

# Central Asia symposium in Tokyo

## Symposium examines Central Asia's issues, future

STAFF REPORT

The present situation in Central Asia, including the opportunities and challenges facing the region, as well as the future of the area were examined during a March 27 symposium in Tokyo.

Co-organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Global Forum of Japan; the Graduate Program on Human Security, The University of Tokyo; and The Japan Times, the symposium brought together representatives of the five Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — and experts from Japan and beyond. The around 250 people who packed the capacity of the auditorium evidenced the keen interest in the region.

Following the opening address by Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Kazuyuki Nakane and a greeting by Kenichi Ito, representative of the Global Forum of Japan, JICA President Akihiko Tanaka gave the keynote speech.

"Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue was initiated at the proposal of then Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi and was agreed to at a meeting of the six relevant foreign ministers held in 2004 in Astana, Kazakhstan. The foreign ministers have held five meetings and many official dialogues have been organized so far. These have served as the framework for Central Asia-Japan cooperation.

"After ten years of dialogue, we're already into our second decade, which should be full of

different opportunities and challenges. In this milestone year, it is timely and meaningful to have an opportunity to hear the opinions of experts from around the world," Tanaka said.

Since achieving their independence, Central Asian countries have experienced many difficult times, including the 1998 Russian financial crisis, the September 11 attacks in 2001, and the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008. "But perhaps, the countries have never faced a more challenging environment than now," Tanaka said.

The EU sanctions on Russia over the 2014 unrest in Ukraine have resulted in a decrease in remittances from Russia to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have many migrant workers. Also, flagging oil prices have affected

the economy of the resource-rich countries such as Kazakhstan. In addition, radical Islamic sects such as the Islamic State group are attracting many youths from this area.

"Influenced by the divisional cooperation within the former Soviet Union regime, the economies of the Central Asian countries are structurally imbalanced and vulnerable even after nearly a quarter of a century of independence," Tanaka said. Looking back on the post-Soviet development of the region, he noted the structural challenges in political systems, economies, industries, trade and investment and people's livelihoods.

On the other hand, he pointed to some positive aspects.

"Central Asia is surrounded by Russia, India and China, which

are three of the BRICS that are likely to be the key drivers of the world economy today," Tanaka said. "There is steady advancement toward regional cooperation and integration, which provides Central Asia a big opportunity," he said, referring to the concrete regional cooperative frameworks, such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.

In this context, Japan has participated in this advancement, in the framework of the "Central Asia Plus Japan" dialogues, under three basic policies — respect for diversity; competition and collaboration; and openness in cooperation, Tanaka said.

Following the keynote speech, there were sessions comprised of presentations and discussions moderated by Ambassador Akira Muto, special representative for Central Asia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan.

Andrew Kuchins, director and senior fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Russia and Eurasia Program, said: "The geopolitical significance of Central Asia starts with its geopolitical location in the heart of Eurasia," and noted that the famous British geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder, more than 100 years ago, referred to this area as the "World Island" and went further to assert that whoever controls the "World Island" controls the world.

"Central Asia should be considered more important to the United States and its allies simply by the virtue of its geographic location adjacent to four of the most significant foreign and security policy challenges for the U.S.: Afghanistan/Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia," he said.

Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center pointed out the dynamic situations in Eurasia such as Russia's strategic shift to the East, away from Europe, while China looks West



A symposium on Central Asia is held on March 27 in Tokyo, bringing together representatives from the region and experts from Japan and beyond. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## Water cooperation needed for sustainable development in Central Asia

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In over 20 years of independence, the five Central Asian countries have made progress in state building and development. However, relationships between them are marred by disputes over the use of the transboundary rivers that flow in the region. Although Central Asia is rich in water and energy resources, some of these countries face water scarcity or energy shortages due to the lack of successful cooperation. Currently, these countries, with some exceptions, lack trust and prefer to choose unilateral solutions on water utilization, implementing unsustainable and wasteful water projects, while efforts to promote long-term cooperation come to a standstill.

The reasons for this situation are the disintegration or lack of dialogue between the Central Asian countries on water issues. Disputes between countries are worsened by their uneven and unbalanced distribution of water. In Soviet times, most water was routed to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, although more than 70 percent of water in the area originates in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The imbalanced distribution was

reimbursed by the supply of agricultural and energy resources from the countries that received more water for irrigation. In return, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the upstream countries, provided water storage in large reservoirs during winter and released it to downstream countries in the spring and summer.

Cooperation ceased after the Central Asian's sovereignty after the fall of the USSR. Nowadays, there are no sustainable arrangements for fair utilization of water from the Syrdarya and Amudarya rivers, and the region is divided between countries rich in energy resources, but poor in water, and other countries, which lack energy resources, but require water mainly for energy production, especially in the cold winters.

Effective water cooperation requires political will from all states in guaranteeing the balanced rights and obligations of all riparian countries and mutually beneficial collaboration in providing water, energy and food security.

Kyrgyzstan has an energy shortage and without sufficient funds to import expensive energy resources from neighbors, sees a solution in building large power plants, such as Kambarata HPS I and II. The construction of these power

stations would give the region cheap electricity and provide for the operation of the Toktogul plant, which was built in 1976 as part of an irrigation regime based on the interests of downstream countries. The transboundary impact of these plants are minimal as they are located inland of Kyrgyzstan and upstream of the Toktogul Reservoir — the main regulator of the Syrdarya River's flow. The Toktogul reservoir, with a volume of 19.5 billion cubic meters, will be approximately four times larger than the estimated volume of the projected Kambarata-1 station with its volume of 4.7 billion cubic meters.

There is potential for water cooperation, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have shown success through their active collaboration on the Chu-Talas River Basin. To achieve sustainable development in addressing water, food and energy security challenges, mutually beneficial joint efforts and a regional complex approach are important measures to be taken by the Central Asian countries.

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and the U.S. is withdrawing from the Middle East.

The next session examined the stability in Central Asia in relation to Afghanistan.

Khudoberdi Kholiknazar, the head of the Centre for Strategic Research at the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, who served as the representative of Tajikistan, gave his commentary on the situation after the U.S. military withdrawal in Afghanistan and listed the challenges Afghanistan and Central Asia are facing.

Uktam Nasirov, the project leader at the Institute of Strategic and Inter-Regional Research under the President of Uzbekistan, who represented Uzbekistan, talked about new horizons for the resolutions of Afghanistan's challenges and noted Uzbekistan's contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of improving people's lives in Afghanistan on the economic and social fronts for the country's stability.

Former Deputy Prime Minister of Turkmenistan Gurbanmhammet Kasymov, who joined as a special ambassador of Turkmenistan, talked about his country's measures for the

improvement of transportation. He also spoke of its initiatives for international cooperation.

Abdulah Kundakbayev, assistant for the head of the International Chamber of Commerce of Kazakhstan, who represented Kazakhstan, introduced projects being planned or conducted in the region.

While it is true that Central Asian countries are constrained by being landlocked, projects have emerged to connect Europe and Asia to overcome this. Additionally, China and Turkey are interested in strengthening continental connectivity, which is becoming a reality.

Tomomi Tamaki, director of the Japanese Representative Office of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), introduced projects being conducted in the framework of CAREC. He also spoke about the role of international organizations as "honest brokers" and touched on what contributions are expected of Japan.

The final topic covered focused on the issue of water and energy, which is an issue as the amount of water in the five countries and the different seasons in which they need it. Although it was under control during the Soviet era, limited water resources

has been a potential divisive factor since independence.

Elmira Nogoibaeva, director of the Center Polis Asia think-tank, who served as the representative of Kyrgyzstan, pointed out that there is no agreement in place regarding water usage among the five countries, leading to shortages despite a plentiful supply.

"It gives a new perspective to examine this Central Asian issue from Japan," she said, adding that a new regional principle based on their natural geography should be implemented among the five countries.

Kenzo Hiroki, director of the water resources planning division at the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, spoke of the water supply along the Syrdarya River. He also presented the focus of Japan's cooperation regarding the water and energy issues in Central Asia, including the reconstruction of rules for reservoir administration; improvement of reservoir management ability; promotion of electric power interchanges; reduction of water for farming; and strengthening hydrological observation. Hiroki also reiterated the importance of international cooperation.