance of Central Asia, a region adjacent to China and Russia, has been talked about in general, but it has not been linked to a concrete strategy.

The context of Asian diplomacy

- Rather, continuity with Asian diplomacy was prominent in Japan's diplomacy for about 15 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.
- The idea of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue, launched in 2004, was based on Japan's experience with ASEAN.

Japan's Asian diplomacy: Post-Imperial Atonement or Neocolonialism?

- 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. However, due to an ambitious expansion policy, it collided with the United States and Britain, spread the war to various parts of East and Southeast Asia, and caused great damage to Asian peoples. Its policy in the colonies and occupied territories was also discriminatory against the local people.
- 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 promoted, 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.

Japan's non-Western approach to Central Asian decolonization

- Whether Central Asia was a Soviet colony is a controversial theme, but the process of building an independent state in a region that has long been dominated by a great power is similar to the situation in postcolonial states in Asia and Africa.
- 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 DAC list and provided a large amount of ODA. Unlike Western countries, it did not place much emphasis on democratization and was rather critical of radical market reforms recommended by the IMF, favoring Uzbekistan's "step-by-step" reform line.
- Notably, Japan sought to make Central Asian countries "pro-Japanese." Many of the diplomats, bureaucrats, and politicians involved in Japan's early Central Asian diplomacy were enthusiastic, but a few said, half-jokingly, for example, "Kyrgyzstan is a Japanese colony." Overall, however, neocolonial elements were not prominent in Japan's Central Asian diplomacy.

Activation and stagnation of Japan's Central Asian policy

- The “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue (2004–) promotes 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, but the “CA + Japan” is unique in its intention to assist in decolonization by supporting the voluntary efforts and mutual help of Central Asian countries.
- Around the time of the proposal for dialogue, the number of personnel in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JICA's departments in charge of Central Asia, as well as embassies and offices, was also increased.
- However, at that time, tensions often arose between Central Asian countries, especially between Uzbekistan and other countries, and the multilateral dialogue faced difficulties.
- Central Asian countries expected Japanese investment, but as the Japanese economy stagnated for a long time, Japanese companies were uninterested in unfamiliar and high-risk investment destinations. Later, ODA budgets were reduced. Some countries in Central Asia, which have grown economically, have also placed less emphasis on aid and economic cooperation.

Japan's Central Asian diplomacy and the USA

- Some in Central Asia and Russia think that Japan represents the interests of the United States in Central Asia, but as mentioned earlier, Japan and the US have very different approaches to Central Asia.
- One aspect of Japan's cooperation with the US in Central Asia is that it sought to encourage Central Asian countries to strengthen relations with Afghanistan and South Asia in order to assist in the development of Afghanistan, but due to the turmoil in that country, this did not work very well.
- Central Asia's priority for Japan is indirectly related to US-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 emphasizes the importance of the "Indo-Pacific" region including Southeast Asia, Oceania, and South Asia.
- Japan is an economic power, but in the military aspect, it is a semi-colonial country subordinate to the United States, and in order to prevent the threat of China, Japan must increase its cooperation with the US.

Future of Japan's cooperation for decolonization of Central Asia

- Nevertheless, 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.