

“Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue: The Fifth Tokyo Dialogue Discussion paper

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1. The “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue and Tokyo Dialogue

- (1) Regional cooperation among Central Asian countries is essential if Central Asia is to develop as a self-sustaining region that is open to the external world. In this context, in August 2004 Japan took the initiative to launch “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue as a framework for promoting dialogue and cooperation with Central Asian countries. Under this framework, Japan and Central Asian countries have held the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting four times and Senior Officials’ Meeting six times.
- (2) In the Fourth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held last November in Tokyo, Central Asian countries announced various initiatives that involve a range of sectors including trade and investment, the environment and energy, and cooperation with Afghanistan. This move suggests that the idea of regional cooperation has somewhat taken root in this diverse region. It is also of great significance that these countries expressed their appreciation and expectations for the catalytic role Japan has been playing in promoting regional cooperation among them.
- (3) The Tokyo Dialogue has been held to complement these inter-governmental meetings within the framework of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue. The Tokyo Dialogue is an intellectual dialogue that provides an excellent opportunity for academics and experts from the countries concerned to gather under one roof to discuss specific themes and make policy recommendations to the governments of these countries. The outcomes of the discussion at the Tokyo Dialogue are reported to the next inter-governmental meeting in the form of a Chairperson’s summary. The participating governments are expected to act on such recommendations depending on their feasibility and usefulness.

2. Theme of the Fifth Tokyo Dialogue

The upcoming Fifth Tokyo Dialogue will discuss the theme of **“The Role of Regional Cooperation in Trade and Investment Promotion”** based on the discussions at the Fourth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in November 2012 and with a view to offering input to the next Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. Special focus will be placed on the prospects and directions for the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia. In the discussion process, attention will be given to two aspects: One is the formation of ASEAN, which has made remarkable progress in regional cooperation in recent years. The other is the role of Japan, which has been deeply involved in the developmental process of the regional association.

- (1) Vitalizing intra-regional cooperation toward the socioeconomic development of Central Asia as a whole is an extremely effective policy option. It is important to enhance connectivity among Central Asian countries through increased intra-regional cooperation and improve connectivity between them and other foreign countries so as to expand trade and investment.

- (2) The economic environment varies from country to country in Central Asia, depending on such factors as the national development strategy, the national policy, and the scales of the national economy and the domestic market. Such variation clearly defies a uniform solution. The fact remains, however, that Central Asian countries face common challenges, notably the need to develop transport infrastructure and information and communications networks, streamline customs procedures at border crossing posts, create an enabling environment for promoting trade and luring investment, and expand people-to-people exchanges. These challenges can be addressed more effectively if countries in the region work together, not separately. In fact, they have already taken a step in that direction with the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and other regional frameworks. It is important to note that Central Asian countries enjoy a major advantage in working towards regional cooperation: a common language and institutions, a legacy of the Soviet era.
- (3) The ASEAN experience provides a useful model for the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Since its launch in 1967, the Member States have advanced dialogue and thus built confidence among them. Their efforts towards regional cooperation started with areas of common interests and culminated in the coming into force of the ASEAN Charter in 2008. It is worthwhile to review such a developmental process of ASEAN and explore the opportunity to put the lessons learned from that process to good use for Central Asia. This will likely provide a fresh perspective to the discussion on the desirable direction for regional cooperation in Central Asia.
- (4) What role should regional cooperation play in promoting trade and investment in Central Asia? What progress has the region made so far in regional cooperation and what challenges does it face now? What approach should the region take? In what sector are the prospects promising? What role should Japan and other countries outside the region play? These are some of the questions to be discussed at the Fifth Tokyo Dialogue. Through candid and lively discussion, the Fifth Tokyo Dialogue aims to contribute to the discussion about regional cooperation in Central Asia towards promoting trade and investment.