

## **The Role of JICA in the Central Asia Plus Japan Framework as an Instrument of Japan's Development Diplomacy in Central Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Japan is attempting to increase its footprint in Central Asia despite the region's enormous potential as a transcontinental passageway Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue (CA+JAD) This study seeks to determine the strategic significance of the Japan as a tool for Japan's development diplomacy in the area, the International Cooperation Agency (JICA) The qualitative method used combines semi-structured interviews with data synthesis from a literature review. Interviews with JICA volunteers. The results show that JICA is the main operator, converting diplomaticTechnical support, excellent infrastructure, and large human resources help to translate vision into tangible projects developing capacity during the official development assistance implementation. A short discussion shows that these Japan's sustainable development is bridged by the efforts that establish long-term trust based on the local ownership concept agenda emphasizing regional stability in Central Asia. In essence, JICA is a powerful tool for diplomacy in a multipolar geopolitical setting. The results of this study support Japan's status as a trustworthy country and flexible partner, offering thoughts for other players in development diplomacy, JICA, ODA, and regional Central Asian cooperation.

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue, Development Diplomacy, JICA.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over twenty years on from forging since 2004 the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue framework, Japan has managed to maintain its pursuit in Central Asia, not as a regional hegemon like with Russia or China, but in a sustaining manner that is astutely measured with the use of development partners who are effectively employed through JICA as the chief tool for establishing developmental diplomatic relations through Japan's continued engagement. One of the countries that has consistently fallen prey to this logic is Japan, which exploits mainly through the aid and trade instrumentality via Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which can be defined as the center of implementing agency for Japanese Official Development Assistant (ODA) as an extension from their diplomatic agenda in several strategic areas around the world. First of all, development diplomacy in itself means an explicit strategy that connects foreign aid programs with the concurrent achievement of foreign policy goals (Dobrinskaya, 2024). Because of its geographical location as a transit corridor for Eurasia and the fact that Central Asia is an energy resource-rich region, this strategy has made it one of the main arenas for its implementation (Central Asian countries include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In line with the regional paradigm and its intention to deepen engagement, Japan launched a multilateral platform called 'Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue' (CA+JAD) in 2004, which later became JICA's main platform in the execution of a variety of technical assistance, grant, and concessionary loan programs. Within this framework, JICA's role as an instrument of soft power and Japanese development diplomacy in Central Asia is most clearly seen.

Academic studies on Japan's engagement with Central Asia have emerged from different perspectives but left prominent gaps unaddressed. Dobrinskaya (2024) combines realism, liberalism, and constructivism to build a theoretical framework that allows us to see Japanese policy not as closed on material interests but merged with identity through the Silk Road narrative. But her broad brush inevitably constrains the amount of empirical assessment of policy on-the-ground that can happen. Rakhimov (2014) documents Japan's key shift from a bilateral approach to regional institutionalization through CA+JAD with a detailed analysis. However his study is not very good at looking at the problems that Russia and China are causing in the world. Muratbekova from 2023 says that soft power is about what people think is important and she notes that the ideas of democracy that Japan is promoting are often very different, from what's really happening in local politics. Japan is trying to promote its way of doing things but this is not always working because of the way things are done in other places. However, her research lacks strong evidence about the internalization of values at the civil society level. Dissyukov (2019) offers a new constructivist view by framing CA+JAD as a space for long-term norm formation through conference diplomacy. analysis, however, is centered on Japan and neglects the perspectives of individual Central Asian states. (Purnama, Asyidiqi and Dewanto,(2024). They found out some good things about what JICA is doing in Tajikistan. It is actually making a difference to the people at the level.

The problem is that the study only looked at one place. So the results of the study about JICAs operations, in Tajikistan cannot be used in other areas of the region. This review shows a clear gap: there is no research that combines the conceptual framework, institutional analysis of CA+JAD, and cross-country empirical evaluation to understand JICA's role as a tool of Japanese development diplomacy. The Japan International Cooperation Agency's 2022 Annual Report provides some interesting and disturbing facts about trends in the distribution of aid in the region. The total amount of money that the JICA programs have given to Central Asia is really big it is tens of billions of yen. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have gotten the money from the JICA programs Kyrgyzstan got 21,822 million yen and Uzbekistan got 20,604 million yen. But what is really important to remember is that the JICA programs have given a lot money to Tajikistan the JICA programs have given Tajikistan around 10,656 million yen and this is a problem because Tajikistan has the most people living in poverty in the whole region the poverty rate, in Tajikistan is 21.98%. The JICA programs have given a lot of money to Central Asia and the JICA programs have helped Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan but the JICA programs need to help Tajikistan because Tajikistan needs it the most. Turkmenistan got a small amount, just 1,361 million yen. This shows that the help from JICA is not given out based on what the countries really need to get better economically. The JICA aid does not seem to be given out just because a country needs it the JICA aid is given out in a way that's not equal. Turkmenistan and other countries, like it need help from JICA to get better economically but they are not getting as much JICA aid as they should be getting. It also captures more complicated diplomatic and geopolitical realities. Reflecting the context with competition from China and Russia (Murashkin, 2018), this situation underpins the perception that Japan's investment of resources in Central Asia via

JICA must not only be viewed in light of it being a development work; it is also regarded as one that originates out of detail to strategic interest.

Given the research gaps identified above and the pressing nature of the problem illustrated by empirical data so far, this study will take a comprehensive look at how far JICA has succeeded in transforming development assistance into a real diplomatic instrument to bolster Japan's strategic position in Central Asia under the CA+JAD framework. The main academic contribution of this research is the development of an integrative analytical framework that reconciles institutional analysis, implementation on the field and regional geo-political dynamics. The use of development diplomacy as a foreign policy tool, the study argues, can advance global prosperity and stability. Thus, to conduct this study properly, a qualitative method using descriptive-analytical approach will be conducted by combining systematic literature reviews on secondary sources and semi-structured interviews with JICA informants and analyzed under Complex Interdependence Theory.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Therefore, the analysis of Japan's presence in the Central Asian region has become a more integral process, incorporating factors like identity and institutions. In this context, it is worth mentioning an interesting article called "Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue: Its Role in Japan's Strategy in Central Asia." According to Dobrinskaya (2024), the author builds a well-reasoned theoretical framework based on the ideas of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. As for the strengths of the work, the main one can be defined as the possibility of analyzing Japan's foreign policy strategy from two perspectives, which are national interests and identity formation via the concept of the "Silk Road". The uniqueness of the paper lies in its ability to incorporate three major theories of international relations and combine general theoretical analysis of negotiations with the practical application of the chosen policy. While most sources consider the CA+JAD program as a political dialogue, Dobrinskaya (2024) states that JICA performs the function of implementation of CA+JAD. However, the very fact that it provides such an extensive theoretical framework ends up having the effect of reducing the thoroughness of analysis concerning the efficacy of the theories on a practical level of diplomacy.

As per the above discussion on policy-mapping approaches, Rakhimov (2014) in his article, *Central Asia and Japan: Bilateral and Multilateral Relations*, published in the *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, clearly illustrates how Japan has experienced a major shift from its bilateral orientation towards regional institutionalization through the CA+JAD approach. Although the study does not explicitly engage with a broad range of International Relations theories, confining itself primarily to Institutional Liberalism, it employs Policy-Oriented Analysis as its principal analytical and positional framework. The merit of the study is the thoroughness with which the issue of Japan using economic diplomacy together with political communication is addressed. One thing about the contribution that makes it unique compared to other academic works is that it revolves around the change that has occurred in the relational behavior of Japan towards Central Asia, moving from bilateral relations to multilateral ones. However, one of the main drawbacks of the study conducted by Rakhimov is the overly optimistic perspective he takes regarding the tension that is caused by the influence that both Russia and China exercise on the region. In addition, the article is less sophisticated than the most recent research on the matter.

While many authors tend to focus on institutional and material factors as explanatory factors, Muratbekova (2023) pays attention to another kind of factor that is no less important. Her paper titled "Japan's Value-Based Relationship in Action: The Case of Central Asia" argues that soft power, as well as value-based relationships, should become the key determinants of the analysis of Japan's presence in Central Asia. From the theoretical point of view, the author makes a conscious effort to remain pluralist in her approach to the study, incorporating the concepts drawn from different streams of IR and Development Diplomacy and combining Value-Based Diplomacy and Constructivism. One of the most notable aspects of this study is its open admission that the democracy-oriented values of Japan can often only be partially implemented under the conditions of specific political regimes operating in the region. A distinctive aspect of this study is that it tries to explain the relation between Central Asia and Japan based on value rather than purely from the perspective of an economic relationship. Nevertheless, the study should be able to present

more empirical evidence to prove whether the adoption of such values was by the civil society and not only by the political elite.

Having passed through the process of conceptualizing the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue to its actual implementation, Dissyukov (2019), writing in the *Journal of International and Advanced Japanese Studies*, applies the theory of conference diplomacy rooted in Liberal Institutionalism to prove that the CA+JAD forum operates as an enlarged norm-making space. Unlike other papers, this one does not approach CA+JAD merely as a ritualized dialogue. Instead, Dissyukov attempts to reconsider it as a pragmatic tool for politics with real-life implications in development strategies. In this case, an optimistic perspective on the problem at issue is greatly appreciated. However, this paper fails to overcome the Japanese point of view. Meanwhile, the views, aims, and aspirations of Central Asian states require special consideration because they cannot be ignored in the course of the dialogue's evolution.

Theoretically, the discussion moves from the theoretical discussion to the actual implementation stage of ideas, as shown in Purnama et al.'s (2024) analysis of the strategic objectives of Japan in an empirical setting. In this study, Purnama et al. conduct a critical examination of the stages of policy formulation and policy implementation, noting cases when Japan has succeeded in its policies through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as situations when there is a gap between intention and achievement. Supplementing the theoretical debate, Purnama et al. (2024) conduct an analysis of Japan's strategy in achieving food security in Tajikistan through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Rather than basing the analysis on traditional paradigms of International Relations such as realism, which emphasizes material capabilities, and liberalism, which focuses on institutions like CA+JAD, the analysis leans towards constructivism by focusing on values and norms. However, it contextualizes these concepts empirically via the strategic role played by JICA in implementing policies in the field. Importantly, the paper shifts from traditional perspectives on the international arena that emphasize what is considered normal and the behavior of institutions. Instead, it focuses on Tajikistan. This prompts a question of whether its findings can be replicated elsewhere. There are marked differences in terms of economic, geographical and political conditions in the states located in Central Asia. What makes this paper special is the fact that it analyzes the activities of JICA in Tajikistan in great detail. This is the part of the research that provides lots of data missing in other papers that are based on the analysis of the region as a whole. The analysis of Tajikistan is indeed the most interesting part of this research because it provides such data.

The literature related to the engagement of Japan in Central Asia can be classified under three main categories that are interrelated with one another. In the first place, there are the theories used by scholars, then follows their strategies, and finally, there are individual actors involved in the process. Shadrina's paper "EU's and Japan's Strategies for Energy Transition Enhancement in Central Asia" featured in the journal *Energy Strategy Reviews* reveals that Japan's engagement in the region is not only influenced by its material gains as per the realist paradigm but also due to norms and values transmitted through energy diplomacy, which is a constructivist approach, even though it focuses on states more than on non-state actors. Realism, on the other hand, largely overlooks the soft power dimension that has become increasingly central to Japan's regional posture.

Japan's approach has changed over time in ways. This is because the situation in the region is changing and Japan is feeling pressure from countries. At the time Japan is figuring out what it really wants to get out of being involved in Central Asia. Japan's goals for being in Central Asia are changing. Japan's approach to Central Asia has grown over time using things like technology transfer and Official Development Assistance. Japan's approach to Central Asia has also used mechanisms like the Joint Crediting Mechanism. However with all these things happening the people who study Japan's approach to Central Asia tend to focus on small parts of it. They do not often look at the picture and compare Japan's role to that of other big players like the European Union or China. In this area JICA is an organization, one that puts Japanese values into practice through capacity building and infrastructure work. JICA engages in such activities, which are value-based. The issue here is that such activities may be too focused on the technical aspects of the process and might result in a loss of sight of their highly political nature. The approach of Japan towards Central Asia is the subject of this research, which will use the constructivist approach to argue that CA+JAD and JICA are more than facilitators of institutional collaboration. CA+JAD and JICA are not only facilitators of institutional collaboration but also instruments by which Japan seeks to promote its values through an interaction of interests, normative ambitions, and development policies. This research will examine the development of the approach of Japan towards Central Asia.

Another sobering point in Umitaliyeva (2019) is that values-based soft power has its limits. However, without the backing of any material power, such initiatives become ineffective. Though promoting democratic values, education, and technical know-how is not entirely ineffective, these methods fail to compete with the interest-based diplomacy of countries like China and Russia who have been applying such diplomacy for many years in the region. There might be some doubts regarding the efficacy of value-based diplomacy aimed at changing the political nature of the Central Asian countries through such initiatives, as such a change can hardly be expected in this pragmatism-driven, interest-oriented area. However, theoretical approaches also face certain limitations. For instance, realist theory views Japanese initiatives in Central Asia as strategic balancing whereas the liberal approach focuses on CA+JAD and other similar initiatives. Nevertheless, both theoretical approaches fail to answer one very important question – how values affect the recipients' behavior?

However, it tends to neglect the material aspects of this phenomenon, especially in the case of intense geopolitical rivalry (Umitaliyeva, 2019). The statistics from initiatives such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe are not insignificant, and thousands of students have been studying overseas; collaboration opportunities abound for research purposes. However, the key issue is how much did the politics change because of all that? The response to this question is not satisfactory. Although some people in certain countries might be more inclined to collaborate with Japan or Europe now, they do not necessarily have to do so, just because they like the idea. What matters to them is that they benefit from such collaboration in various ways – financial resources, education, employment training, and infrastructure development. Ultimately, regardless of their affection for other nations, they will continue collaborating with those nations who hold all the cards. Therein lies the problem, as the promises made by diplomats are not always what they should expect. This discrepancy has remained unchanged, and there is no indication that it ever will. By foregrounding JICA's role within the CA+JAD framework as an implementative actor that bridges values and practice through ODA, technology transfer, and capacity building, this study positions itself within a critical constructivist framework that conceptualizes Japan's diplomacy as a hybrid formation, one that simultaneously integrates the realist logic of interest, the liberal logic of institutionalism, and the constructivist logic of value diffusion. In extending the analysis both geographically and comparatively, the study deliberately avoids Japan-centric bias and demonstrates that the effectiveness of value-based diplomacy is ultimately contingent upon the coherent integration of normative commitments with tangible material instruments of engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the contributions of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) within the framework of the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue (CA+JAD). Data collection was conducted through a combination of two main techniques. First, a systematic literature review of various secondary sources, such as books, academic journals, JICA policy documents, and official reports from the CA+JAD framework. Second, to obtain primary information and much deeper insights, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant key informants, namely JICA volunteers. The choice of a semi-structured format aimed to provide flexibility in exploring JICA's human resource selection processes for partner countries, while maintaining a focus on Japan's development diplomacy in Central Asia. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis through the lens of Complex Interdependence Theory. The integration of data from the literature and interview results is intended to present a comprehensive analysis of JICA's effectiveness as a diplomatic tool in fostering regional cooperation in the region.

## DISCUSSION

### **The Evolution of Japan's Foreign Policy in Central Asia: From "Silk Road Diplomacy" to the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue**

The dynamics of Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia have not received the scholarly attention they deserve, particularly considering how slowly it responded to the strategic opportunities presented by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Instead of seizing this important chance, Japan continued to view the region through the outdated lens of "Russia's backyard," which led to ambiguous and conflicting policy directions for the majority of that decade (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012). We can better comprehend this situation by applying the concept of complex interdependence

proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in 1977. In essence, Japan was unable to compete with powerful nations like China and Russia, both of which quickly increased their influence in this resource-rich region, due to its failure to create a variety of channels of engagement involving both government and non-government actors (Dadabaev, 2018). As a result, Japan's incapacity to develop a cogent Eurasian strategy that successfully integrates Central Asia is the fundamental issue rather than a lack of resources.

The late 1990s marked the start of the development of Central Asia strategy. During that period, Prime Minister Hashimoto proposed the concept of "Silk Road Diplomacy." This indicates that only then did Central Asia start to show up on Japan's radar as a region of significant importance. The Silk Road Action Plan was the official declaration of the region's policy made in 1998. The goals were to enhance the region as a political entity, promote economic prosperity and stability in the region, and develop democracy. Despite all of the grandiose ideas, their actual execution has produced only mediocre outcomes. Japanese only employed the Official Development Assistance as a tool in its operations in Central Asia. Due to a lack of sufficient market information and legal uncertainties, businesses are reluctant to invest in the area. As a result, Japan acts more as a donor than a partner in its foreign policy toward Central Asia, which seems to be an unfair relationship from the standpoint of complex interdependence theory. Kawato adds to his explanation by pointing out that Japan's provision of Official Development Assistance (ODA) makes room for other parties to participate in the process and contribute to development in their own unique ways. Japan now considers Central Asia to be a top priority. Cooperation between Japan and Central Asia has not been greatly aided by Japan's approach toward the region. Japan's approach to Central Asia has not helped either Japan or Central Asia. Japan plans to work with Central Asia. Japan's approach to Central Asia hasn't been that effective, though. Japan wanted to build strong ties with Central Asia, but this never happened. It should be mentioned that Prime Minister Koizumi's introduction of the Japan-Central Asia Plus Dialogue in 2004 signaled a change in Japan's strategy for collaboration with those nations. Japan used to communicate with each nation independently, but this endeavor sought to involve all nations at once. Political consultation, economic cooperation, resource management, support for local communities, and cultural exchange were the five main facets of the conversation. As a result, CA+JAD offered a fresh strategy for working with these countries. From the standpoint of Complex Interdependence Theory, CA+JAD is different from other programs because it uses different channels, such as formal government-to-government talks and the execution of useful projects locally via JICA (Dadabaev, 2018). Additionally, it is crucial to recognize the balance of interests that Japan aims to attain by managing multiple factors concurrently rather than concentrating only on one, guaranteeing proper interdependence (Japanese MOFA, 2004). However, CA+JAD has a number of flaws. First, luring private investment from Japan is a challenging task. Furthermore, Japan's economic policies are not entirely consistent. These problems impede the growth of dependency, which has started to appear alongside the advancement of. There are certain changes in Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia that are in progress but have not yet been fully executed. Japan's foreign policy approach entails a change from only providing aid to a more intricate strategy of fostering relationships with other nations, including collaboration. Through a number of programs, including CA+JAD, Japan aims to accomplish this. At the same time, Japan's foreign policy goals and actions diverge. According to Keohane and Nye, Japan has not developed the interstate ties necessary for success. The results of this investigation support those of (Dadabaev, 2018).

The development of Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia is clearly a complicated phenomena. Kawato (2006) claims that Japan's actions in the early years after the fall of the Soviet Union were mostly motivated by economic concerns and a desire to protect natural resources. In other words, because Japan showed less engagement than China and Russia, political commitment did not produce noticeable economic results. However, Laruelle and Peyrouse claimed in 2012 that Japan had been successful in creating institutions that would last. By taking a cautious approach and upholding the principles of equitable development in numerous large-scale projects that can lead to reliance, Japan was able to accomplish this goal. As a result, Japan's transition from Silk Road diplomacy to CA+JAD is a sensible move rather than an effort to atone for earlier strategic blunders. Silk Road Diplomacy was only the start of Japan's attempts with CA+JAD. This strategy was intended to be qualitatively distinct from the Chinese and Russian models from the beginning rather than to be quantitatively competitive (Dadabaev, 2018).

In conclusion, through the Silk Road Diplomacy and CA+JAD programs, Japan's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia has evolved from formerly restrictive measures to a more methodical approach. Nonetheless, there are still problems with the consistency of economic policy and the involvement of private sector investment (Dadabaev, 2018).

### **The Strategic Role of JICA in the Implementation of the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue (CA+JAD)**

The Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue was started in 2004. This is a deal for Japan and Central Asian countries. They use the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue to talk about what they want to do and how they can work together. The Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue helps them make plans and work on projects that Japan thinks are important. The Japan International Cooperation Agency is in charge of making these plans happen. They turn the ideas, from the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue into projects that help people and communities. The main goal of the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue is to figure out how Japan and the Asian countries can work together in a practical way. Japan and the Asian countries need to find ways to help people. This means Japan and the Asian countries have to help people get the skills they need. Japan and the Asian countries also have to give people support. The Japan International Cooperation Agency does this kind of work all the time. People need help. These people are there to provide it. We should give these people the support that these people need. It would be reasonable to acknowledge that the dialogue between Central Asia and Japan is valuable for both sides. Therefore, it becomes evident that JICA's significance lies far beyond its administrative coordination function since the organization represents the major instrument through which Japan implements its development cooperation objectives in Central Asia.

Indeed, the institution plays a vital role in the implementation of human resources development and education-related activities officially defined under the CA+JAD strategy. As reported, by 2022, JICA's trainings and scholarship programs accounted for more than 12,100 individuals from Central Asia (White Paper on Development Cooperation: Japan, Central Asia, and Caucasus, 2022). In addition, the organization dispatched tens of thousands of specialists to promote institutional capacity building (White Paper on Development Cooperation: Japan, Central Asia, and Caucasus, 2022). Thus, the data confirms the significance of JICA's contributions to human resources development and education as the crucial areas of cooperation within CA+JAD. Moreover, the information supports the thesis that the uniqueness of Japanese involvement in the region does not lie in the amount of funds that the country provides but rather in its investment in human resources.

In addition, findings obtained from semi-structured interviews held with JICA volunteers explain further the reason behind Japan International Cooperation Agency maintaining operational quality in CA+JAD. The Japan International Cooperation Agency or JICA in short goes through a strict selection process before sending out their workers into foreign nations. Prior to dispatching any one volunteer for work purposes, Japan International Cooperation Agency subjects them to several rigorous exams. Japan International Cooperation Agency checks on their qualifications as well as holds them through two separate interviews. In such interviews, Japan International Cooperation Agency determines whether such individuals would suit the task as well as the working environment at the foreign nation in question. Should Japan International Cooperation Agency select such individual for work abroad they must first attend a training program that will last for three months. Such a program will include language skills training to facilitate better interaction among the locals and foreigners. Through this selection program Japan International Cooperation Agency ensures that their workers are adequately prepared for the task in hand. Moreover, Japan International Cooperation Agency is keen about ensuring that the assistance rendered is fruitful hence making the locals interact well and benefit fully from them.

JICA's "human diplomacy" is defined as diplomacy aimed at forging relations, as opposed to financial assistance in large volumes. For example, JICA volunteers who were involved in infrastructure construction and capacity building programs within the framework of the CA+JAD program prove the fact that Japan's assistance is not merely related to provision of material resources. Rather, emphasis is placed on sustainable cooperation involving application of development theories promoted by Japan in accordance with the daily needs of the target population.

Local ownership becomes real for JICA volunteers through cooperation with local partners who help overcome technical as well as psychological barriers. For example, they create favorable conditions for learning and enhance communication between schools and madrasahs. JICA is very serious about establishment of long-term relations. It does not confine itself to knowledge sharing with people who are expected to assist. On the contrary, JICA tries to get local partners involved in the process thus creating mutual understanding between JICA representatives and the local community. JICA makes projects related to road and water supply construction; however, it also wants to present Japan to the region. Japan desires to become a partner to these nations by listening to their needs and addressing them

through strategies that are applicable to specific areas rather than using the same strategy to tackle all situations. JICA achieves this through its desire to be friends with these nations, which is a strength Japan excels in, as Dadabaev noted in 2018.

In addition to supporting education and capacity-building initiatives, JICA is also involved in the construction of physical infrastructure, which is one of the objectives of the CA+JAD approach. Based on the White Paper on Development Cooperation, the projects undertaken by JICA in Central Asia involve the creation of clean water supply systems, health care institutions, and other important infrastructures used by people on a daily basis (White Paper on Development Cooperation: Japan, Central Asia, and Caucasus, 2022). The initiative aligns with the CA+JAD's ministerial objectives to invest in people and promote quality growth. The activities also reflect the importance of implementing the development agendas proposed during the discussion in the framework of the CA+JAD dialogue.

| Central Asia and the Caucasus |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Country                       | ODA (Billion Yen) | ODA (Billion USD) | ODA (Billion EUR) | ODA (Billion GBP) | ODA (Billion JPY) | ODA (Billion KRW) | ODA (Billion INR) | ODA (Billion CNY) | ODA (Billion AUD) | ODA (Billion NZD) | ODA (Billion HKD) | ODA (Billion SGD) | ODA (Billion MYR) | ODA (Billion THB) |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Armenia                       | 8.57              | 0.40              | -18.25            | 0.005             | 2017              | 22                | 4                 | 12                | 5                 |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 20,782            | 36,472            | 408               |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Azerbaijan                    | 3.18              | 0.28              | -27.35            | 0.001             | 2017              | 762               | 183               | 2,243,585         | 18,531            | 228,591           |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 1,143,732         | 1,118,122         | 2,243,585         |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Georgia                       | 2.51              | 1.02              | -3.93             | 0.238             | 2017              | 27                | 4                 | 11                |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 15,826            |                   | 40,382            |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Kazakhstan                    | 3.75              | 1.03              | -37.58            | 0.100             | 2017              | 576               | 8                 | 299               |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 501,471           | 146,606           | 2,417,901         | 1,160             | 724,376           |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Kyrgyz Republic               | 8.70              | 8.88              | -4.60             | 1.047             | 2017              | 27                | 5                 | 2                 |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 21,842            | 196,884           | 5,082             |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Tajikistan                    | 7.18              | 8.36              |                   | 0.813             | 2017              | 620               | 23                | 254               |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 626,882           | 457,740           | 1,132,300         | 18,554            | 187,301           |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Turkmenistan                  | 2.71              | 0.47              | -1.39             | 0.027             | 2017              | 19                | 44                | 1                 |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 19,787            | 19,620            |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Uzbekistan                    | 6.89              | 8.25              | 335.21            | 1.019             | 2017              | 65                | 21                | 4                 | 14                | 19                | 2                 |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 71,470            | 622,421           | 288,354           | 126               | 29,847            | 38,568            |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 3,691,521         | 3,720,079         | 6,017,414         | 1,536,254         | 1,689,234         | 2,038,805         | 198,907           |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 52                | 14                | 24                | 2                 | 9                 | 3                 |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 68,526            | 727,481           | 72,511            | 26                | 34,432            | 9,585             |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 2,472             | 429               | 475               |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 3,764,612         | 6,287,569         | 1,395,327         | 782,530           | 1,693,612         | 2,048,312         | 198,907           |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 32                | 2                 |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 15,622            | 1,298             |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 184               | 56                | 48                |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 804,330           | 226,884           | 110,355           |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 55                | 26                | 30                | 6                 | 67                |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 118,307           | 308,768           | 529,779           | 5,745             | 10,796            | 45,175            |                   |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              | 2,284             | 1,745             | 1,394             |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Total                         |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2017              | 3,386,932         | 5,445,779         | 6,023,356         | 1,719,522         | 1,408,431         | 2,127,234         | 218,907           |                   |                   |
|                               |                   |                   |                   |                   | 2018              |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |

**Figure 1.** Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Data in Central Asia and the Caucasus Region Source : JICA Annual Report 2022

Japans Official Development Assistance is a help to Central Asia. This assistance is managed by JICA. Japans Official Development Assistance is now the source of development aid in Central Asia. Japan uses this assistance to reach its goals for countries like keeping the region stable and helping the economy grow. The JICA Annual Report Data Book 2022 has some information. It shows that Japans Official Development Assistance to Central Asia was not the same for all countries in year 2021. Uzbekistan got the Finance and Investment Cooperation from Japan which was ¥21.491 billion. The Kyrgyz Republic got the Technical Cooperation from Japan which was ¥1.047 billion. On the hand Turkmenistan got very little Technical Cooperation from Japan only ¥0.027 billion. The country did not receive any Finance and Investment Cooperation or grants from Japan's Official Development Assistance. Changes in Japan's Official Development Assistance show that Japan gives aid based on its policy goals and what recipient countries need. This is in line with the Complex Interdependence theory as advanced by Keohane & Nye in 1977, where states develop connections via several nonmilitary ways simultaneously. The Japanese emphasis on F&IC in Uzbekistan is a result of how Japan responded to the new developments and reforms in Uzbekistan from 2016, resulting in Uzbekistan becoming an ideal place for foreign investments in the region (Dadabaev, 2018). In contrast, Japanese engagement in Turkmenistan is insignificant due to the closed political nature of Turkmenistan (Anceschi, 2009).

Contradicting the hypothesis made by Furuoka (2005), these findings confirm that there is indeed a selective approach to the issue at hand, one that correlates well with the FOIP expansion into Central Asia (Hosoya, 2019). Furthermore, it is possible to confirm Dadabaev's (2018) assumption about the fact that Japan defines its foreign aid by its distinctiveness from China's BRI through a focus on transparency and developing local capacity. All things

considered, all of the above proves that JICA is the mechanism for implementing CA+JAD's development priorities and, thus, is an integral part of Japan's foreign policy towards Central Asia (Dadabaev, 2016).

JICA does not limit itself to building capacity. JICA assists countries in having governance and market reforms that are extremely essential to the CA+JAD strategy. JICA does not just focus on building roads and other infrastructure. It also wants to make administration better and make the government more accountable to the people. For example JICA has helped build roads in Tajikistan. These roads help connect regions and make the economy stronger. This is what the CA+JAD agenda is, about. JICA is doing this work as part of its plan, which it talked about in 2024.

Japan is really committed to helping the regions around it grow and get better. Japan does this through its Official Development Assistance projects. Figure 2 Shows Project on Central Asia, These projects are mostly about building roads and other ways to get around making energy and improving phone and internet connections. The map shows all the things Japan is doing to help, like building roads, power plants and phone systems which are all important for the people who live in these countries. Japans Official Development Assistance projects are making a difference, in these areas.



**Figure 2.** Map of Japanese ODA Loan Projects (JBIC) in Central Asia. Source : Japan Bank for International Cooperation, 2006.

Figure 2 shows the places where These Japanese ODA loans from JBIC are helping to upgrade telecommunication networks and power plants in Uzbekistan. They are also helping to improve transport and airports in Kazakhstan. Japanese ODA loans from JBIC are being used to repair roads in Kyrgyzstan and Additionally Japanese ODA loans from JBIC are helping to modernize railways in Turkmenistan. Figure 2 shows the details of the projects it is clear that Japanese ODA loans from JBIC are meant to help Central Asia by improving connections, between the regions and making the economy more stable as stated in the JICA Report from 2024. The Japan International Cooperation Agency helps people in Central Asia become workers. They do this by providing training and academic exchanges. The Japan International Cooperation Agency also gives out scholarships to people in Central Asia. Japan wants to have ties, with the people of Central Asia. As part of JICA's efforts in creating a pool of individuals knowledgeable about both the culture of Japan and technology, an environment has been established, which can help in generating a new leadership cadre that would implement the CA+JAD program (Anjana, 2025). Such programs would serve as a guide as to how collaboration ought to be done, legitimize the negotiation process, and establish the empirical grounds for the implementation of the CA+JAD program (JICA Ogata Research Institute Report, 2024).

Japan helps other places grow with its Official Development Assistance projects. Japan is doing a lot of things in countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Japan is working on roads in these countries Japan is working on energy in these countries and Japan is working on phones in these countries. Japan's primary objective is to facilitate greater connectivity among individuals within the region. Japan wants to make the region stronger so people, in the region can work better. Japan is trying to help the region by doing these things. Japan has spent a lot of money on these projects. ¥216.5 Billion. They have done twenty projects. For example they have helped

Uzbekistan with its phone and power systems. They have helped Kazakhstan with its roads and airports. They have fixed roads in Kyrgyzstan. They have also helped Turkmenistan with its train system. Japan is doing this to help Central Asia become more stable and have connections, with other countries (JICA Reports 2022). Japan is using its Official Development Assistance projects to make Central Asia a better place. This is important for the integration of the states in Central Asia because the improvement of the infrastructures and proper water management will be done to ensure this. This is illustrated by the importance placed on this aspect of JICA as the conversation does not only consider bilateral talks but also regional cooperation. JICA serves as the technical connection between the states of Central Asia through which they can achieve their dream of integration through CA+JAD discussion.

### **The Strategic Effectiveness of JICA in Achieving the Core Pillars of the Central Asia Plus Japan (CA+JAD) Dialogue**

When it comes to the objectives of this dialogue between Central Asia and Japan, one thing must not be missed, which is Japan International Cooperation Agency's role in ensuring the achievement of such objectives and goals. There may be some of the objectives and goals here, such as forming communities in these countries in order to promote skill development among the people and economic stability in Central Asia. Although this institution helps achieve the objective by providing financial support, it ensures that development objectives in these countries remain consistent with Japan's foreign policy. The Japan International Cooperation Agency also puts money into helping people by running Japan Centers teaching leaders skills and making people in the public and private sectors better at what they do. A lot of professionals who took part in these programs now have important jobs in the government and businesses of Central Asia. There are many individuals who have graduated from these programs that now occupy positions in the governmental and commercial sectors of Central Asia. There is an active collaboration between the Japan International Cooperation Agency and Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue for the betterment of Central Asia.

The efficiency of JICA to achieve its objectives and aims in the context of CA+JAD could be considered based on the Complex Interdependence theory elaborated by Keohane and Nye (1977). The first main term that should be emphasized in this context is multiple channels. Such an approach presupposes the use of different initiatives to provide assistance to one another. Therefore, no matter what problems arise in one particular sector, the whole system will function properly. Thus, Japanese involvement in Central Asia is determined by dynamic networks of connections. The second key aspect is the lack of hierarchy. In contrast to the donor organization that pursues its own priorities and does not take into account possible reactions of the recipient state, Japan operates as a partner who takes into account the interests of all parties and makes appropriate changes. This feature is quite unique compared to the activities of China. The Chinese strategy is focused on strict conditions that cannot be modified even after their realization (Dadabaev, 2018). It follows that the success of JICA in this CA+JAD structure is not based on its economic strength nor on its ability to outdo others in spending. It is based instead on the ability of JICA to create forms of interdependence that last because they are founded not on dependency but respect. As Keohane and Nye (1977) note, this is ultimately what makes for lasting international relations.

Additionally, the focus of JICA on connectivity and inter-state cooperation is perfectly aligned with the CA+JAD principles where emphasis is placed on regional integration as an engine of economic development and political stability in Central Asia (JICA, 2024). Efficacy of the strategic role played by JICA is evident from its ability to transform political dialogues into developmental initiatives with tangible regional effects. JICA serves as the primary driver in operationalizing Japan's normative visions such as sustainable development, regional cooperation, and human development into practical policy at the regional level. This verifies that the successful application of CA+JAD is inherently connected to JICA as a foundation for Japan's development diplomacy (JICA 2024)

JICA is effective not only in development initiatives but also in development policies that help improve the capabilities of recipient countries. JICA's assistance agenda integrates capacity building, technology transfer, and aid effectiveness principles, despite inherent implementation challenges. These findings support the CA+JAD strategy, which prioritizes capacity building and the sustained participation of regional institutions (Nuriyanto & Azis, 2025). Thus, the effectiveness of JICA is evaluated based on both tangible results of its projects and the ability to increase partner institutions' capacity, make synergy in regional actors, and establish stable, sustainable cooperation in compliance with the principles of the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue.

The JICA Annual Report 2022 states that various programs have been launched in Central Asia, including the program for future leaders. The goal of the long-term program is the strengthening of bilateral ties and improving state capacity via implementing the "JICA Chair" program in selected universities of Uzbekistan. The lectures organized within the scope of the project allow sharing information about the history of Japan and its development; as a result, an extensive network of people knowledgeable in universal values and respect for the rule of law is created. Moreover, during the current fiscal year, JICA was actively involved in overcoming the challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic in the region, namely, provided budgetary and "Last One Mile" support, delivered medical supplies, and developed the infrastructure needed for vaccine distribution across the Central Asia and Caucasus. In particular, realizing that many Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan),

JICA has also actively promoted industrial diversification by supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, JICA has long collaborated on building community-based business models through the "One Village, One Product" (OVOP) movement, such as projects involving the production of crafts from local merino wool to increase household incomes.

The effectiveness of achieving the CA+JAD pillars is further evidenced by projects executed following the Tokyo 2025 Summit, where Japan announced the "CA+JAD Tokyo Initiative." Focusing on green transition, connectivity, and human resources, this initiative has been rapidly executed by JICA through Official Development Assistance (ODA) valued in the billions of yen. As Dobrinskaya (2024) notes in Central Asia and Japan Dialogue (CAJ): Its Role in Japan's Strategy in Central Asia, "CAJ has become instrumental in outlining the areas of practical cooperation," emphasizing how JICA facilitates collaboration in energy and infrastructure such as critical mineral projects in Kazakhstan while maintaining Japan's involvement in regional issues, including Afghanistan, even in the absence of full-scale economic integration.

Additionally, the effectiveness is manifested in increased regional stability through the diversification of Central Asian partners away from sole reliance on China and Russia. JICA has successfully integrated Japan's interests (resource access) into the development of its partners, as analyzed in studies of Japan's economic diplomacy, which indicate a rise in the export of Japanese technology to the region. Despite ongoing geopolitical competition, indicators of institutional neoliberalism, as highlighted by Oentari (2025) in The Effectiveness of Cooperation between the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), confirm JICA's success in building sustainable institutions for the CA+JAD pillars (Dobrinskaya, 2024).

Therefore, in the Conclusion, it should be stated that JICA considers itself to be a partner that assists Central Asian nations with transforming their resource-based economy into something more sustainable through the provision of technical assistance and loans. The total budget for all JICA projects carried out in Central Asia and the Caucasus region in 2021 was ¥42,654 million. As evident from JICA's accomplishments, which have produced tangible results, it is clear that synergy within the CA+JAD structure plays a major role in the process of integration and economic diversification of Central Asia. Thus, its strategy works effectively and contributes greatly to peaceful development in the region.

### **Opportunities and Prospects for Expanding Japan's Influence in Central Asia through JICA Instruments**

The JICA's function within the CA+JAD initiative is moving from traditional forms of technical aid to more strategic cooperation in terms of independent connectivity in the region, specifically with the promotion of international transport corridors and electronic customs services through the Trans-Caspian route (Dobrinskaya, 2024). Nevertheless, the above-mentioned change is hindered by many obstacles related to inconsistent levels of organizational readiness in the receiving countries and the difficulty of inter-institutional collaboration on the regional level, often provoked by conflicting national interests. There is a significant disparity between the goals laid down during CA+JAD negotiations and their implementation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as developing nations, in the current JICA monitoring process (Nuriyanto & Azis, 2025).

The primary perspective for the further development of JICA is connected to the sphere of energy transition and the green economy, when there is expected to be a rapid deindustrialization of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in terms of innovative technologies, as well as education of specialists under the conditions of the introduction of energy-saving technologies in accordance with requirements of local industries (Dissyukov, 2019). However, one should not

forget that despite the idea of renewable energy sources in Central Asia, the situation of Japan lags far behind China in terms of investments into the program of BRI implementation (Dadabaev, 2018).

Moreover, in the long run, the prospects of JICA are linked to the achievement of increased human security through the digitalization of public services and health systems as well as through the use of AI partnerships within the framework of the 2025 strategic cooperation approach (Dadabaev, 2018). However, the digitalization is faced with substantial structural constraints, primarily due to the significant technological difference between the urban and rural areas of Central Asia. It should be noted that any digitalization strategy implemented without enhancing the regulatory framework can lead to the further dependence on technology, which contradicts the idea of self-reliance promoted by JICA (Nuriyanto & Azis, 2025).

The involvement of JICA in the solution of environmental problems like those that have occurred in the Aral Sea offers a great opportunity which has not been fully utilized. In this regard, it is critical to emphasize the point that whereas measures have been taken by JICA to embrace new technology in its aid schemes, it should be noted that there is a gap concerning international cooperation that is required in addressing this transboundary problem (Nuriyanto & Azis, 2025)..

JICA's assistance to SMEs through initiatives like "One Village, One Product" (OVOP) and providing credit facilities to local businesses offers an element of economic empowerment at the grassroots level that sets the Japanese strategy apart from infrastructure-centric development schemes (Hoshiro, 2022). Nevertheless, the scope of such initiatives is relatively small and insufficient to produce any meaningful effect toward diversifying the economy in a region that relies heavily on exporting raw commodities. In the absence of substantial scaling of these initiatives and their better incorporation into the national development strategies of these countries, the OVOP initiative may well end up as another humanitarian diplomatic gesture by Japan that does little in the way of structural development required in the future CA+JAD agenda (Dobrinskaya, 2024).

Analysis of JICA's Opportunities and Prospects in Central Asia in regard to the competition with China and Russia has a substantial implication in terms of Japan's position as a developmental power in comparison with China and Russia. Unlike China's domination due to extensive infrastructure financing programs in the framework of BRI and Russian influence based on security and economic integration via CSTO and EAEU, Japan stands out by highlighting its superior qualities related to governance, capacity transfer, and sustainability (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012).

As a result, it follows that Japanese development diplomacy in Central Asia gains more efficiency by focusing on its normative engagement strategy rather than competing with China in terms of scale. On the long term perspective, Japan's reputation as a reliable partner for development can be cemented by increasing consistency between OVOP strategy and macroeconomics via JICA. Furthermore, improving the system of control and accountability is essential for the successful realization of CA+JAD agreements (Dobrinskaya, 2024).

Otherwise, Japan would remain a highly regarded normative power but not a transformative one in a regional environment marked by rising competition among major powers (Kawato, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This Study reveals significant change in Japan's foreign policy toward Central Asia, Which has shifted from a speculative approach focused on bilateral relations to a more systematic regional approach through the implementation of CA+JAD. key findings indicate that Japan's succes in establishing itself as a political balance bu also on a commitment to regional stability. This has been achieved thanks to the role of JICA in translating Japan's normative principles into concrete programs,particulary in the fields of infrastructure development and capacity building. One of the major contributions of this research to development diplomacy studies is proving that institutionalized assistance in form of technical agencies can be considered a powerful tool for soft balancing of a complex interdependent region divided among rivaling countries like Russia and China.

In order to increase the participation of private actors in business activities and overcome the geopolitical risks associated with them, it is urgent for Japan to start its diplomatic initiatives in coordination with its economic policies by developing a joint venture risk guarantee mechanism through NEXI for renewable energy and digital logistics. In terms of operations, JICA would do well to invest in connectivity-related initiatives in the Trans-Caspian

Route by upgrading the digital customs system, namely Single Window, to develop a robust ecosystem for doing trade. Besides, JICA ought to widen its scope of interventions in environmental crises, including those of a systemic nature, by promoting transfers of precision irrigation technologies in order to overcome the water crisis in the Aral Sea region.

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