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Russia and Belarus, Central Asia and the Caucasus

1 Overview

Despite continued severe sanctions against Russia and strong support for Ukraine, mainly by the G7 and the European Union (EU) countries, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which is an outrageous act, did not stop in 2023. In this context, there have been almost no high-level exchanges between the G7, EU countries, and Russia. Europe, which before Russia's aggression was the largest importer of Russian energy, has further reduced its imports. In addition, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to further expand, with Finland joining NATO and Sweden making significant progress toward NATO membership. Meanwhile, the decision was made to begin negotiations toward Ukraine's accession to the EU. Thus, the relationship between Russia and the G7, EU countries and others has undergone a major structural change.

Russia insists that it is not isolated from the international community and seeks to further strengthen ties with China, India, North Korea, and the developing and emerging countries known as the Global South, but the responses of these countries and regions have been mixed. At the second Russia-Africa Summit in July, the number of countries whose heads of state attended was significantly lower than the first summit in 2019. For the BRICS summit held in South Africa in August, six new countries were invited to join, and Russia, the 2024 chair, announced that five of them (the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia) had joined on January 1, 2024. Their future responses will be closely watched.

As for Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenko has maintained his support for Russia, making note of the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

Regarding Central Asian and Caucasus countries, while they have close geopolitical and economic ties with Russia, they have maintained a neutral stance

toward Russia's aggression against Ukraine (excluding Georgia, which has expressed support for Ukraine). They are also struggling to cope with the impact on transportation routes for energy and other trade items and remittances from migrant workers in Russia.

In response to this situation, countries including the U.S. and China held summit- and ministerial-level meetings with the five Central Asian countries, and dialogues with Central Asia were actively pursued. In the Caucasus region, military activity by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in September was followed by confidence-building steps toward a peace agreement. With these developments, the international community's attention has turned to the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

2 Russia and Belarus

(1) Situation in Russia

A Internal Situation in Russia

As Russia's aggression against Ukraine became more protracted, the Russian government brought forward a narrative as if the "special military operation" (aggression against Ukraine) was a "homeland defense war" against the West, appealing to its people for their support and patriotism for the war. In Russia, the introduction of a patriotic curriculum into school education continued from the previous year, and the use of new history textbooks that include descriptions of the "special military operation" also began. At the same time, restrictions on freedom of speech and press have been further tightened, and anti-war movements and protests continue to be contained.

The Russian government has offered a series of preferential measures to support participants in the "special military operation," and their families, including the creation of a fund, special treatment in higher education and employment, and other benefits. The Russian

government has also repeatedly stated that there is no need for further mobilization at this stage, claiming that the number of contract soldiers and other applicants is increasing.

As part of further “Russification” efforts, President Putin himself visited the areas of Ukraine illegally “annexed” by Russia to publicize the progress of reconstruction, and “local assembly elections” were held in these areas in conjunction with Russia’s nationwide local elections.

In May, a drone attack on the Kremlin was announced, and frequent drone flights against the city of Moscow and Moscow Oblast were observed, especially during the summer. In June, fighters from the private military company “Wagner,” which had reportedly been at odds with the Russian armed forces and the Ministry of Defense, came within 200 km of Moscow on what they called a “march of justice” (In August, an airplane reportedly carrying “Wagner” leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and some of its leaders crashed, killing all aboard.). However, these incidents did not appear to directly destabilize the domestic situation in Russia.

In December, President Putin announced his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election while maintaining an approval rating of over 80%.

B Russian Foreign Policy

In order to stop Russia’s aggression as soon as possible, Western countries are continuing to make efforts that include support for Ukraine as well as severe sanctions against Russia. Meanwhile, Russia continued its “special military operation” in Ukraine and developed its own narrative blaming the West for international energy and food price hikes. The country’s high-level dialogue with the West remains extremely limited, including the suspension of summit-level dialogues between Russia and Germany and between Russia and France that were held on a limited scale in 2022. Furthermore, Finland’s accession to NATO has been completed, progress has been made in Sweden’s accession to NATO, and the EU has decided to begin negotiations for Ukraine’s accession to the EU, which have resulted in significant structural changes in Russia’s relations with the West.

President Putin has also been withdrawing from international arms control and disarmament frameworks one after another, signing a law suspending the

implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between the U.S. and Russia in February, a law suspending participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in May (the Russian Foreign Ministry announced in November that the withdrawal procedure was completed), and a law to revoke the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in November. At the same time, the transfer of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia to Belarus has been reported since the spring.

In March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued warrants of arrest for individuals including President Putin on the grounds that there was sufficient evidence proving their criminal responsibility for the deportation of children from Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, Russia is seeking to strengthen its ties with China, India, North Korea, and developing and emerging countries known as the Global South.

Russia has made particular progress in its relationship with China in various political, economic, and military fields. In March, President Xi Jinping visited Russia on the first foreign trip of his third term and stated that the development of China-Russia relations is a “strategic choice” for China. In October, President Putin visited China to attend the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, and the second face-to-face China-Russia Summit Meeting of 2023 took place. Total trade between China and Russia reached the nations’ 200 billion U.S. dollars goal for 2024 in 2023, ahead of schedule. On the military front, Russia has made moves to strengthen ties with China, with its conducting military joint navigation with Chinese naval vessels (July to August) and joint flights with bombers (June and December) in the vicinity of Japan. The joint statement at the China-Russia Summit Meeting in March also stated that “joint maritime and air patrols and joint exercises will be conducted regularly” and that “mutual trust between the militaries of the two countries will be deepened.” The fact that the militaries of China and Russia continue to engage in joint activities with increasing frequency in the vicinity of Japan should be closely monitored with serious concern from the perspective of Japan’s security.

In September, North Korea’s President of the State Affairs Commission Kim Jong Un visited Russia’s Far

East region for the first summit meeting held in four years. In addition, mutual visits by the foreign ministers of the two “countries,” as well as the transfer of arms from North Korea to Russia were conducted among other moves to strengthen relations with North Korea. The government of Japan has strongly condemned Russia’s procurement of arms from North Korea, urges North Korea and Russia to fully implement United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, and is closely following Russia’s possible military support to North Korea with concern, as it may lead to further deterioration of the situation in Ukraine and constitutes a violation of relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) prohibiting the transfer and procurement of all arms and related materiel to and from North Korea.

Russia continued to utilize the regional frameworks in which it participates, hosting the second Russia-Africa Summit in July (St. Petersburg, Russia), which was last held in 2019, as well as the BRICS Summit and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Heads of State Council Meeting.

Russia continues to emphasize relations with Belarus and the Central Asian and Caucasian countries, but there has been some friction in relations with Armenia because of handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.¹

In March, Russia revised the “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, which outlines its foreign policy.

C Russian Economy

Russia continues its aggression against Ukraine, and has significantly increased defense spending to continue the war. The 2024 budget includes defense spending 1.7 times higher than the previous year (6% of GDP) and a roughly 20% increase in social policy spending, including benefits for soldiers and their families.

Real GDP growth in 2022 fell by 1.2% due to severe sanctions against Russia by the G7 and the EU. However, the government’s fiscal stimulus measures and the resulting recovery in domestic consumption and improved production, especially in the manufacturing sector, have stimulated economic growth, and real GDP growth turned positive in the April-June period

of 2023. Instead of a sharp decline in energy and other exports to Europe due to the sanctions, Russia is trying to shift eastward by increasing exports to countries that are not imposing sanctions against them such as China, India, and Türkiye. In addition, Russia is attempting to reduce dependence on the dollar by increasing the use of the yuan in trade settlements. In response to restrictions on exports of advanced components and other products from Western countries, the Russian economy is dealing with sanctions by attempting to reroute imports through friendly countries.

Meanwhile, there could be medium- to long-term effects on the economy and society due to continued inflationary pressures, policy interest rate hikes (the Russian Central Bank raised its policy interest rate sequentially from 7.5% to 16% between July and December), labor shortages due to partial mobilization for the “special military operation” against Ukraine and the exodus of the working population, and restrictions on access to advanced technology due to sanctions, and others.

(2) Japan-Russia Relations

A Overview of Japan-Russia Relations

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine that began in February 2022 continues to have a serious impact on Japan-Russia relations. In order to stop Russia’s aggression as soon as possible, Japan, in cooperation with the international community including the G7, has been taking measures such as imposing severe sanctions against Russia. One such measure in 2023, when Japan held the G7 Presidency, was Japan’s leading of a united G7 response at the G7 Summits and Foreign Ministers’ Meetings to impose severe sanctions against Russia and strongly support Ukraine. At the same time, Japan has been appropriately dealing with issues that need to be addressed by Japan and Russia as neighbors, such as those related to fishing and other economic activities as well as maritime safety, from the perspective of what is in Japan’s national interest in the overall diplomacy of our country.

In June, a bill was passed in Russia to rename September 3 from “Day of the End of World War II” to “Day of Victory over Militaristic Japan and the End

¹ Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: A dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian settlement on Azerbaijani territory.

of World War II.” In response, the Government of Japan conveyed its position and has been requesting the Russian government to respond appropriately so as not to incite unnecessary emotional conflict between the two peoples.

On the subject of cultural and personal exchange, Japan is conducting projects within an appropriate scope that includes accepting Russian students by the Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship and providing Japanese language education in Russia based on the belief that it is important to maintain contact with Russian civil society, especially the younger generation, and to provide Russian citizens with opportunities to gain international perspectives.

With regard to fisheries, the Government of Japan has been holding consultations with Russia to maintain and secure Japan’s interests in fisheries activities since Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. However, in January, Russia informed Japan that it could not arrange the timing of intergovernmental consultations based on the Framework Agreement Concerning Operations in the Waters Around the Four Northern Islands² because of Japan’s policy toward Russia regarding the situation in Ukraine. In response, the Government of Japan has protested and engaged in various communications with the Russian side to enable operations under the agreement, but at this point, no positive response has been received from the Russian side toward the implementation of the operations.

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. The Northern Territories issue is yet to be resolved even after 78 years have passed since the end of World War II, and the Government of Japan firmly worked on the negotiations under the policy of concluding a peace treaty through the resolution of the territorial issue.³

However, in March 2022, the Government of Russia, considering the measures taken by Japan in relation to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, announced measures such as discontinuing negotiations on a peace treaty, suspending free visits and the Four-Island exchange program, and withdrawing from the dialogue on joint economic activities on the Four Northern Islands. In September, the Government of Russia also announced a government decree suspending the validity of the agreement on free visits and the Four-Island exchange program.

The current situation is entirely the result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and Russia’s attempt to shift responsibility to Japan is extremely unjust and absolutely unacceptable, and the government has lodged a strong protest against the Russian side.

Although Japan-Russia relations are in a difficult situation due to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the government will firmly maintain its policy of concluding a peace treaty through the resolution of the territorial issue.

In addition, the Four-Island exchange program⁴ and other programs have not been conducted since 2020 due to the impact of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the deterioration of Japan-Russia relations following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The resumption of exchange and other programs involving the Four Islands, including visits to the graves in the Northern Territories, is one of the highest priorities in Japan-Russia relations. With a strong desire to somehow respond to the fervent pleas of the elderly former residents of the islands, the government will continue to strongly urge the Russian side to resume these programs, with particular emphasis now on the visits to the graves in the Northern Territories.

Japan has also lodged protests against Russia over Russia’s moves to build up its military forces in the Four Northern Islands, including military exercises, on the grounds that such moves are contradictory to Japan’s position regarding these islands.

² Agreement on the Operation of Japanese Fishing Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Northern Territories.

³ 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/region/europe/russia/territory/index.html>

⁴ Refers to Visits to Graves in the Northern Territories, free visits, and exchange visits/receptions to the Four Northern Islands (including receiving patients and expert exchanges).



C Japan-Russia Economic Relations

Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Japan has continued its policy of suspending, for the time being, government projects related to economic cooperation with Russia while imposing severe sanctions against the country.

Against this backdrop, trade between Japan and Russia in 2023 declined by 44.3% from the previous year (Japan's total trade during the same period was approximately 1,435.9 billion Japanese yen). Due in part to Japan's sanctions against Russia, exports from Russia to Japan fell 47.2% from the previous year (especially crude oil and coal), and exports from Japan to Russia also fell 34.5% from the previous year (all sources: Trade Statistics, Ministry of Finance).

With regard to sanctions against Russia, Japan, in cooperation with the G7 and the rest of the international community, has maintained and strengthened severe sanctions against Russia in order to demonstrate that outrageous acts that shake the very foundation of the international order come with a high price. These include sanctions against individuals such as Russian government and military officials, as well as organizations in Russia and occupied territories, along with sanctions in the financial sector that include freezing bank assets, and measures prohibiting imports and exports. The G7 and Australia, including Japan, together with the EU, have introduced a price cap system for Russian crude oil since December 2022 and for Russian oil products in February 2023, with the aim of stabilizing international oil prices while reducing Russian energy revenues. In addition, based on a recognition of the importance of ensuring the effectiveness of sanctions amid Russia's prolonged aggression against Ukraine, the G7 leaders confirmed at the G7 Leaders' Video Conference in February and the G7 Hiroshima Summit in May that the G7 would further prevent evasion or circumvention of sanctions against Russia, and in December, Japan decided to introduce measures such as asset freezes and export bans against third country entities suspected of involvement in sanction circumvention or evasion. In addition, the G7, including Japan, has also introduced measures to ban imports

of non-industrial diamonds from Russia beginning in January 2024.

Regarding the energy sector, the Government of Japan intends to phase out its dependence on Russian energy, including coal and oil, and will take this step in a manner that minimizes adverse effects on Japanese people's lives and business activities. However, the government policy remains focused on maintaining Japan's interests in the "Sakhalin 1" and "Sakhalin 2" oil and natural gas development projects in Russia, as these projects are important to Japan's energy security from the perspective of ensuring a stable supply over the medium- to long-term.

(3) Situation in Belarus

Belarus began joint military exercises with Russia on February 10, 2022, and although it did not participate in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, it has supported Russian military actions through the use of its territory. Western countries strengthened sanctions against Belarus, and Japan introduced sanctions against Belarus for the first time.

Since then, President Lukashenko has held a series of meetings with President Putin in Moscow and other places where they have continued to discuss issues such as the continuation of joint military exercises, security and economic initiatives between the two countries, and the defense of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.⁵

In March 2023, President Putin said he had agreed to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. President Lukashenko acknowledged deployment in the country, also made a statement to the effect that all tactical nuclear weapons would be controlled by Belarus, and further stated that the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons was completed in October. The international community condemned this as a further escalation of the situation as Russia continues its aggression against Ukraine.

After the "march for justice" by the Russian private military company "Wagner," some "Wagner" troops moved to Belarus, which was noted to have caused a temporary increase in tensions with neighboring

⁵ In December 1999, the two countries signed a treaty creating the Union State of Russia and Belarus with the aim of achieving political, economic, and military integration and equality between the two peoples in social life.

countries, including Poland and Lithuania, which border the country.

Belarus will hold parliamentary elections in 2024 and presidential elections in 2025, two events that will be closely watched.

3 Countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus

(1) Overview

Countries in Central Asia and the 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, uranium, and rare metals. The stability of the entire region, including Central Asia and the Caucasus, has also been of great importance in addressing key issues facing the international community such as the fight against terrorism and counternarcotics.

In the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine that began in 2022, Central Asian and Caucasian countries that have close geopolitical and economic ties with Russia have each been forced to take a cautious approach. The countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have been absent from or abstained from voting on UN General Assembly resolutions related to the aggression against Ukraine, with the exception of Georgia, which has expressed support for Ukraine, and many countries have avoided making their positions clear externally. Meanwhile, at the ninth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue held in December 2022, Japan and the five Central Asian countries concurred on the importance of upholding the UN Charter and other international laws, which includes respecting the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all countries and peacefully settling disputes.

Japan and the Central Asian and Caucasian countries have traditionally maintained friendly relations. In 2023, with a return to normal following the COVID-19 pandemic, the flow of people to and from the Central Asian and Caucasian countries increased, including

high-level visits between Japan and these countries. Japan is strengthening bilateral relations with these countries through high-level dialogues, including the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, which will mark its 20th anniversary in 2024, as it continues efforts to promote regional cooperation.

In addition, in light of the current international situation, the importance of the "Caspian Sea Route," a transportation route linking Central Asia and Europe via the Caucasus region without passing through Russia, is attracting increasing attention from Central Asian and Caucasian countries as well as Western countries. Japan has also actively participated in discussions on strengthening connectivity in the region. In March, the Twelfth Tokyo Dialogue of "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, whose theme was "Connectivity with Central Asia and the Caucasus," was held jointly with the Global Forum of Japan⁶ with the participation of experts from Central Asian and Caucasian countries, international organizations, and businesses.

(2) Central Asian Countries

The countries of Central Asia are partners of Japan 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.

Japan launched the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue in 2004, and has held nine Foreign Ministers' Meetings as well as various discussions with the participation of experts and business people. In recent years, the international community has shown increasing interest in strengthening relations with Central Asian countries, and many countries have held summit meetings with Central Asian countries. Japan will also strengthen relations with these regions through high-level dialogues and other means in 2024, the 20th anniversary of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue (See the Column on page 161).

In Uzbekistan, the constitution was amended in May, extending the presidential term to seven years. In addition, presidential elections were held in July before the end of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's term, after which he was reelected for the second time. President

⁶ Global Forum of Japan: A membership-based voluntary organization for private, non-profit, non-partisan, independent, policy-oriented intellectual international exchange (Source: the Global Forum's website Copyright (C) The Global Forum of Japan (GFJ))

Mirziyoyev continues to pursue his own reform path. In terms of Japan's relations with Uzbekistan, the Government of Japan has actively engaged in high-level political dialogues that include a visit to Uzbekistan by Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs YOSHIKAWA Yumi in January, a telephone call between Foreign Minister Hayashi and Acting Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov in March, a visit to Japan by Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Kuchkarov in July, and a telephone call between Foreign Minister Kamikawa and Foreign Minister Saidov in October.

Kazakhstan held elections for the Senate in January and for the Majilis (Lower House) in March, both of which were won by the ruling party, indicating that the country's internal political situation is stable. In terms of Japan's relations with Kazakhstan, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited Kazakhstan in January, and in September, Foreign Minister Kamikawa met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Murat Nurtleu to confirm that Japan and Kazakhstan, which chairs the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, will work together to coordinate the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogues and summit meetings, and discussed ways in which the two countries can deepen cooperation in all areas, including strengthening connectivity and the energy sector.

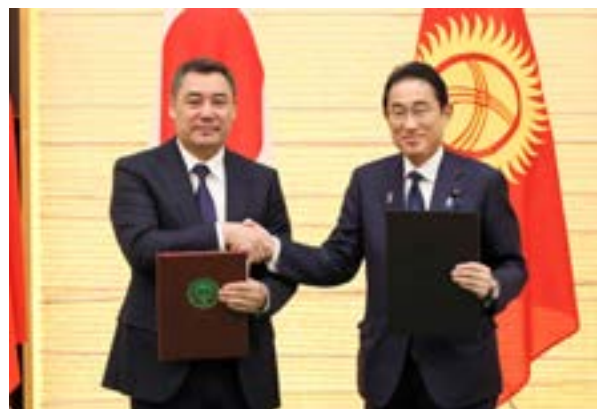
With regard to Japan's relations with the Kyrgyz Republic, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited the Kyrgyz Republic in August and met with Foreign Minister Zheenbek Kulubaev and Deputy Foreign Minister Rysbek Moldogaziev to discuss ways to strengthen bilateral relations based on the ninth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of "Central

Asia plus Japan" Dialogue and bilateral foreign ministerial meetings held in December 2022. In November, President Sadyr Zhaparov Foreign Minister Kulubaev, and others visited Japan. As his first visit to Japan, President Zhaparov visited Tokyo and Kyoto, where he held his first summit meeting with Prime Minister Kishida. Prime Minister Kishida confirmed friendly relations with the Kyrgyz Republic, and the two leaders signed the Joint Statement on friendship and comprehensive partnership in the new era between Japan and the Kyrgyz Republic, in which they shared an intention to develop bilateral relations and confirmed cooperation toward sustainable development. On this occasion, they also signed and exchanged notes on the Grant Assistance to the Kyrgyz Republic for the "Project for the Improvement of Irrigation Maintenance Equipment," exchanged notes verbales on the introduction of diplomatic and official visa waiver measures for diplomatic and official passport holders, and signed memoranda of cooperation between legal authorities and between health authorities.

With regard to Japan's relations with Tajikistan, the two countries held the second meeting of the "Tajik-Japanese Intergovernmental Commission on Economic, Technical and Scientific Cooperation" in Tajikistan in March. In August, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited Tajikistan and met with Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin and Minister of Economic Development and Trade Zavqi Zavqizoda, respectively, to discuss strengthening bilateral relations based on the ninth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue and the bilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in December 2022.



Japan-Kazakhstan Foreign Ministers' Meeting (September 20, New York, U.S.)



Japan-Kyrgyzstan Summit Meeting (November 20, Tokyo; Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office)

In Turkmenistan, the People's Council, the supreme organ of government authority, was established in January, and the parliament reverted from a bicameral to a unicameral structure. In addition, former President Serdar Berdimuhamedov assumed the position of Chairman of the People's Council and the newly created position of "National Leader." In terms of Japan's relations with Turkmenistan, there was an active flow of dignitaries to and from Japan. In June, State Minister for Digital Transformation OGUSHI Masaki and representatives of the Turkmenistan-Japan Parliamentary Friendship Group attended the opening ceremony of Arkadag, a city built as a smart city. In July, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited Turkmenistan and met with the Chairperson of the Parliament Dunyagozel Gulmanova, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov, and Deputy Prime Minister for Economy, Banking, and International Finance Hojamyrat Geldimyradov. Also in November, Minister of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations Begench Gochmollayev attended a meeting of the countries participating in the 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo in Osaka. In December, an economic mission led by Rahimberdi Jepbarov, Chairman of the Board of the State Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs, visited Japan and held discussions with relevant Japanese ministries and agencies. Furthermore, negotiations for the conclusion of a tax convention between Japan and Turkmenistan, which began in July, resulted in a substantive agreement during the second round of negotiations, which took place in October.

In recent years, there has also been a growing movement among Central Asian countries and neighboring countries to promote regional cooperation. In 2023, there were a number of meetings attended by the leaders of Central Asian countries, including a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), summit meeting (July), a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit meeting (October), a meeting of the Organization of Turkic States (November), a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), summit meeting (November), and a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit meeting (December). Among the Central Asian countries, the fifth meeting of the Central Asian Leaders Summit took place in Tajikistan in September.

(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. Meanwhile, problems exist in Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Azerbaijan and Armenia have long been at odds over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Japan announced the Caucasus Initiative in 2018, which is comprised of two pillars: (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), develops its diplomacy in line with this initiative.

Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Japan has strongly urged all parties to peacefully resolve issues involving the region through dialogue. In 2023, Azerbaijan established a checkpoint along the Lachin Corridor, the only transportation route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, extending last year's restrictions on traffic and logistics along this corridor and raising concerns about a humanitarian crisis.

In September, Azerbaijan conducted military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, bringing the entire region under Azerbaijani control and bringing more than 100,000 displaced people from the region into Armenia. In foreign ministers' statements and at the UN Security Council and other forums, Japan expressed serious concern about the worsening situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and called for a suspension of military activities by Azerbaijan and a peaceful resolution of the situation for all parties through dialogue. Furthermore, given the large number of displaced persons, Japan decided in October to provide 2 million U.S. dollars in emergency grant aid through international organizations. In December, the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan issued a joint statement reaffirming their willingness to normalize relations and conclude a peace treaty based on respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, and stating that they support a prisoner exchange, the withdrawal of Armenia's candidacy for the 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) in 2024, and Azerbaijan's holding of

COP29, which Japan welcomed as a step toward confidence-building measures aimed at achieving a peace accord between the two countries. These developments have also drawn the attention of the international community to the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In terms of Japan's relations with Azerbaijan, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited the country in May and met with Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources Mukhtar Babayev, Chairman of the State Customs Committee Shahin Baghirov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Fariz Rzayev, and they concurred on strengthening cooperation with regard to the economy and regional connectivity. In August, the tax convention between Japan and Azerbaijan entered into force and is expected to further promote investment and economic exchange between the two countries.

In terms of Japan's relations with Armenia, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited Armenia in May and met with President of the National Assembly Alen Simonyan, Deputy Foreign Minister Mnatsakan Safaryan, and Deputy Minister of the Economy Rafayel Gevorgyan, and they concurred on deepening bilateral relations and working closely together, including with regard to the economy and interparliamentary exchange. In November, Economy Minister Vahan Kerobyan visited Japan and attended a meeting of the international

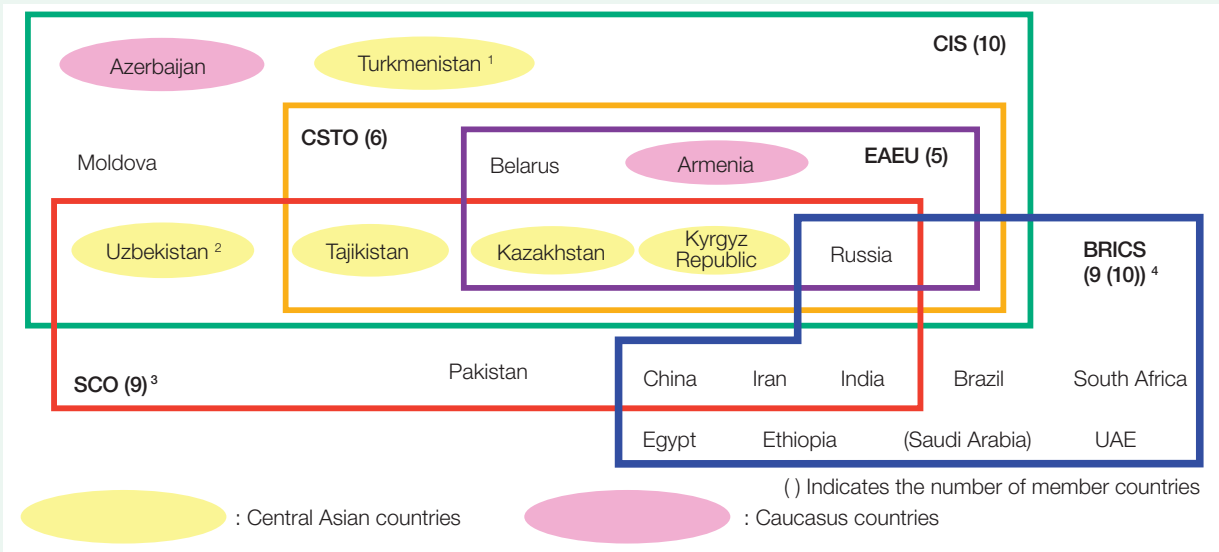


Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visits the No. 13 kindergarten of Etchmiadzin Municipality in Etchmiadzin, Armenia, during her visit to three Caucasus countries (May 3, Etchmiadzin, Armenia)

participating countries of the World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai held in Osaka, as well as meetings with related ministries.

Regarding Japan's relations with Georgia, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshikawa visited the country in May and met separately with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Levan Davitashvili and First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Lasha Darsalia to discuss regional developments, including the situation in Ukraine, and to share an intention to promote cooperation in bilateral relations. In December, the European Council decided to grant Georgia candidate country status for EU membership.

Major Frameworks involving Russia, Central Asia, and Caucasus countries



<Note>
1 Turkmenistan has been an associate member of the CIS since 2005.
2 Uzbekistan ceased its membership in the CSTO in 2012.
3 Iran officially joined the SCO in 2023.
4 See footnote 2 in Chapter 1 Page 16

<Abbreviations>
CIS : Commonwealth of Independent States (10)
CSTO : Collective Security Treaty Organization (6)
EAEU : Eurasian Economic Union (5)
SCO : Shanghai Cooperation Organization (9)

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue

Although separated by thousands of kilometers by sea and land, Japan and Central Asia share an Asian climate and culture, and their history of exchange via the Silk Road dates back more than a thousand years. When the five Central Asian countries gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Japan was one of the first to establish diplomatic relations the following year, developing friendly relations among the nations. In 1997, Japan began conducting “Silk Road diplomacy” with three pillars: political dialogue, cooperation for economic and resource development, and peace building.

In 2004, Japan launched the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue as a new dimension for cooperation with Central Asia. For Central Asia, it was the first attempt to have a framework for dialogue between the entire region and a third country. The idea was born as an extension of Japan’s awareness of the role it could play because of its geographical distance from Central Asia, which is surrounded by major powers, and Japan’s proposal was accepted by Central Asia.

At the time, Central Asia was in the midst of prosperity and development, undertaking nation-building efforts that included shifting to a market economy and democratization. At the same time, the region was dealing with localized terrorist attacks and other indicators of instability. Looking at the international environment, following the terrorist attacks on the United States (U.S.) (9/11), the U.S. began stationing its military in Central Asia while Russia and China also worked to maintain and strengthen their influence in the region. Under these circumstances, the stable development of the Central Asian region was very important as it would lead to peace and stability in the international community, including Japan. Furthermore, Japan believed that Central Asia could achieve stability and prosperity quickly and more steadily through intra-regional cooperation than if each country addressed its challenges on its own. With the Central Asian countries playing the main roles, Japan aimed to play a catalytic role in supporting the development of Central Asia based on the three basic principles of “respect for diversity,” “competition and coordination,” and “open cooperation.”

Over the 20 years of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue, many political dialogues and people-to-people exchanges have taken place, including nine Foreign Ministers’ Meetings. During this period, the Central Asian countries have steadily developed. As a result of Japan’s long-standing and ongoing support for human resource development, many people are active in their respective fields, and it is not unusual to hear fluent Japanese spoken in government-to-government discussions. The tracks that remain from 20 years of cooperation can be felt.

However, after 20 years, new challenges are emerging. Especially now, with the surrounding international environment growing more severe, the time is ripe for intra-regional cooperation, mainly among the countries of Central Asia. This is the starting point of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue and is the time for the essence of mutually beneficial cooperation demonstrated through many years of effort to be utilized. Through relationships of trust that have been cultivated over the years, Japan will continue to respect the efforts of each country while redoubling its own efforts to engage with the region as an important partner in achieving free, open, and sustainable development in Central Asia.



Character created by manga artist MORI Kaoru to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue