

## Section 6

# Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus

### 1 Russia

#### (1) Situation in Russia

##### A Russia's aggression against Ukraine

In February 2022, Russia recognized the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic,” which are the territory of Ukraine, as “independent states” and began the aggression against Ukraine under the pretext of protecting these regions. In response, the international community, including Japan, strongly condemned and imposed sanctions against Russia. Under the Putin administration, Russia has made a series of moves to undermine the territorial integrity of its neighboring countries in order to regain the sphere of influence it lost after the Cold War, causing serious concern in regions near Russia. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is an outrageous act that caused damage to another country which resulted in a serious humanitarian crisis claiming the lives of many civilians, and that shakes the very foundation of the international order that humanity has built up over the past century such as the prohibition of the use of force, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, not only in Europe but also in Asia.

The following is a review of the events before Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

##### B Internal Situation in Russia

In the September 19 elections for the Russian State Duma (lower house), the ruling party “United Russia” retained more than two thirds of the seats on its own, despite a slight reduction in the number of seats compared to before the election, which allows them to amend the constitution. The organizations related to the Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny was declared “extremist,” and those associated with the group were stripped of their eligibility for elections.

##### C Russian Economy

The Russian economy recovered rapidly in the second quarter (April-June), returning to pre-COVID-19 levels (GDP growth in the first half (January-June) was +4.8% year on year). This was due to factors such as the recovery of oil prices following the OPEC+ agreement on coordinated production cuts in December 2020, and the expansion of domestic demand, including investment, in a wide range of industries. However, inflation has been rising (+7.4% year on year as of September), and the Bank of Russia raised its key rate in stages. Since food prices also surged from the end of 2020, the Russian government introduced measures such as price ceilings on some items and export tariffs.

##### D Russian Diplomacy

In early February 2021, shortly after President

Biden took office, the United States and Russia agreed to a five-year extension of the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START), which is the only remaining nuclear disarmament framework between the United States and Russia. Russia held its first face-to-face summit with President Biden in Geneva in June. While there have been attempts to explore cooperation in certain areas, these have not led to improved relations. The Russian military buildup in areas along the Ukrainian border since the fall became a new point of contention between the U.S. and Russia and was the main topic of discussion at the December U.S.-Russia summit held virtually.

Russia's relations with NATO also became more strained over the issue of closer Ukraine-NATO relations, and in October Russia decided to suspend the functions of its Permanent Mission to NATO in Brussels and the NATO Military Liaison Mission in Moscow.

Russia maintained close relations with China, although annual reciprocal visits between leaders did not take place following 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. 2021 marked the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and the two countries agreed to an automatic five-year extension. There were concerning developments with respect to Japan's security. For example, in October, Chinese and Russian naval vessels sailed together around Japan for the first time, and in November, Chinese and Russian bombers flew together for the third time following July 2019 and December 2020. At the China-Russia summit held during the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022, China expressed support for Russia's proposal

on security guarantees in Europe, which is noteworthy as a move that shows the strengthening ties between China and Russia in the context of European security.

In addition to its traditional cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, Russia continues to be actively involved in multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

## (2) Japan-Russia Relations

### A Japan-Russia Relations in the Review of the Post-Cold War Order

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 constitutes a challenge to the fundamental principle of the international community that unilateral change of the status quo by force is unacceptable, and threatens the post-Cold War world order. Japan, in solidarity with the G7 and the international community, strongly urged Russia to immediately withdraw its troops and comply with international law. In response to this situation, Japan, in close coordination with the international community, including the G7, is working to improve the situation by imposing sanctions against Russia in three areas: (1) asset freeze of Russian related individuals and entities, including President Putin; (2) sanctions in the financial sector, including restrictions on transactions with the Russian central bank and freezing the assets of seven Russian banks that are excluded from SWIFT<sup>1</sup>, and (3) an export ban to Russia of dual-use goods such as semiconductors, as well as of luxury goods.

The greatest concern between Japan and Russia is the Northern Territories issue. It is yet to be resolved even after more than 75 years have passed since the end of World War II and

<sup>1</sup> Overview of SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication):

- An association (cooperative) that serves as an intermediary and executor of financial transactions between banks around the world. Headquartered in Belgium.
- More than 11,000 banks and other financial institutions in more than 200 countries are connected to it, sending an average of more than 42 million messages related to international financial transactions per day.
- The association was established under Belgian law and is subject to the EU regulatory framework.

the Government of Japan has firmly worked on the negotiations under the policy of concluding a peace treaty through the resolution of this issue. There is no change to Japan's position on the Northern Territories issue and its intention to meet the wishes of the elderly former residents of the islands. However, under the current circumstances of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, now is not a moment in which Japan can talk about the prospects for the peace treaty negotiations. Above all, Japan strongly urges Russia to take seriously the condemnation of the international community, withdraw its troops immediately and comply with international law.

The following is a review of the events before Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

### **B The Northern Territories and Negotiations on a Peace Treaty**

The greatest concern between Japan and Russia is the Northern Territories issue. The Northern Territories are islands over which Japan has sovereignty. The islands are an inherent territory of Japan but currently illegally occupied by Russia. Holding frequent dialogues between the two leaders and foreign ministers, the Government of Japan energetically worked on negotiations with Russia on its basic policy to conclude a peace treaty through the resolution of the issue of the attribution of the Four Northern Islands<sup>2</sup>.

In July 2021, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin "visited" Etorofu island, and in September, President Putin announced at the Eastern Economic Forum the introduction of a "preferential regime" in the "Kurile" Islands. In October, deputy prime ministers Grigorenko and Khusnullin "visited" the islands



Japan-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting  
(September 23, New York, U.S.)

including Etorofu. These move by the Russian side are incompatible with Japan's position on the Four Northern Islands, and the Government of Japan lodged protests or made demarche at various levels.

Under these circumstances, Japan held a summit telephone call, a face-to-face foreign ministers' meeting, and two foreign ministers' telephone calls with Russia in 2021 amid the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The September meeting between Foreign Minister Motegi and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during the UN General Assembly in New York was the first face-to-face meeting between the two in over a year and a half.

In October, immediately after the inauguration of the Kishida administration, the two leaders held a Japan-Russia summit telephone call. In November, the first Japan-Russia Foreign Minister's Telephone Talk took place after Foreign Minister Hayashi took office.

Regarding the joint economic activities on the Four Northern Islands on which the leaders agreed<sup>3</sup> to commence discussions during President Putin's visit to Japan at the end of 2016, Japan and Russia continued discussions in order to materialize the

**2** Refer to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website for the position of the Government of Japan on the Northern Territories issue:

<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/hoppo/hoppo.html>

**3** As a result of the Japan-Russia Summit Meeting in December 2016, the two leaders expressed their sincere determination to resolve the peace treaty issue, agreed to commence discussions on joint economic activities on the Four Northern Islands, and agreed to improve procedures for grave visits by former island residents.



five candidate projects<sup>4</sup> designated at the Japan-Russia Summit Meeting in September 2017.

The Government of Japan actively worked on projects contributing to the improvement of the atmosphere for the resolution of the Northern Territories issue, such as the four-island exchange program, free visits and visits to graves. In 2019, as part of humanitarian measures for the former island residents of the Northern Territories, a temporary additional entry/exit point was established on the occasion of a grave visit by ship, and furthermore, a grave visit by airplane was realized for a third year in a row. During the grave visits, the former island residents were able to visit places they had been unable to go to in recent years. However, due to the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic the programs were canceled in 2021 as in 2020.

In addition, the Government of Japan is approaching and coordinating with the Russian side in order to ensure safe operations of Japanese fishing vessels around the Four Northern Islands and to continue the fishing of salmon and trout using alternative fishing methods to driftnet fishing prohibited by Russia. At the same time, Japan lodged protests against Russia over Russia's moves to build up military forces in the Four Northern Islands, on the grounds that such moves are contradictory to the Government of Japan's position regarding the territorial issue.

### **C** Japan-Russia Economic Relations

Trade volume between Japan and Russia in 2021 recovered from the decline caused by COVID-19 in 2020, and the trade volume from January to December increased 35.7% year on year. (The total trade volume in the statistics for January-December 2021 is approximately 2.4055 trillion Japanese yen (Source: Trade Statistics of Japan, Ministry of Finance)). The volume of direct investment from Japan to Russia increased

from 239.5 billion Japanese yen (2019) to 247.6 billion Japanese yen (2020) (Source: Balance of Payments Statistics, Bank of Japan).

There have been some developments with regard to the Eight-point Cooperation Plan for Innovative Reform in the Fields of Industry and Economy and a Favorable Living Environment of Russia proposed by Prime Minister Abe in 2016, including the conclusion of a basic agreement on Japanese companies' participation in an LNG transshipment terminal project.

In November, Japan and Russia held the 13th meeting of the Trade and Investment Subcommittee of the Japan-Russia Intergovernmental Committee on Trade and Economic Issues and the 10th Meeting of the Subcommittee on Region-to-Region Cooperation online, which are vice-ministerial level talks. In February 2022, the Meeting of the Co-chairs of the Japan-Russia Intergovernmental Committee on Trade and Economic Issues, was held online between Foreign Minister Hayashi and Minister of Economic Development Reshetnikov.

Furthermore, the Japan Centers operating in six cities in Russia carried out business matching between companies from both countries and held management courses and training in Japan for Russian businesspersons. The training programs in Japan could not be conducted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but management courses were held online by Japanese instructors in which approximately, 6,800 people participated.

### **D** Initiatives between Japan and Russia in various fields

#### **(A) Security, Defense Exchanges and Maritime Security**

As part of efforts to address "non-traditional threats" such as drugs, in September, a training course for counter-narcotics officers (Domodovovo Project), which has been ongoing since 2012

<sup>4</sup> (1) Propagation and aquaculture of marine products, (2) Greenhouse cultivation, (3) Development of tours compatible with the islands' features, (4) Wind power generation, (5) Garbage disposal

between Japan, Russia, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), was conducted for counter-narcotic officers from Central Asian countries.

With regard to defense exchanges, Japan and Russia conducted the Japan-Russia Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultation (“2+2” Ministerial Meeting), various dialogues between defense authorities, an annual meeting based on the Japan-Russia Incidents at Sea Agreement, the Japan-Russia Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX), and joint counter-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden from the perspective of building trust between Japan and Russia.

### (B) Cultural and people-to-people Exchanges

It became difficult to hold many in-person events due to the spread of COVID-19, but exchanges in a broad range of fields took place mainly online, including the Japan-Russia Youth Exchange Program.

The “Japan-Russia Year of Regional and Sister-City Exchanges (Japan-Russia Regional Exchange



The Second Online Japanese Language Course High School Student Exchange, one of the Japan-Russia Youth Exchange Programs (March, Japan-Russia Youth Exchange Center)

Year)” was advanced mainly online. More than 400 Japan-Russia Regional Exchange Year programs have been accredited in Japan, with over 1.3 million participants that included the online introduction to the Japanese culture program “J-FEST” in which approximately 120,000 people participated.

## 2 Countries in Central Asia and Caucasus, etc.

### (1) Overview

Countries in Central Asia and Caucasus are situated in a location of geopolitical importance that connects East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Russia, and have abundant natural resources such as oil, natural gas and uranium. Stability of the region as a whole, including Central Asia and Caucasus, has significant importance in addressing key challenges that the international community faces such as fighting against terrorism and countering illicit drugs. Japan continues to work to strengthen bilateral ties with these countries through high level talks and will be continuing initiatives to promote regional cooperation using the framework of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue.

In 2021, the spread of COVID-19 continued in Central Asia and Caucasus countries, and while it affected travel, high-level bilateral exchanges were actively conducted, including through the use of online formats. Under these circumstances, 2022 marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan



Japan-Russia Grassroots Exchange Program “Consul General’s Cup Kyudo Tournament “White Night Style”” (June, St. Petersburg, Russia)



Japan-Russia Grassroots Exchange Program “Tomari City Japanese Culture Festival” (October, Sakhalin Oblast, Russia)

and Central Asian and Caucasus countries, and momentum is building for further strengthening of relations.

## (2) Central Asian Countries

The countries of Central Asia, celebrating the 30th anniversary of their independence in 2021, are partners in maintaining and strengthening a free and open international order, and Japan is promoting diplomacy aimed at contributing to peace and stability in Central Asia. From January to February 2022, Prime Minister Kishida and Foreign Minister Hayashi exchanged congratulatory messages with the leaders and foreign ministers of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

In the framework of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue<sup>5</sup>, the 6th Expert Meeting (clean energy) was held in March, where working-level experts from the five Central Asian countries and Japan exchanged views. In June, the 14th Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) was held online, where the five Central Asian countries and Japan discussed ways to strengthen cooperation in the region. At the SOM, officials affirmed the results of cooperation between Japan and the five Central Asian countries in the areas of health, economy, and environment (clean energy) since the Foreign Ministers’ Special Video Conference Meeting of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue in August 2020, and agreed to proceed with preparatory work for the next Foreign Ministers’ Meeting.

The diplomatic role of the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, has become more prominent following the Taliban’s control of Afghanistan in August. In October, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov of the

Republic of Uzbekistan and Rashid Meredov, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, visited Kabul, respectively. Both countries are engaged in dialogue with the Taliban with a view to ensuring border stability and strengthening energy, railway and other connectivity areas with South Asia. By contrast, Tajikistan takes a cautious approach to dialogue with the Taliban.

Japan provided emergency humanitarian assistance to the Central Asian countries to prepare for the influx of refugees due to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan since August, while continuing to support the strengthening of border management capabilities in these countries. In August, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakanishi Satoshi visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where he met with Shakhrat Nuryshev, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, while in Uzbekistan he met with Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade Sardor Umurzakov, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, and First Deputy Chairman of the Senate in Uzbekistan Sadik Safaev. In both visits, he exchanged views on the situation in Afghanistan as well.

In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has pursued reforms over the past five years, was reelected in the October presidential election. In relations with Japan, Japan has actively pursued high-level political dialogue, including a January video conference meeting between Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Aso Taro and Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade Sardor Umurzakov, and a summit telephone call between Prime Minister Suga and President Mirziyoyev in May. During the summit telephone

<sup>5</sup> Japan launched the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue framework in 2004 as a precursor to the “Five Central Asia Countries plus One country” format dialogue from the perspective that regional cooperation for solving common regional issues is indispensable for the stability and development of Central Asia, with Japan as a “catalyst” to promote regional cooperation. In addition to the seven foreign ministers’ meetings, various discussions have been held with the participation of experts and businesspersons. More than 15 years have passed since its establishment, and in recent years it has focused on practical cooperation.

call, Prime Minister Suga stated that Uzbekistan is an important partner for building a free and open international order based on the rule of law and welcomed deepened and expanded strategic partnership between the two countries. President Mirziyoyev stated that he would steadily implement all the agreements made during his visit to Japan in December 2019.

In Kazakhstan, a state of emergency was declared in January 2022 after rallies sparked by protests over fuel price hikes spread across the country and became radicalized. Kazakhstan requested assistance from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Peacekeeping Forces led by Russian troops were dispatched, after which the situation subsided. The upheaval led to the resignation of first President Nursultan Nazarbayev from the presidency of the Security Council and acceleration of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's efforts at large-scale domestic reforms. In May 2021, a summit telephone call with Japan was held between Prime Minister Suga and President Tokayev. The two leaders shared the view to further enhance the strategic partnership relationship between the two countries, touching on cooperation in a wide range of areas, including politics and the economy. In May, Speaker of the House of Representatives Oshima Tadamori held an online meeting with Nurlan Nigmatulin, Speaker of the Kazakh Parliament's Lower House.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, a new government was formed by President Sadyr Japarov, who won the presidential election in January, and presidential powers were strengthened through constitutional amendments in May. In November, the Kyrgyz Republic re-held the parliamentary elections that were invalidated following the political upheaval in 2020, and pro-government parties won a majority of seats in parliament. Regarding relations with Japan, Prime Minister Kishida and President Japarov held a brief meeting during the 26th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on

Climate Change (COP26) in November, during which President Japarov expressed his gratitude for Japan's support, including human resources development.

In relations with Tajikistan, Japan held political consultations in an online meeting in March. Both sides discussed a wide range of topics, including cooperation in the areas of human resources development and enhanced border control, and shared the view to further promote good relations between the two countries.

Regarding relations with Turkmenistan, Prime Minister Suga and President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov held a summit telephone call in May in which both leaders welcomed the development of bilateral economic relations, with the realization of many major projects involving Japanese companies. Deputy Prime Minister Serdar Berdymukhamedov attended the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 and held a meeting with Prime Minister Suga.

In recent years, efforts toward advancing regional cooperation have become active among Central Asian and neighboring countries. In 2021, leaders of Central Asian countries attended a variety of online and hybrid meetings that included the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Summits both held in May and October, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Summit held in September, and the Organization of Turkic States held in November.

In addition, there are active foreign minister-level meetings with one country added to the five Central Asian countries. In 2021, the five Central Asia countries held foreign ministers' meetings with the U.S., the EU, China, Russia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Italy, and India respectively.

### (3) Caucasus Countries

The Caucasus region has a potential to be a gateway connecting Asia, Europe and the Middle East, and geopolitical importance that directly affects the peace and stability of the international community. However, there are still outstanding issues such as in Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Japan is developing its diplomacy based on the basic policy for this region, which is comprised of two pillars announced in the Caucasus Initiative in 2018: (1) assistance for human resources development for state building (human resources development) and (2) assistance for paving the way to “Appealing Caucasus” (infrastructure development and business environment improvement).

With regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the ceasefire agreement reached by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in November 2020 has generally been observed, but sporadic gunfights have occurred along the border areas of Azerbaijan and Armenia since then. Meanwhile, there have been efforts toward dialogue through the mediation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs and Russia, including a meeting of Azerbaijan and Armenia's foreign ministers and a summit meeting. Japan hopes that the outstanding issues related to the conflict between the two countries will be resolved peacefully based on principles of international law through dialogue, including the OSCE Minsk Group.

In relations with Azerbaijan, Foreign Minister Motegi and Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov held a telephone call in August. The ministers exchanged views on international cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 and shared the view to further develop bilateral relations on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2022.

Regarding relations with Armenia, President Armen Sarkissian, who visited Japan in July to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic

Games Tokyo 2020, held a summit meeting with Prime Minister Suga where the two leaders shared the view to deepen cooperation in economic areas, including IT, while valuing the historical ties between the two countries. Domestic politics in Armenia became fluid following the military conflict with Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, and elections to the National Assembly were held ahead of schedule in June. As a result, incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was re-elected.

Georgia is an important partner in building a free and open international order based on the rule of law. In economic areas, the Japan-Georgia Investment Agreement and the Tax Convention between Japan and Georgia came into effect in July. In addition, in October, a program inviting Natela Turnava, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia to Japan in an online format was held where she met with Japanese businesspersons and officials. Besides, at the political consultations held online in November, both sides exchanged views on a wide range of topics, including decarbonization and international affairs.

### (4) Republic of Belarus

While the massive protests that erupted after the August 2020 presidential election gradually died down due to strict controls by authorities, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate, with large-scale searches of independent media and NGOs and the detention of those involved.

On May 23, 2021, a commercial aircraft flying over Belarus was forced to land at Minsk Airport, and the independent journalists on board were detained. Western countries strongly condemned the incident and took measures such as not allowing Belarusian aircraft to board or to fly over their countries. Japan also took measures in the aviation sector.

Since the summer, the number of people crossing the border from Belarus into neighboring Poland, Lithuania and Latvia has increased sharply compared to previous years. This has been the case

especially since November, with those attempting to cross into the Schengen area massing in the border region between Belarus and Poland. The situation became tense, with the Polish side closing checkpoints in the area and mobilizing its military as a precaution. In response, Japan, along with the G7 nations, issued a statement by the G7 foreign ministers condemning the Belarusian regime's attempts at irregular migration. Japan also contributed 500,000 US dollars in emergency grant aid to conduct humanitarian and medical assistance through the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

In addition to the worsening human rights situation, the conflict between Belarus and western countries has deepened further with the forced landing of a commercial aircraft and the detention of journalists, as well as the rapid increase in the number of people crossing the border through Belarus. Japan has issued two foreign press secretary statements on the situation in Belarus and has strongly urged the authorities of Belarus to immediately cease the arbitrary detention and forceful oppression of citizens, engage in national dialogue that respects the principles of the rule of law and democracy, and make an earnest effort in responding to the situation.

In 2022, amidst increasing tensions in the area along the Ukrainian border due to the buildup of Russian troops and other factors, Belarus began joint military exercises with Russia on February 10, and supported Russia by letting them use its own territory during the Russian aggression against of Ukraine that began on February 24.



Courtesy call by Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakanishi Satoshi to Sardor Umurzakov, Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan (August 28, Uzbekistan)



Japan-Armenia summit meeting  
(July 24, Tokyo; Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office)

Japan has strongly condemned Belarus. In light of Belarus' obvious involvement in this aggression, on March 3 and 8, Japan decided to impose sanctions on Belarus, including sanctions against President Lukashenko and other individuals and entities, as well as export control measures.