ABSTRACT

of the dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the educational program «8D02209 – Oriental Studies»
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on the topic: Transformation of Japanese regional initiatives and the Kazakh-Japanese partnership in the «Central Asia plus Japan» format

General description of the research. The dissertation is aimed at analyzing the evolution of Japan's regional initiatives, as well as the content and prospects of Kazakhstan-Japan cooperation within the framework of the «Central Asia plus Japan» format. The study examines the theoretical foundations of Japan's foreign policy concepts and regional diplomacy, and also analyzes the mechanisms of their practical implementation in Central Asia.

Relevance of the research. The «Central Asia plus Japan» initiative is one of the important platforms aimed at institutionalizing and developing Japan's cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in the political, economic, and security spheres.

The outcomes of the «Central Asia plus Japan» summit held on December 20, 2025, in Tokyo once again confirmed Japan's interest in expanding political and economic ties with the states of the region, including Kazakhstan. This format functions not only as a platform for diplomatic dialogue but is also gradually evolving into a multilateral mechanism focused on addressing pressing regional issues such as energy security, infrastructure connectivity development, environmental challenges, and human capital development.

However, the high potential of Kazakhstan-Japan cooperation is constrained by geographical distance, insufficient institutionalization of economic interaction, and the influence of global political and economic changes. These factors to some extent hinder its sustainable development, making the scientific analysis of the dynamics and limitations of relations particularly relevant. In the framework of the study, the method of expert interviews was applied: in-depth conversations were conducted with a representative of the Japanese diplomatic service, a Japanese public expert, and a Kazakh diplomat working on issues related to the «Central Asia plus Japan» dialogue. The obtained materials made it possible to analyze in greater detail the political, economic, and institutional features of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, as well as to clarify the role of this format in the contemporary system of international relations.

Thus, the results of surveys and expert interviews obtained in the course of the study contribute to a comprehensive analysis of the Kazakhstan-Japan partnership within the framework of the «Central Asia plus Japan» format, identifying its potential

and limitations, as well as providing a scientific basis for priority directions for further deepening cooperation between the two countries.

The **purpose of the research** is to systematize the strategic model of Kazakhstan-Japan partnership within the framework of the «Central Asia plus Japan» format in the context of the transformation of Japan's regional initiatives.

To achieve this aim, the following **tasks were set**:

- identification of the theoretical foundations of the doctrines of Japan's contemporary foreign policy strategy and the system of regional international relations;
- analysis of the content and main directions of Japan's foreign policy toward Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union;
- revealing the significance of Japan's «Silk Road diplomacy» as a strategic guideline of its policy in the region;
- analysis of the significance of the «Central Asia plus Japan» dialogue in Japan's relations with the countries of the region and assessment of its results;
- determination of the political and historical causes of the initiative to "transform Central Asia into a corridor of peace and stability" and analysis of the mechanisms of its implementation;
- identification of the legal and regulatory framework of cooperation between Kazakhstan and Japan and assessment of its role in the development of bilateral relations;
- determination of models of partnership between Kazakhstan and Japan;
- identification of the strengths and weaknesses of Kazakhstan–Japan partnership within the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" format.

The object of the reseach Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia

The subject of the research Kazakhstan-Japan partnership within the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" format

The theoretical framework of the research is the theory of new regionalism, which serves as the key methodological framework of the dissertation. This is due to the fact that it enables a deeper explanation of the multidimensional nature of contemporary regional processes. The theory of new regionalism considers regional integration not only as an economic or institutional mechanism, but also as a multi-level, multi-actor, and normative process under conditions of globalization. Using this theory, it was substantiated that relations between Kazakhstan and Japan represent not merely bilateral ties, but a multi-level regional partnership.

The theories of conservatism and «soft power» are considered as additional explanatory approaches of the study. Through the theory of conservatism, Japan's regional policy and Kazakhstan-Japan partnership are interpreted in terms of stability, national interests, and evolutionary development. Some Japanese conservatives proceed from the view that established orders (nation, people, order) possess intrinsic

value. The theory of “soft power” allows the interpretation of Japan’s policy in Central Asia, including its relations with Kazakhstan, as influence exercised not through coercion, but through the promotion of cultural values, exchange of technological achievements, provision of assistance, as well as through attractiveness and trust.

Research methods. The dissertation employs a set of theoretical and empirical methods based on the principles of systematicity, consistency, and objectivity. Theoretical methods include theoretical analysis, desk research, comparative analysis, and a scenario-simulation method. Empirical methods include expert interviews and SWOT analysis (strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats).

Hypothesis of the research. The research is based on the following scientific questions:

1. The transformation of Japan’s regional initiatives, driven by changes in its foreign policy, economic, and strategic priorities, influences the content and directions of its partnership with Kazakhstan within the framework of the “Central Asia plus Japan” format.

2. With effective institutions, aligned interests, and sustained dialogue in place, the «Central Asia plus Japan» format can become a significant platform for strengthening the Kazakhstan-Japan strategic partnership and advancing it to a new level.

Scientific novelty of the research:

- for the first time in a dissertation study, a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of Japan’s initiatives in Central Asia and of the Kazakhstan-Japan partnership within the “Central Asia plus Japan” format has been conducted;
- the research incorporates official materials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan and Japan (1991–2025), interstate agreements, data on official visits, and official development assistance, on the basis of which an empirical analysis has been carried out;
- the research analyzes the prerequisites, stages, and evolution of Japan’s regional initiatives in Central Asia, as well as assesses changes in their content and directions;
- as a result of the transformational analysis, the components of Japan’s strategic partnership model in Central Asia were identified, along with their evolution, interdependence, and potential effects;
- using a scenario-simulation method, models of possible scenarios for the future of Kazakhstan–Japan partnership were identified;
- based on expert interviews and the outcomes of the 10th “Central Asia plus Japan” summit, key trajectories of Kazakhstan–Japan relations were analyzed, strategic priorities were identified, and recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the partnership were developed.

Practical significance of the research. The scientific results and conclusions obtained in the course of the dissertation research have practical significance for the expert activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Trade and Integration, as well as strategic research institutes in terms of improving the substantive and institutional foundations of Kazakhstan–Japan cooperation. The study contributes to the systematization of Kazakhstan's Japan studies, the expansion of the theoretical and methodological foundations for analyzing Japan's regional and global initiatives, as well as the development of the national academic school focused on the study of multilateral diplomatic formats in Central Asia.

Main provisions of the dissertation submitted for defense:

1. Japan's regional initiatives toward Central Asia have undergone an evolutionary transformation since the beginning of the 21st century, shifting from a traditional model of official development assistance to a multi-level framework of strategic partnership;

2. The «Silk Road diplomacy» initiative announced in 1997 laid the conceptual foundations of Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia, aimed at developing political dialogue, economic cooperation, and regional stability; however, limited political influence, financial and institutional challenges of projects, and insufficient consideration of internal instability in regional countries have been identified as its main shortcomings;

3. Launched in 2004, the «Central Asia plus Japan» dialogue elevated Japan's regional policy to the institutional level and created a platform for multilateral cooperation. As a result, its approach in Central Asia was transformed from ODA to an institutional regional partnership;

4. Global geopolitical changes prompted Japan to reconsider its policy in Central Asia and to propose the «corridor of peace and stability» initiative. Through JICA and ODA, infrastructure and institutional reforms were supported; however, limited political and expert influence, a project-based approach, and weak long-term sustainability remain key shortcomings;

5. Kazakhstan-Japan relations have reached the level of strategic partnership and have been strengthened in the fields of technology, green energy, and infrastructure, reflecting the long-term nature of cooperation. The strong side is economic diversification and the development of scientific and technological exchange, while the weak side is the limited scope of political and security interaction. In the future, it is necessary to expand digital and energy projects and strengthen diplomatic dialogue while reducing geopolitical risks;

6. Strengthening the Kazakhstan-Japan partnership requires economic diversification and the expansion of infrastructure, energy, and digital projects. Scientific and educational exchanges enhance human capital, while regional security

and diplomatic dialogue ensure stability. Flexible strategies aimed at reducing geopolitical risks are a key condition for the long-term development of relations.

Approbation of the research. The dissertation was conducted at the Far East Department, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

Publications of the PhD candidate include: 1 article published in an international peer-reviewed journal indexed in the Scopus database (Q2, Social Science Review, percentile – 78), 4 articles published in national journals recommended by the Quality Assurance Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and 4 articles presented at international scientific conferences.

The structure of the dissertation: The structure of the dissertation includes normative references, definitions, symbols and abbreviations, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references, and appendices.