

THE TOKYO SUMMIT OF THE CENTRAL ASIA-JAPAN DIALOGUE AND THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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On 20 December 2025, the heads of state of Japan and five Central Asian countries held their first leaders summit in Tokyo. This signals a new phase in Japans relations with Central Asian states. In 2004, Japan launched the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue in Astana to improve regional cooperation with the Central Asian states. Japan thus pioneered a diplomatic approach that comprehensively addresses relations with Central Asian states in terms of regional integration.[1] Under the framework of Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue referred as CA+JAD, nearly 40 meetings have been held to date and the discussions initiated in the fields of economic cooperation have expanded to cover areas such as security, energy, transportation, counterterrorism, and the environment. CA+JAD summit held in Tokyo on 20 December 2025 is significant in that it demonstrates that aforementioned relations have been elevated to the level of heads of state. In her speech at the summit, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi highlighted the geostrategic importance of Central Asia. She also announced the launch of CA+JAD Tokyo Initiative.[2] It has been stated that Tokyo Initiative is built on three key areas of cooperation: Green (Transformation) and Resilience, Connectivity, and Human Resource Development.[3] The Declaration of Tokyo was signed at the end of the summit, which includes Japans 19-million-dollar investment plan covering various areas. For Japan, which has recently been interested in the Middle Corridor transportation routes and has been investing in various sectors in the regions countries, transportation routes and critical minerals emerged as key topics at the Tokyo summit.

Although Japans interest in Central Asia dates back to the early 2000s, its elevation to the level of heads of state reflects a broader global trend that emphasize the regions

geostrategic importance. This global trend is related to the economic, political, diplomatic, and security relations that global and regional actors have recently developed with Central Asian states. By 2025, actors such as the US, the EU, and China have made significant progress in developing comprehensive relations with Central Asian states. It is evident that these actors are approaching their relations with Central Asia from a regional and comprehensive perspective. The most major of these developments are the summits held by the EU, the US, and China in recent years. In April 2025, the EU held its first summit with Central Asian countries, bringing leaders together in Samarkand. The EU published its first strategy document on Central Asian countries in 2007, and announced the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia in 2023.[4] At the Samarkand summit, the EU included Central Asian countries in its Global Gateway Project, announced in 2021, which is claimed to be an alternative to Chinas Belt and Road Initiative. Investments in Trans-Caspian transport corridors and regional connectivity formed the main agenda at the Samarkand summit.

Chinas interest in Central Asia is steadily increasing. According to 2025 data, China has become the primary trading partner of Central Asian countries.[5] Transportation lines, infrastructure investments, digital and green investments under the Belt and Road Initiative announced by China in 2013 have been key factors in increasing Chinas presence in the region. Meanwhile, within its institutionalized regional relations through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China launched the C5+C cooperation model with five Central Asian states in 2020.[6] The second summit of the C5+C dialogue, which was elevated to level of heads of state in 2023, took place in 2025. Topics such as the Belt and Road Initiative, digital and green investments, free trade were discussed at the Astana Summit, and important transportation projects aimed at increasing regional connectivity, particularly the China-Uzbekistan railway project, were targeted.[7]

The Central Asia region, which was initially important for the US in terms of its Afghanistan policy, has become prominent in recent years in areas including transportation, energy, and politics. In this context, the US launched the C5+1 Dialogue Forum with five Central Asian states in 2025 and published the document titled United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025. In 2023, C5+1 mechanism was elevated to the level of heads of state, and the first summit was held in Washington in November 2025. Among the main agenda items of the US recent Central Asia policy have been the critical minerals and rare earth elements. To this end, C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue was established in 2024, and various agreements on critical elements were signed with Central Asian countries at the 2025 C5+1 Washington Summit. Another development is the US initiative to implement the Zangezur Corridor in the form of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity.[8]

In addition to China, the US, the EU, and Japans the growing interest in Central Asia, actors such as the Gulf states and India are also developing cooperation with countries in the region. In this context, it can be observed that the geopolitical importance of Central Asia is increasing. The factors playing a role in the increased interest of aforementioned actors in the region are based on three main components. The first component relates to connectivity. In this regard, the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian cooperation), which refers

to the transport route extending from Central Asian states to Europe via Türkiye, facilitating transportation between Europe and Asia within the scope of Chinas Belt and Road Initiative, has gained strategic importance in terms of transportation and connectivity as an alternative route that is preferred over the Northern Corridor, which has become unusable due to the Russia-Ukraine War. The second component relates to energy and mineral resources. Central Asian countries, which are rich in energy resources, particularly natural gas, are also rich (in the case of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) in rare earth elements and critical minerals such as uranium and lithium, and have gold resources (in the case of Uzbekistan). This makes them stand out in terms of nuclear and green energy resources, in addition to natural gas, and attracts foreign investment.[9] Recent agreements in the aforementioned areas between the EU, the US, China, and Japan are key indicators of this situation.

Finally, the diversification of foreign policies of Central Asian countries, primarily Kazakhstan, in line with the concept of regionalization, and the increasing strategic interest in the region are turning Central Asia into an element of geopolitical competition.[10]

In addition to the components mentioned above, several developments have taken place that have advanced regional integration among Central Asian states, increasing the geopolitical importance of Central Asia. The first of these is the resolution of the border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which led to the signing of a peace agreement on 13 March 2025, and signing of the Khujand Treaty between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan to demarcate their borders on 31 March 2025. This represents a significant achievement in terms of regional peace and security. The second development is the agreement to implement the Zangezur Corridor in the form of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity under the leadership of the US. This would facilitate transportation and strengthen connectivity between Türkiye, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus countries. Meanwhile, the proposal to establish a Central Asian Community, made by the Uzbek leader during the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia in November 2025, signals the emergence of a spirit of unity among the countries of the region. At the same summit, Azerbaijans inclusion as a full member of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia has enhanced Azerbaijans integration with the Central Asia region and brought to the agenda the possibility of the transformation of the C5 mechanism into the C6.[11] This has naturally strengthened the connection between Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

Furthermore, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Turkic World Vision 2040 that was adopted in 2021 represent the most advanced institutional dimension of integration among Central Asian states. The steps toward integration among the Turkic states led by Türkiye have made significant contributions to the establishment of common strategic goals among Central Asian states.

As a result, Central Asia has gained geostrategic importance due to the Middle Corridor gaining significance as an alternative route, as well as the regions connectivity and possession of resources such as natural gas, critical minerals, and rare earth elements. Actors such as the US, China, the EU, and Japan have pursued a comprehensive approach

in their relations with the five Central Asian states, advancing their integrated relations with Central Asia over time through various dialogue mechanisms and elevating them to the level of heads of state. On the other hand, the resolution of border issues between the countries in the region, the establishment of institutional integration and common visions through the OTS have enabled the strengthening of regional integration. The convergence of these factors has made Central Asia a geopolitically and geoeconomically strategic region that is increasingly attracting the attention of actors such as the US, China, the EU, and Japan.

Image: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

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