

## Section

## 6

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, an outrageous act of Russia's aggression against Ukraine (which Russia calls a "special military operation"), did not stop in 2024. While Ukraine advanced into Russia (Kursk Oblast) in August, Russia has meanwhile gradually expanded its occupied area of Ukrainian territory. Russia also continued its nuclear threats. In November, Russia announced the "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," its first such document since 2020, and launched what was said to be a new medium-range ballistic missile toward Ukraine in what it called a "test."

With its relations with Western countries extremely limited, Russia continued seeking to further strengthen its ties with China, India, North Korea, and developing and emerging countries known as the "Global South." Of particular note are President Vladimir Putin's visit to China immediately after taking office for his overall fifth term, his first visit to North Korea in about 24 years, and the BRICS<sup>(1)</sup> Summit in October hosted by Russia. Russia claims to unite the efforts of the "global majority."

Regarding Belarus, the country has maintained a supportive stance towards Russia, which includes both Russia and Belarus making mention of deploying 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). Meanwhile, 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.

Amid this situation, the international community is paying close attention to the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2024, countries including the United States (U.S.), Germany, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) actively engaged in dialogue with Central Asia, holding summit- or ministerial-level meetings with the five Central Asian countries. Furthermore, China has been deepening its involvement in Central Asia year by year, steadily increasing the number of visits by leaders and ministers, and the Fifth China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China in December.

In the Caucasus region, peace talks and border delimitation negotiations have been held intermittently between Azerbaijan and Armenia since the military activities in Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>(2)</sup> in September 2023, and while positive developments have been seen that include an agreement on partial border delimitation, a peace treaty has yet to be concluded. In Georgia, amid allegations of fraud with regard to the country's parliamentary elections, the Georgian government announced at the end of November that it would not begin the EU accession process until the end of 2028. This led to large-scale protests by citizens supporting EU accession, resulting in clashes with security forces and many arrests and injuries.

(1) BRICS: A term referring to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. At the summit meeting in August 2023, invitations for new membership were announced for Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (Argentina subsequently withdrew its application for membership due to a change of administration, and there are also reports that Saudi Arabia has not yet joined.) At the summit meeting in October 2024, the leaders concurred on creating a new category of BRICS Partner Countries, and 2024 chair country Russia announced that nine countries — Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan — will join as Partner Countries from January 2025. In January 2025, Brazil, the 2025 chair country, announced Indonesia's full membership.

(2) Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: A dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian settlement on Azerbaijani territory. In September 2023, Azerbaijan carried out military activities in the region, bringing the entire region under Azerbaijan's administration and causing many refugees to flow into Armenia.

## 2 Russia and Belarus

### (1) Situation in Russia

#### A Internal Situation in Russia

In 2024, domestic politics continued to focus on the “special military operation” (hereinafter referred to as the “operation”). Since the beginning of the year, President Putin has demonstrated his support for participants in the “operation,” as well as bereaved families through means such as meeting with soldiers injured in the “operation,” celebrating the New Year with those who participated in the “operation” at the Presidential Residence, and spending a Russian Orthodox Christmas with the bereaved families. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly in February, Putin stressed that those who serve Russia are the “genuine elite.” A human resources development program was launched for participants in the “operation,” and some graduates of the program as well as individuals involved in the “operation” have been appointed to high-ranking federal and local government positions, and elected to assembly member. Russia has significantly increased the lump-sum payment it gives to contract soldiers at the time of contract signing, as well as one-time payment given to participants in the “operation” when they become injured or disabled.

In the presidential election held in March, in which opposition candidates were not allowed to participate, President Putin was elected with the highest voter turnout and percentage of votes in the Russian presidential elections. He invited participants in the “operation,” as well as their children, to his overall fifth presidential inauguration in May, and gave an inaugural address in which he called for national unity in support of the “operation.” With the start of the new presidential term, Russia’s cabinet was reshuffled, with Mikhail Mishustin continuing in his role as Prime Minister and First Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belousov, an economic expert, appointed Minister of Defense. Russia has significantly increased its defense budget following its aggression against Ukraine.

In February, a regional department of the Federal Penitentiary Service announced that opposition figure Alexey Navalny had died in a penal colony. At his funeral, held in Moscow, a large number of citizens

lined up to offer flowers amid strict security measures from Russian authorities. In March, a few days after the presidential election, an attack involving gunfire and explosions occurred at a concert hall in a shopping complex in Moscow Oblast, leaving more than 140 people dead. The Russian government initially claimed that Ukraine was responsible. In early August, there was a slight, temporary drop in President Putin’s approval rating and a slight increase in social unrest following Ukraine’s advance into Russia’s Kursk Oblast. Meanwhile, as the Russian government has maintained and strengthened restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, the situation has not led directly to instability in the country.

In the meantime, in March, an event was held to celebrate the “10th anniversary of Crimea’s reunification with Russia.”

#### B Russian Foreign Policy

In order to stop Russian aggression as soon as possible, Western countries continue to provide robust support to Ukraine in 2024 and take measures that include maintaining severe sanctions against Russia. High-level dialogues between Russia and the West remain limited, with a few exceptions.

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

Russia has made particular progress in its relationship with China in various fields, including politics, economy, and military affairs. In May, President Putin paid a state visit to China on his first overseas trip since taking office for his overall fifth term as president, and said that Russia-China relations have reached the highest level ever. With regard to economy, the proportion of bilateral transactions settled in yuan and ruble has increased, and de-dollarization continues. On the military front, the two countries are ramping up the frequency of their military cooperation, with continued joint navigation (July, October) and joint flights with bombers (November) by the two militaries in the vicinity of Japan, as well as mutual participation

in military exercises (September). The joint statement issued at the China-Russia summit in May also clearly stated that they would strengthen military cooperation, expand the scale of exercises, and conduct regular joint maritime and air patrols. From the perspective of Japan's security, these developments must continue to be closely monitored with serious concern.

In June, President Putin visited North Korea for the first time in about 24 years and signed the "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," which entered into force in December and stipulates the provision of mutual assistance in the event of an attack on either participating "country." Moves to advance Russia-North Korea military cooperation, such as Russia's procurement and use of weapons and munitions, including ballistic missiles, from North Korea, and the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia and their engagement in combat against Ukraine, are of grave concern, not only lead to a further deterioration of the situation in Ukraine, but also affect the security of the region surrounding Japan. The G7, including Japan, strongly condemns these moves.

In October, Russia hosted the 16th BRICS Summit as the chair. At the summit, President Putin stated that delegations from 35 countries, including four new member states, and six international organizations had participated in the Summit, and asserted that the role and authority of BRICS are growing. In November, the first Ministerial Conference of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum was held, further invigorating frameworks involving the Global South.

Also in November, shortly after reports of Ukraine's use of Western-supplied weapons on Russian territory, the Presidential Administration of Russia issued a presidential decree approving the "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," the first such document since 2020. In retaliation for the use of said weapons, Russia launched what was said to be a new intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) into Ukraine in what it called a "test." Russia has repeatedly made statements and moves that suggest the use of nuclear weapons in the context of its aggression against Ukraine. Japan, as the only country to have ever suffered atomic bombings during war, has taken every opportunity to convey to Russia its position that Japan firmly reject Russia's threat to use

nuclear weapons, let alone any use of nuclear weapons, and has also appealed to the international community as well.

## **C Russian Economy**

Russia continues its aggression against Ukraine, and has significantly increased defense spending to continue the war. The government's budget proposal calls for an increase of about 25% over the previous year in defense spending for 2025, accounting for just over 30% of the annual budget and about 6.3% of gross domestic product (GDP).

As a result of increased investment and consumption owing to, including, fiscal stimulus measures by the Russian government and improvement in income situation, the GDP growth rate was positive at 3.6% in 2023, with similar growth predicted for 2024 (as of the end of 2024). Although sanctions have caused a significant reduction in energy exports to Europe, Russia has increased exports to countries such as China, India, and Türkiye that are not participating in sanctions against Russia, and has taken measures to circumvent these sanctions. Russia is moving away from the U.S. dollar for trade settlement, and in response to export restrictions on advanced components from Western countries, it appears to be facilitating indirect import of these components through friendly countries.

Meanwhile, within Russia, inflationary pressures continue due to increased import costs caused by sanctions and currency destabilization (weakened ruble), and the Russian central bank has continued to raise its key interest rate, which reached 21% in October, the highest since the start of the aggression. The country also continues to face a severe domestic labor shortage. Restrictions on access to advanced technology due to sanctions imposed by Western countries could have medium- to long-term effects on the economy and society.

## **(2) Japan-Russia Relations**

### **A Overview**

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. 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 and air safety, from the perspective of what is in Japan's national interest in the overall diplomacy of Japan.

With regard to fisheries, even after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Government of Japan has been holding discussions with Russia to maintain and secure Japan's interests related to fishing activities. In 2024, fishing operations continued under the "Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Mutual Relations in the Field of Fisheries off the coast of Both Countries" and the "Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics concerning cooperation in the fields of fisheries," as well as fishing operations based on the Kaigara Island Kelp Agreement, a private agreement. As for the Framework Agreement Concerning Operations of Japanese fishing vessels in the Waters Around the Four Northern Islands,<sup>(3)</sup> in January 2023, Russia notified Japan that it could not arrange for intergovernmental consultations based on the agreement due to Japan's policy toward Russia regarding the situation in Ukraine. The Government of Japan has protested this and continues to urge the Russian side to realize operations to be carried out under the agreement.

Regarding security issues, following the intrusion into Japan's territorial airspace three times in September by a Russian military patrol aircraft over Japanese territorial waters north of Rebun Island in Hokkaido, Japan has lodged a very severe protest with the Russian government and urged that it investigate the cause and prevent a recurrence of such intrusion. Japan has also conveyed serious concerns to the Russian government about the increasing frequency of joint operations between the Chinese and Russian militaries around Japan.

On the subject of cultural and people-to-people exchanges, 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.

In January 2025, the Russian government decided to terminate the application of memorandums between the Japanese and Russian governments regarding the Japan Centers. Japan protested this, stating that the unilateral termination of the memorandums was unacceptable, and demanded that the Russian government's decision be revoked.

## **B The Northern Territories Issue 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 79 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 issue of the attribution of the Four Northern Islands.<sup>(4)</sup>

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

<sup>(3)</sup> Agreement on the Operation of Japanese Fishing Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Northern Territories.

<sup>(4)</sup> 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>



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 issue of the attribution of the Four Northern Islands.

In addition, the Four-Island exchange program,<sup>(5)</sup> Free Visits and Visits to Graves in the Northern Territories have not been conducted since 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 and the deterioration of Japan-Russia relations following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Resuming the Four-Island exchange program, Free Visits and Visits to Graves in the Northern Territories is one of the highest priorities in Japan-Russia relations. In response to the earnest wishes of the elderly former residents of the islands, the Government of Japan will continue to strongly urge the Russian side to resume these programs, with particular emphasis on Visits to 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 and surrounding waters, including military exercises, stating that these moves are contrary to Japan's position concerning these islands and unacceptable.

### **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 2024 declined by 16.8% from the previous year (Japan's total trade during the same period was approximately 1,188 billion Japanese yen). Due in part to Japan's sanctions against Russia, exports from Russia to Japan fell 16.7% from the previous year (especially coal), and exports from Japan to Russia also fell 17.2% 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 foundations of the international order come with a high price. These include sanctions against individuals such as Russian government and military officials, as well as individuals and organizations in Russia and occupied territories, along with sanctions in the financial sector that include freezing assets of several banks, and measures prohibiting imports and exports. Japan and like-minded countries, such as those in the G7, introduced a price cap system for Russian crude oil in December 2022 and for Russian oil products in February 2023, with the aim of stabilizing international oil prices while reducing Russia's 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 2024 and the G7 Apulia Summit in June that the G7 would further prevent evasion or circumvention of sanctions against Russia, and in June, designated additional entities in third countries suspected of involvement in the circumvention or evasion of sanctions. Russia's procurement of arms from North Korea is a violation of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and could lead to a further deterioration of the situation in Ukraine. In response, Japan, in cooperation with like-minded countries such as the G7, introduced measures in May that include freezing the assets of individuals and organizations involved in these arms transfers. Furthermore, at the G7 Leaders' Video Conference in December, Prime Minister Ishiba stated that the government was considering imposing additional sanctions on organizations in third countries suspected of being involved in the circumvention or evasion of sanctions.

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

<sup>(5)</sup> Refers to Visits to Graves in the Northern Territories, Free Visits, and exchange visits/receptions to the Four Northern Islands



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

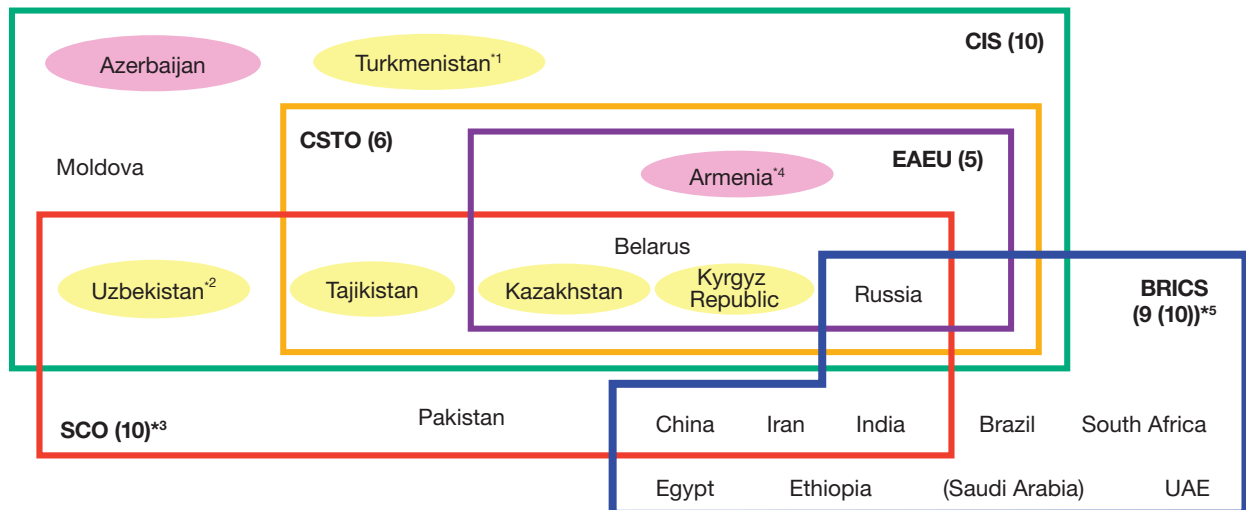
Although Belarus did not take part in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, it supported Russian military action through the use of its territory at the beginning of the aggression. In response to this, Western countries strengthened sanctions against Belarus, while Japan also implemented sanctions against Belarus.

Since then, President Lukashenko has held a series of meetings with President Putin in Moscow and other places to maintain and enhance relations with Russia. Foreign Minister Maxim Ryzhenkov, who took up his post in June, visited China and North Korea in succession in July as part of efforts to strengthen ties with countries close to Russia.

In the meantime, Russia and Belarus have been making moves to contain Western countries, such as stating that Russia has completed the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. The international community condemned this as a further escalation of the situation as Russia continues its aggression against Ukraine.

In Belarus, elections for the House of Representatives (lower house) and local councils were held in February, but candidates with anti-government positions were not allowed to run, and only those loyal to the president were elected. No significant protests occurred on election day, but the U.S. pointed out problems such as a lack of democratic procedures and the absence of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) election observer mission. In the presidential election on January 26, 2025, President Alexander Lukashenko, who took office in 1994, was elected for a seventh term amid concerns that similar problems had arisen as in the parliamentary elections.

#### Major Frameworks involving Russia, Central Asia, and Caucasus countries



( ) Indicates the number of member 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 Armenia has announced that it will freeze its participation in the CSTO in 2024.

\*5 See footnote (1) (page 148)

<Abbreviations>

CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) (10)

CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) (6)

EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) (5)

SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) (10)

### 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 opportunities such as the Foreign Minister's Meetings of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue and other various opportunities, 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. Japan is strengthening bilateral relations with these countries through high-level dialogues, including the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, which marked 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 is also focusing on strengthening connectivity in the region and promoting economic

cooperation, including facilitating logistics by speeding up customs clearance.

#### (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 such as the U.S., the EU, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), China, Russia, India, and Germany have held summit meetings with Central Asian countries. Japan will also utilize the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024, to strengthen its relations with Central Asia through high-level dialogues and other means.

In June, State Minister for Foreign Affairs TSUJI Kiyoto visited the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, while also stopping in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.



Illustration commemorating the 20th anniversary of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue ©MORI Kaoru



Japan-Uzbekistan Foreign Ministers' Meeting (March 8, Tokyo)

Furthermore, Prime Minister Kishida held telephone calls with the leaders of the five Central Asian countries in August, and Foreign Minister Iwaya held telephone calls with the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries in November.

Regarding relations with Uzbekistan, Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov visited Japan in March as a guest of MOFA to attend a Foreign Ministers' Meeting with Foreign Minister Kamikawa, and the two foreign ministers shared the intention to foster concrete bilateral cooperation at multiple levels. In June, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuji visited the country and met with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Bobur Usmanov.

Regarding relations with Kazakhstan, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuji met with Deputy Mayor of Almaty Nusupova during his visit to the country in June. Parliamentary Vice-Minister Fukazawa visited the capital, Astana, to attend the 30th anniversary commemoration of the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC), and held discussions with First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Akan Rakhmetulin and Minister of Science and Higher Education Sayasat Nurbek on deepening cooperation between the two countries in all areas, including science and technology, sports, and energy. In May, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Nazira Nurbayeva visited Japan and confirmed that Japan and Kazakhstan, the current chair of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, would cooperate on further coordination of "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogues and summit meetings.

Regarding relations with the Kyrgyz Republic, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuji visited the country in June, paid a courtesy call on President Sadyr Japarov,

and exchanged views with relevant parties regarding cooperation in areas such as the sending and receiving of human resources, including highly skilled personnel, clean energy, logistics, and transportation infrastructure. Additionally, during his visit to Japan in September, Minister of Energy Taalaibek Omukeyevich Iblaev met with Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry SAITO Ken and exchanged views on bilateral cooperation concerning economics and energy.

Regarding relations with Tajikistan, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuji visited Tajikistan in June and paid courtesy calls on Deputy Prime Minister Usmonali Usmonzoda and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sirojiddin Muhriddin, and exchanged views on issues including the utilization of Tajikistan's labor and human resources, strengthening cooperation toward holding the Summit Meeting of "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue in 2024, and cooperation in the international arena. A ceremony was also held to present football uniforms to the Tajikistan Football Federation.

Regarding relations with Turkmenistan, Foreign Minister Kamikawa met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov, who visited Japan in January, and signed the Cooperation Program between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan for 2024-2026. In February, Speaker of the House of Representatives NUKAGA Fukushima held talks with Chairperson of the Parliament Dunyagozel Gurmanova during her visit to Japan. In March, Minister of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations Begench Gochmollayev visited Japan, met with relevant parties, and attended the Turkmenistan-Japan Business Forum. A new Japan-Turkmenistan tax convention was signed at the 15th Joint Meeting of the Turkmen-Japanese and Japan-Turkmen Committees on Economic Cooperation, held in Ashgabat in December.

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 and other issues. Japan announced the Caucasus Initiative in 2018, which is comprised of two pillars: (a) assistance for human resources development for state building (human resources development) and (b) 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. Peace negotiations and consultations toward border delimitation have continued between Azerbaijan and Armenia since the military activities in September 2023, and at the eighth meeting of the State Commissions on the delimitation of the state border in April 2024, the two parties agreed to carry out border delimitation based on the Alma-Ata Declaration, which stipulates the recognition and respect of each other's territorial integrity. Based on the preliminary agreement reached at the same meeting, an agreement was reached with respect to part of the border between the two parties at the ninth meeting, held in May.

Regarding relations with Azerbaijan, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Yalchin Rafiyev visited Japan in February and met with State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuge, and the two concurred on their countries working together to ensure the success of the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties to the

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) (November, Baku, Azerbaijan). Furthermore, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Elnur Mammadov visited Japan in May and held a discussion with Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Fukazawa on cooperation between Japan and Azerbaijan in various fields.

Regarding relations with Armenia, in September, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuge met with Secretary of the Security Council Armen Grigoryan, who was visiting Japan, and welcomed Armenia's participation in the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan. He also confirmed that through participation in the Expo, the two countries will further deepen bilateral relations, including strengthening and promoting economic relations, and continue close cooperation between the two countries in various fields.

As for relations with Georgia, in May, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Fukazawa met with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Khvtisiashvili, who was visiting Japan for a round of political consultations between the two countries and exchanged views on cooperation in various fields. He also conveyed his congratulations on the opening of the Honorary Consulate of Georgia in Kagoshima in the same month. In the Georgian parliamentary elections held in October, the ruling party “Georgian Dream” won more than half of the seats, but opposition parties did not recognize the election results, claiming there was electoral fraud, and held protests calling for the election to be rerun. In addition, the announcement by the Georgian government at the end of November that it would not start the EU membership process until the end of 2028 led to large-scale protests by citizens supporting EU membership, resulting in many arrests and injuries due to clashes with security forces. In response, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson issued a statement expressing concern over the situation and calling on the Georgian government to exercise restraint in order to avoid further deterioration and to take constructive measures that will gain the understanding of the Georgian people, as well as expressing its hope that the situation will be calmed down soon.