

The Current Status of Central Asian & Caucasian Newly Independent States and Japan's "Silk Road Diplomacy" (Summary)

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1. Geopolitical importance of the Central Asian & Caucasian region and destabilizing factors

Peace & stability in Central Asia and the Caucasus range are indispensable to everyone throughout Eurasia. With the end of the civil war in Tajikistan, Central Asia seems more stable than before.

However, given the network of Islamic extremists extending from Afghanistan and Central Asia to Chechnya and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China, not to mention the instability in such areas as Afghanistan, Kashmir and Iraq, stability in Central Asia itself has become a factor essential to the peace of the whole of Eurasia. On the other hand, in the Caucasus region, neither the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, nor the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ozeria in Georgia have been settled as yet.

2. Economic importance of the region

The region is rich in mineral resources and agricultural products such as cotton, as well as energy resources. The petroleum and natural gas in the Caspian off-shore fields has already begun to be explored and exploited using foreign investment, mainly by Majors, despite the fact that no agreement has been reached among the five coastal countries on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. Japanese petroleum companies are also active in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

The selection of pipeline routes to deliver oil to the world market is another big issue for both the countries of the region and importing countries. The Tenghiz (Kazakhstan) ~ Novorossiysk (Russia) oil pipeline started operating in November 2001, while construction began recently on the Baku (Azerbaijan) ~ Tbilisi (Georgia) ~ Ceyhan (Turkey) oil pipeline, which has been strongly

supported by the three countries concerned and by the US, which objected to pipelines to Russia and Iran.

3. International power politics

After the NIS countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus gained independence, Russia has played power politics with political and economical interests in an attempt to maintain its traditional influence over these countries, and the US has behaved similarly. West European countries, China and such neighboring regional powers as Turkey and Iran, which have religious and cultural ties with Central Asian countries, and Azerbaijan have also joined the game.

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the US changed the whole situation in Central Asia as well as in Afghanistan. At present, American forces are stationed in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyz. Russia allowed American troops to enter Central Asia and was rewarded with full membership in G8. However, although Russia and China, which have their own separatist movements in Chechnya and Xinjiang and need security and stability in Central Asia, supported the American anti-terrorism action, they have also strengthened their cooperation in Central Asia within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). For its part, Uzbekistan, which permitted US forces to be stationed on its territory and received economic assistance in return, left GUUAM, a sort of anti-Russia alliance, and joined the SCO.

In the Caucasus, pipelines and political issues are the major focuses of power politics. In short, Azerbaijan and Georgia are pro-Western, while Armenia, which has needed military assistance from Russia in the past, is pro-Russian. Russia is not happy with the US, especially with regard to the issue of Georgia. Russia has accused Georgia of harboring Chechen terrorists and failing to prevent them from launching cross-border attacks. However, the US administration has declared its full support for the independence and territorial integrity of Georgia, and has sent American military personnel to train Georgian soldiers.

4. Tasks to be implemented by the governments of the region

When these countries won independence, they inherited various "debts" from the Soviet era, such as environmental pollution and the demolition of the federal economic system. They started to struggle with building their nations and market economies. Generally speaking, internal stability has been maintained in most of these countries under the authoritarian regimes of the presidents of these republics. However, there remain many tasks to be implemented.

a) Political democratization, the elimination of corruption among politicians and public servants, and the realization of social justice.

b) The establishment of national unity, paying special attention to ethnic minorities

c) The solution of ethnic and territorial conflicts, and the resettlement of refugees and internally displaced

persons

d) Control over Islamic extremists through poverty reduction

e) Transition to a full market economy and the development of industries, including the recovery of agriculture

f) The construction of railroads and highway networks, which is vital for the economic development of landlocked countries.

5. Rich cultural inheritance and restoration of the historic Silk Road

The peoples of the region boast colorful cultures based on both sedentary and nomadic traditions and enriched by Islamic and Eastern Christian civilizations.

Historically, the Silk Road consisted of steppe routes and oasis routes, and played a major role in the traffic of peoples, goods and cultures between Eastern Asia and Europe. International efforts aimed at the reconstruction of the Silk Road started recently under the TRACECA project.

6. Japan's Silk Road diplomacy

Given the geopolitical and economic importance of the Caucasian and Central Asian countries, the government of Japan is pursuing active diplomacy in order to strengthen relations with these countries under a policy named "Silk Road Diplomacy", which has three concrete objectives. The enrichment of bilateral dialogue for increasing mutual reliance and also for deepening mutual understanding is the first objective. The second is economic cooperation for prosperity as seen in the case of developing natural resources. The third objective is cooperation for peace by realizing democracy and political stability in the region.

Japan is the largest ODA donor to the region. Japan's assistance, in the form of loans, grant aid for agriculture, health and education, and technical cooperation, as well as support for refugees, has contributed to the economic development and social welfare of these countries and is appreciated by the governments and people as real friendship without political ambition. Economic relations in the private sector have also been activated, although the trade volume is not yet satisfactory. In line with these directions, Japan should and will continue to make efforts in various fields to intensify relations with the countries in the region.

I think that Japan should expand its political dialogue to include not only bilateral matters but also global issues faced by the countries of the region, such as problems relating to refugees and internally displaced persons, narcotics smuggling, arms control including landmines, and environmental control. Japan need not be a player of power politics but can play stronger role in the political arena as a real friend of the people of the region. ODA should be continued or even expanded, with an emphasis on training young experts in the region to implement administrative and economic reforms.