

STATEMENT OF S. FREDERICK STARR

Since Kazakhstan and other countries of Central Asia have adopted English as their international language and since this is an international assembly, I will speak today in English.

Let me begin by saluting the countries of Central Asia for their achievements over the past quarter century. They have asserted their sovereignty, created new legal systems, built parliamentary bodies, transferred property to private hands, fostered economic development. Together, these are staggering achievements.

Let me equally salute Japan. After recognizing the new regional states, Japan stepped forward as the only foreign country focusing on providing disaster relief and protection from earthquakes and mudslides. Particularly

important was Japan's support for young Central Asians to study the institutions and practices that made possible Japan's amazing economic development in the post-World War II era. Japan did all this as a friend and equal partner, not as a big brother.

Following an initial period of intense interaction, Japan briefly assumed a more distant pose. But in 2004 Japan brought forth its "Central Asia Plus Japan" initiative. This called for regular high-level dialogue at several levels not only with individual countries but with the leadership of all the countries together. Note, please, that this is known as "Central Asia Plus Japan" and not "Japan Plus Central Asia." The difference is significant.

In taking this initiative, Japan led the way in treating Central Asia not only as a group of newly sovereign states but as a region, with its own distinct interests, outlook, and inter-relationships. At a time when the Central Asians' own Central Asia Economic Union was being dismantled

under outside pressure, Japan reasserted and validated such regionalism as legitimate and necessary. We have all heard the phrase "Divide and Conquer," which dates to Julius Caesar. Well, Japan's motto was "Link Arms and Thrive."

Given the distance between them, both Central Asians and Japanese might have viewed each other as remote and inaccessible. But this did not happen, and for a very good reason. Interaction between Central Asia and Japan dates far back in time. In the eleventh century Mahmud of Kashgar, who was born in what is now Kyrgyzstan, a world pioneer in what we would now call ethnography and comparative linguistics, included in his great work on Turkic languages a map showing Japan. Mahmud's is the oldest known map of Japan anywhere. Or to take another example of interaction between Central Asia and East Asia, in Samarkand you can view a glorious fresco from the seventh century showing what is clearly a Korean

merchant offering presents to the local ruler. At the same time that fresco was being painted Japan's Emperor Shomu was collecting the finest handiwork from the entire known world for his Shosoin Treasure House in Nara. His collection, which still exists today and which is still housed in the structure that Shomu built, includes priceless objects from Central Asia.

Interaction between Central Asia and Japan was by no means limited to trade in precious goods. Buddhism, which early took deep root in Japan, reached this country not directly from India but from Central Asia and Afghanistan. It was Central Asians who translated the Buddhist texts into Asian languages and it was Central Asian traders who brought those texts to China, Japan, and Korea. Incidentally, those translators did not just translate the Buddhist texts. They also selected the texts to be translated, carefully edited them, and, significantly, did not hesitate to add their own thoughts along the way.

This process indicates clearly that Central Asians were by no means a passive party in the relationship. They were a pro-active force that shaped the relationship and deeply influenced East Asia itself.

This brings me to an important truth. We hear much talk today about the Silk Road. But did you know that the original Silk Road was opened and operated not by the Chinese but by Central Asians? To be sure, the Chinese themselves sent goods by ship to Africa and the Middle East. But on the land routes they simply brought their goods to the border, where they were picked up by Central Asians, who managed their transport and sale to the West. Central Asians in fact dominated Eurasian trade along the Silk Road and even issued and managed many of the currencies with which it was conducted.

It is well known that the Chinese invented paper. But when Central Asians examined the stiff product from

China they were appalled that it was made from bamboo and mulberry leaves. Why not make it instead from Central Asia's abundant cotton fiber? The paper we know today descends from this clever reinvention by Central Asians.

The people who opened and managed the Silk Roads were called Sogdians, who lived in what is now Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In centuries before the arrival of Arab armies, these Sogdians maintained trading posts deep into China. It was their activity that brought trade clear to Japan. They were an amazing people, who produced glorious art and literature. Until they were obliterated by invading Muslim armies, Sogdians were religiously diverse and tolerant. For many years scholars asked how the Sogdians were influenced by the great flowering in Tang China and the Nara period in Japan. Now they are beginning to ask how Sogdians influenced the East.

If Central Asians were in part responsible for the flowering of the Tang period in China, they also led to its downfall. This occurred in the 750s when a man named An Lushang mounted a huge rebellion that destroyed the prosperity of the Tang empire and brought the Tang period to an end. An Lushang was himself half Sogdian.

Skipping ahead a millennium, let us note that Japanese played a notable role in rediscovering the lost glories of Central Asian civilization that took place a century ago when the treasures of Xinjiang's great oases came to light. As you know, the Arab invasion of the eighth century pushed the center of Buddhist and other non-Muslim cultures of Central Asia eastward, into the deserts of Xinjiang. A great moment in Central Asian history occurred when Arel Stein, a Hungarian-born British citizen, and other explorers discovered there hordes of ancient Buddhist and Uyghur manuscripts.

Few today are aware that Japanese, too, were involved in these amazing discoveries. One of the main explorers of the Silk Road was the Japanese Count Otani Kozui, a member of the Japanese royal family, who mounted three expeditions to Xinjiang and Central Asia prior to World War I. He and his successor, Tachibana Zuicho, discovered many ancient Uyghur and Buddhist texts, which they brought to Japan for study. His discoveries caused Tachibana to be elected a member of the Royal Geographical Society in London. Japan, in short, figured actively in the rediscovery of a forgotten era in Central Asian history.

It would be interesting to know whether this early research encouraged recent Japanese leaders to embrace the concept of Central Asia as a single cultural zone. For they were among the first to conceive of the region as a single whole, and to emphasize its regional character.

For several decades Japanese scholars have also taken an interest in the early history and culture of Afghanistan. Their studies, especially on Buddhism, have caused them to acknowledge Afghanistan as an essential part of Central Asia as a whole, a status it enjoyed for 2,000 years until the Soviet Union drew a hard line dividing the region in two. Following the disastrous Taliban years Japan has greatly assisted the emergence of a new Afghanistan. But it has yet to include Afghanistan in its Central Asia Plus Japan structure, as I hope might eventually happen.

This brings us to a point which I want to stress firmly today, as we celebrate the first quarter century of Japan's relations with the newly sovereign states of Central Asia. Namely, both the European Union and the United States embraced Japan's *regional* approach to Central Asia and took it as a model for their own interactions with the region.

In 2007 Europe adopted its first Central Asia Strategy, under which the EU would become a significant partner for the region. This led to annual high-level consultations on sustainability, education, human rights, and security. Following the Japanese model, a similar structure was proposed in the United States and finally adopted in 2016.

A third country that might possibly adopt the Japanese model for interaction with Central Asia is India. India's cultural contact with Central Asia is far older and deeper than that of any other external power. And their mutual interaction in science, art, and religion have been constant and intense.

The fact that Europe, and America have already adopted the Japanese model for interaction with Central Asia and that India might eventually join them, suggests that such a model, combining both bi-national and regional elements, has a bright future. Its common feature

everywhere is respect for national sovereignties and an embrace of deep intra-regional affinities.

Japan's interaction with Central Asia attained a new level in 2015 when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited all five Central Asian capitals, bringing gifts, not loans, and also very substantial proposals for investments and joint ventures. While embracing the concept of Central Asia as a single region with shared interests and values, Japan acknowledged also the specificity of each country and has shaped its gifts and investments accordingly.

It is no exaggeration to say that no other major power has achieved such a harmonious relation between strengthening the newly sovereign states individually and strengthening the region's economy and civil life as a whole. Nor has anyone else achieved so happy a balance between development grants and market-based investments.

Some have suggested that Japan's new activism in Central Asia is part of a political game. Others have claimed that Japan's real motive is to counter the influence of Russia and China. I sincerely doubt this. Japan has always had many partners throughout Asia. It would be much harder to argue that Japan should not develop active partnerships in Central Asia than to explain why it does so.

Both Central Asians and Japanese see practical benefits from their expanding relationship, and seek to develop it in realms as diverse as natural resource development, technology, research, education, governance, and culture. Japan gives as much or more than it gets. Instead of simply buying up Central Asia's resources, it actively assists regional countries as they seek to transition from resource-based economies to diversified economies based on modern knowledge and modern practices. Such an approach is not against anyone. It is for Central Asia and

for Japan. In such a relationship no one loses, everyone gains.

So where are we today, after twenty five years? The trajectory of the relationship between Central Asia and Japan since 1991 and especially since 2004 and 2015, suggests that the best is yet to come. Indeed, it is quite probable that we will come to look at the period we celebrate today as merely the front porch of a much more significant structure of ties that will arise in the years to come.

In closing, let me again congratulate the governments of Central Asia for having opened the very important window to Japan and the government of Japan for having so constructively helped advance the individual countries and the region as a whole. I deeply respect what you have accomplished and wish you an even more active and mutually beneficial quarter century to come.

