

# A Steady Hand: The EU 2019 Strategy & Policy Toward Central Asia

Svante E. Cornell  
S. Frederick Starr

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## Executive Summary

The launch of a new EU Strategy for Central Asia in June 2019 marked a milestone in the gradual development of relations between the EU and the region. The Strategy's launch coincides with considerable change in and around the region. Internally, Central Asia has experienced a renewed commitment to reform and regionalism; meanwhile, the region has seen a greater engagement by neighboring powers, most immediately through large-scale Chinese and Russian initiatives, but also in the shape of a growing interest on the part of Asian powers as well as the United States.

A closer analysis of the EU's engagement with Central Asia paradoxically indicates a sort of parallel evolution: both the EU and the Central Asian states are products of the post-cold war era, and their relations have intensified along with their own internal evolution into ever more solid entities on the international scene. Whereas the EU and Central Asia in the early 1990s were weakly institutionalized and had little to do with each other, that has changed. The EU has gone through deep internal processes through which it emerged with a Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the institutions, like the European External Action Service, to implement it.

Similarly, the development of statehood in Central Asia has allowed the regional states to develop relations not just with their immediate neighbors, but with the wider world. From a Central Asian perspective, the EU is a valuable partner as it is not, inherently, a traditional great power with designs on the region's sovereignties; but an important trading partner as well as a source of technology and assistance. Conversely, as the EU has developed a global posture, Central Asia has acquired greater importance. Several factors have contributed to this: growing European attention to

Eurasia following the conflict in Afghanistan; the EU expansion into Eastern Europe; mounting troubles in EU-Russia relations, including energy security concerns; and the emergence of China on the world stage, including through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The gradual intensification of EU-Central Asia relations is traceable in the series of EU documents on the region that have been issued since a first assistance strategy was drafted in 2002. A formal EU-wide strategy followed in 2007, which was subsequently revised several times, culminating in its replacement by the newly promulgated 2019 document. What started as a roadmap for foreign assistance has, over time, morphed into a complex document seeking to balance a wide array of interests, ranging from the promotion of trade and energy ties to enhanced dialogue in security matters as well as a focus on human rights and good governance.

The overview of EU policy in this study suggests that from relatively modest beginnings two decades ago, the EU has devoted considerable attention and resources to its relationship with Central Asia – with a very organized approach, involving the production of concrete strategies, reviews of these strategies, and European Council conclusions on the region on a bi-yearly basis. This approach compares favorably to the more disorganized policy of the United States toward Central Asia. The EU's systematic approach has allowed it to avoid the pitfall of U.S. policy, namely to risk treating Central Asia as a corollary to policies on other issues or powers rather than as a goal in itself. This EU has defined its relations with Central Asia on the basis of its interests in the region itself, and not as an appendix to something else. That said, a series of issues continue to confront EU policy in Central Asia.

First among these is scope. The EU is active on numerous fronts and needs to take into account the interests of 28 member states, different EU institutions, civil non-government and activist organizations, and Central Asian governments. Navigating the different priorities advanced by



different actors raises the risk of the EU trying to do too much with too little, instead of focusing its energies on several specific matters. The 2019 strategy's structure suggests a conscious effort to narrow down the scope of the strategy. Still, many of the existing priorities remain in force, only being relegated to subordinate priorities under the respective key rubrics. Indeed, few of the priorities expressed in the past have been dropped from the new strategy; but the EU has made it more clear where it is intending to invest most of its resources and has indicated concrete priorities.

Second is the regional question: the EU is frequently criticized for taking a regional approach to countries that have distinct differences. Is the EU right to frame its interactions with Central Asia on a regional rather than bilateral basis? While this was a frequent criticism in the past decade, the growing enthusiasm for regionalism across the region must now be said to vindicate the EU's regional approach. Central Asian states themselves have made clear they consider themselves part of a distinct Central Asian region – something most plainly stated in the official foreign policy doctrines of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which both make “Central Asia” the priority of their foreign relations. In addition, the alternative – viewing Central Asia from the perspective of its neighbors – has the direct implication of removing the focus from Central Asia itself, and seeing its states as loose appendages to other great powers or conflict zones, thus strengthening centrifugal tendencies that run counter to long-term interests of both the EU and Central Asian states.

That said, this regional approach should avoid being mired in a Soviet-era definition of the region. Across the region, in fact, the growing acceptance of a larger definition of Central Asia as extending to the south and east is unmistakable. While maintaining its focus on the five post-Soviet states of Central Asia, the EU has for far too long treated Central Asia as entirely separate from Afghanistan, thus missing opportunities to develop synergies

between its activities in both areas. Similarly, Central Asian states are strongly affected by developments in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province, while the links between Central Asia and the South Caucasus across the Caspian Sea are crucial to the region's economic development, and not least to its links to Europe. The EU has considerable potential to function as an engine for boosting Central Asian cooperation with both Afghanistan and the South Caucasus.

A third perennial challenge has been to balance the normative elements of the EU's agenda – advancing human rights and democracy – with the pursuit of European interests in the spheres of trade, energy or security. The apparent tension between these EU objectives has led to considerable criticism of EU double standards. This issue affects the very legitimacy and internal consistency of the EU's policies in Central Asia. But the activists' charge that the EU ignores normative matters for the sake of self-interest does not hold up to scrutiny and stems largely from unrealistic expectations. For one, the EU has made the determination that the promotion of human rights and democracy is a long-term endeavor and emphasized a measured and cautious long-term promotion of the *prerequisites* for sustainable democracy. Therefore, EU efforts have centered on the promotion of poverty reduction, education, and good governance in Central Asia rather than an aggressive promotion of immediate political change.

Viewed in this light, the EU has actually invested considerably more in the promotion of domestic development in Central Asia compared to strategic interests such as energy and security. In sum, the EU has correctly adopted an approach that focuses on good governance and economic development, criteria that are necessary for long-term democratic development, and which require cooperation with governments rather than efforts to circumvent or undermine them.

Fourth, how should the EU approach security affairs in a region dominated by hard security actors? Central Asia is a region where states face hard security questions that touch directly on their sovereignty. The EU, as an entity, has only reluctantly been forced to accept the continued primacy of geopolitics. Its challenge in Central Asia is to simultaneously adapt to this hard power reality, while carving out a niche on the basis of how it differs from hard power actors. To do so, it must adjust its policies to take into consideration a reality where concerns of sovereignty, statehood and security are at the center of its Central Asian counterparts' mind. The EU can no longer rely solely on the power of its normative values, but must act more as a power rather than an integration project. This applies very directly to the EU's approach to the Central Asian states' efforts to balance China and Russia, a situation where the EU now finds itself, for most practical purposes, the Western power most engaged in Central Asia. Key in this regard is the facilitation of Central Asian regional cooperation, a matter raised as a cross-cutting priority by the EU.

Fifth, the EU puts strong emphasis on supporting education in Central Asia. However, like Central Asian states themselves, the EU has tended to focus too much on higher education at the expense of K-12 education, and the development of practical skills in the Central Asian labor force.

Sixth, while the EU is correct in highlighting the struggle against violent extremism in its 2019 Strategy, that struggle should not be limited to a fight against armed groups, as it is also a struggle against the ideologies underpinning violent acts. Against this background, it is unfortunate that the 2019 Strategy omits the emphasis put in the 2007 document on the domestic religious traditions of Central Asia, and their acceptance of secular governance – something that makes Central Asian states stand out in the Muslim world, providing a unique point of commonality with Europe. The EU should support the further development of secular governance, seeking

to work with Central Asian states to reform and improve their implementation of secularism in a more positive and constructive direction.

Finally, the EU's success in developing relations with Central Asia is to a considerable degree a function of the fact that the most senior EU officials – unlike their predecessors – have taken Central Asia seriously, and have devoted time and energy to meeting their Central Asian colleagues and not least, to listen to their concerns. Against this background, the task of keeping EU-Central Asia relations at the current level, and ideally to intensify them further, requires the incoming leadership of the EU – particularly the incoming Vice President and High Representative Josep Borrell – to take a similar level of interest in Central Asia and visit the region as soon as possible.

## Introduction

The launch of a new EU strategy for Central Asia in 2019 comes at a time of considerable change in and around the region. Internally, Central Asia has experienced a renewed commitment to reform and regionalism; meanwhile, the region has seen a greater engagement by regional powers, most immediately through large-scale Chinese and Russian initiatives, but also through growing interest on the part of Asian powers as well as the United States.

Central Asia is often analyzed through the perspective of some sort of "Great Game." This terminology, harking back to the rivalry between Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century, is convenient but also misleading. Its main fault is that it strips the Central Asian states themselves of agency, making them appear as objects rather than subjects of international affairs. Events in recent years, however, should make it clear that the states of Central Asia are very much masters of their own destiny.

Kazakhstan has taken the lead in developing an activist foreign policy, including both an active role in multilateral organizations and involvement in the promotion of peace and security through the facilitation of negotiations and dialogue regarding hot topics like the Iranian nuclear program and Syria's civil war. In the past decade, Kazakhstan also took the lead in announcing a far-reaching vision of the country's future development, as well as concrete reforms to translate this vision into reality. Following the death of President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan in 2016, a similar urge for reform also emerged under the leadership of his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan's reformism did not only focus on

domestic affairs but also very much on foreign policy, as the new leadership made the improvement of relations with neighboring states its first priority.

These developments, in turn, facilitated the resumption of efforts to develop regional cooperation in Central Asia. While efforts to develop structures of cooperation in the region had advanced considerably in the late 1990s, they had then grown moribund, as specific Central Asian mechanisms of cooperation were subsumed under broader, Eurasian forms of integration. For the first time in nearly a decade, a summit of Central Asian leaders was held in Kazakhstan's capital in March 2018, at which regional leaders announced their intention to make such meetings a recurring feature and pledged to develop regional cooperation.

This activism on a regional level contrasted brightly with the relative inactivity that had been visible in the region in the previous decade. Most importantly, it was a welcome indication that meaningful change in Central Asia could emerge as a result of actions taken by Central Asian states themselves, and not by outside prodding.

This growing activism on the part of Central Asian states does not, of course, change the fact that they remain small and mid-size states surrounded by the largest powers of the Eurasian continent. But it does mean that they are much more involved in determining their own future than is commonly assumed.

To some degree, of course, the activism of Central Asian leaders is related to the activity of regional powers surrounding the region and may even be construed in part as a response to such activity. For in recent years, the geopolitical and geo-economic situation surrounding the region has evolved to a considerable degree.

The most significant development is, no doubt, the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which symbolically occurred with a speech by the

Chinese President in the capital of Kazakhstan. In the six years since that event, the BRI has truly adopted global proportions; but Central Asia remains key to its successful implementation, indicating the growing importance of the region for Beijing.

The evolution of Russia's global posture also has significant implications for Central Asia. Moscow has long been promoting Eurasian integration, and took the lead in implementing the vision initially launched by Kazakhstan's First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to develop a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). But on a more fundamental level, the deep slump in Russia's relations with the West following the Ukraine crisis of 2014 has led Moscow to reorient itself toward the East. The main conceptual vehicle for this has been the idea of a "Greater Eurasian Partnership," launched in St. Petersburg in 2016. This concept signifies Moscow's intention to find linkages between the EEU and the BRI, while also seeking closer ties with South and Southeast Asia. It goes without saying that these projects have important implications for Central Asia, which is the main meeting place between the BRI and the EEU.

In parallel, other powers have developed closer relations with Central Asia as well. In recent years, there has been an ever-higher level of interactions between Central Asian states and Eastern as well as Western powers. Several Asian heads of state or government have taken tours of Central Asia, ranging from Japan's Shinzo Abe, South Korea's Moon-Jae In, and India's Narendra Modi. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has developed a closer interest in Central Asia following a period of preoccupation with Middle Eastern affairs. And the United States, following a period of inactivity, developed the C5+1 format of relations with Central Asia in 2015. Breaking a long dry spell, the U.S. government invited the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to meet with President Trump in Washington in January and May, 2018, respectively.

In this rapidly developing environment, the EU has not been an exception. Brussels has gradually expanded its relations with Central Asian states, as a result of the implementation and revision of its strategic approach to the region. Leading EU figures have not been strangers to the region, as indicated by visits by former Commission President José Manuel Barroso, High Representative Federica Mogherini, and President of the European Council Donald Tusk.

What is the place of the EU in this dynamic Central Asian environment? That is the key question that this study seeks to answer. As such, it aims in part to study the evolution of EU policy on Central Asia, from 1990s until the present. The EU Strategy for Central Asia was first presented in 2007. Given the pace of change in and around the region, the European Council wisely concluded that a decade-old strategy could no longer merely be revised, but that a new strategy was needed. While an analysis of this strategy is part of this study's objective, it also strives to maintain the focus on Central Asia itself, and will therefore also inquire how Central Asian states view the EU and its role in the region.

The study is divided into three key parts. In the first part, it will detail the evolution of relations between the EU and Central Asia in the past three decades. The second part will then focus on the key documents determining EU policy in the region, up to and including the 2019 Strategy. The study's third part then turns to an analysis of specific issues in EU policy in Central Asia, before concluding with a series of concrete recommendations for the future.



# **The EU and Central Asia**

## **EU-Central Asia Relations**

To a casual observer, the EU and Central Asia appear as different as can be. The EU is a collection of advanced democracies and features some of the world's richest states; Central Asia is a region of small and medium-sized nations that have yet to develop democratic governance, and includes states with high poverty rates. The EU is an advanced, knowledge-based economy; Central Asian states are mainly producers of raw materials. And the EU itself is the advanced form of cooperation among nation-states, whereas Central Asia is among the world's least integrated regions. But beyond these obvious differences, Central Asia and the EU have something very much in common: both emerged on the world scene in the early 1990s.

This is more than a coincidence: it is a fundamental element of understanding the evolution of relations between the EU and the five Central Asian states that formed part of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the USSR and the independence of the Central Asian states was a prerequisite for the relationship; but the same can be said for the transformation of the European Economic Community to the European Union in the early 1990s. Only this transformation, and the evolution of the EU into a stronger union with a common foreign and defense policy in the late 2000s, made the EU an important actor on the global political stage, and thus also in Central Asia. Moreover, the relationship between EU and Central Asian institutions has paralleled their internal development: from young institutions in the 1990s to more mature ones presently, the development of the relationship continues to reflect the coming of age on

the international scene of both the European Union and the states of Central Asia.

Throughout this period, EU foreign policy has evolved tremendously, affecting EU perceptions of Central Asia. Similarly, the maturing of Central Asian states has allowed them to develop foreign policy strategies that in turn affect their perception of the role of the EU in the world and in the region. In both cases, these developments have led both the EU and Central Asia to pay increasing attention to each other.

### **The Evolution of EU Foreign Policy**

The European Union and its role in the world has changed considerably in the past quarter-century. This period has been one of unprecedented, if not uncontroversial, institution-building in Europe. The starting point is of course the transformation of the EEC into the EU with the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992. Led by U.S., Maastricht provided the EU with a Common Foreign and Security Policy, a step beyond the existing mechanisms to “coordinate” policy among member states. This CSFP was still in its early stages, as it was an intergovernmental form of cooperation rather than a supranational one. Still, it allowed for the EU to begin taking a unified role on the world stage. Only five years later, the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 introduced the position of a High Representative for CFSP, who nevertheless served alongside a Commissioner for External Affairs in the EU Commission. Furthermore, the EU was primarily represented internationally by the member state holding the union’s rotating six-month presidency. Thus, the EU was developing its position on the world stage, but still suffered from divisions among its institutions, particularly between the EU Council, the Commission, and the member states.

In spite of these problems, the EU began to develop its global stance. A key development in this regard was the 2003 EU Security Strategy, the first

strategic document ever to frame the priorities of EU foreign policy. Written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it sought to provide a roadmap for the EU to “share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world.”<sup>1</sup> This document emphasized security challenges like failed states, while advocating for preventive engagement through “effective multilateralism.”<sup>2</sup> Coming on the heels of the NATO military action in Afghanistan, it necessarily helped focus a modicum of EU attention on Greater Central Asia.

The further institutionalization of the EU proceeded apace, with the Lisbon Treaty signed in 2007, and entering into force in 2009. This Treaty conferred upon the EU a unified legal personality, which was nowhere more visible than in the realm of foreign affairs. The Treaty led the rotating presidencies of the EU to take on much lesser importance, while the posts of Commissioner for External Relations and High Representative were merged: the High Representative is now Vice President of the Commission, reflecting in itself the EU’s greater attention to international affairs. The Treaty also created an External Action Service to support the High Representative – an institution that effectively developed into an EU Ministry of Foreign Affairs, drawing staff and responsibilities from the Commission, Council, as well as member states. In spite of some growing pains, the EEAS has undoubtedly helped the EU “to take swifter and more coordinated international action so that it can punch its weight in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, its relative success is very much due to an understanding among member states that a unified EU approach is needed if the union is

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<sup>1</sup> Javier Solana, *A Secure Europe in a Better World – European Security Strategy*, December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Asle Toje, “The 2003 European Union Security Strategy: A Critical Appraisal,” *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 10 no. 1, 2005, pp. 117-133.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Hug, “The EEAS Needs Cooperation from Member States,” *Foreign Policy Centre*, February 13, 2013. (<https://fpc.org.uk/the-eeas-needs-cooperation-from-member-states/>)

to safeguard European interests on the world scene in competition and dialogue with great powers.

An important step in this direction was the launch of an EU Global Strategy in mid-2016. The launch of the strategy explicitly mentions the challenge of the “violation” of the European security order “to the East,” as well as the “terrorism and violence” that plagues the Middle East and North Africa, with a direct impact on the EU itself. The strategy advanced the notion of EU Strategic Autonomy, which implies the ability of Europe to operate independently to protect the EU itself, maintain stability in the neighborhood, as well as help maintain a global security order. While it was launched before the U.S. 2016 presidential election, much of the discussion about the Global Strategy and Strategic Autonomy has come to focus on its link to the Transatlantic relationship, and the controversy over decoupling European security from NATO and the United States by strengthening the EU’s autonomous capabilities. The document was also prepared before the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, a development that will substantially complicate the EU’s efforts to develop into a global security player. Indeed, the UK and France were the pillars of the EU military capability, and the departure of the UK from efforts to develop EU Strategic Autonomy will deal a considerable blow to these ambitions.

Similarly, much focus has been on the Strategy’s military aspects – which are indeed novel, as they indicate an ambition to develop “full-spectrum capabilities” including “strategic enablers.”<sup>4</sup> But the Strategy suggests an interest on the part of the EU to establish itself as a global player, implying an ambition to have meaningful policies toward, and relations with, every

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<sup>4</sup> *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy*, Brussels: European Union, 2016.

([https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf))

world region, including Central Asia. This is certainly a remarkable difference from the situation even a decade earlier.

### **Central Asia in EU Policy**

This internal evolution has been coupled with developments in Central Asia and beyond to lead to a considerable evolution of EU policy toward Central Asia. This can basically be divided into three decades: the 1990s were focused on developing EU assistance programs, the 2000s saw a solid and gradual growth of interest in the region, and the 2010s saw the EU-Central Asia relationship coming of age.

The 1990s were characterized by a general absence of a concrete EU policy toward Central Asia; and only embryonic links between EU institutions and Central Asian states. That being said, the EU Commission took the lead on several initiatives early on that were not only productive but in a sense visionary. Already in 1993, the EU launched the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia at a conference of Transport Ministers of states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus held in Brussels. In this sense, the EU was the prime mover in the effort to restore historic land transportation corridors between Europe and Asia.<sup>5</sup> And TRACECA initially showed much promise: a major conference was held in Baku in 1998, and a permanent TRACECA secretariat has been based there since 2001. However, TRACECA at first fell short of expectations. The EU did implement some 60 technical assistance and investment projects at a value of €120 million in a variety of areas, but the most salient projects in the region have been conducted without EU involvement. The rise of Chinese interest in the corridor, however, appears to have led to a renewed EU interest in TRACECA.

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<sup>5</sup> S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell and Nicklas Norling, *The EU, Central Asia, and the Development of Continental Transport and Trade*, Washington/Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, December 2015.

Another EU initiative, launched in 1996, was the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE), which came to include the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as Turkey and Ukraine, and served to coordinate energy markets and support energy security. Following on ministerial conferences in Baku and Astana in 2004 and 2006, INOGATE set up a technical secretariat, and implemented a number of projects to harmonize energy policy and energy markets among the member states. INOGATE was terminated in 2016.

While these were important efforts that helped develop relations between the EU and Central Asian states, in the political realm there remained a sense that Central Asia was only a distant world region to Europe, and implicitly, many EU and European member state officials viewed Central Asia as a Russian backyard.

This would change significantly in the following decade. A number of factors can be credited for raising Central Asia's profile in the 2000s. First, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought Central Asia into the EU's spotlight, at first indirectly. Several key EU member states were heavily involved through NATO in the military campaign in Afghanistan, and for this purpose, developed a military presence in Central Asia. Germany established a presence in the border town of Termez, Uzbekistan,<sup>6</sup> while France did so at Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan.<sup>7</sup> This ensured that European powers intensified their political relations with Central Asian states, and also that they paid at least some attention to the security challenges within Central Asia itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Jozef Lang, "The Luftwaffe and American military equipment in Uzbekistan," OSW, February 4, 2015. (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-02-04/luftwaffe-and-american-military-equipment-uzbekistan>)

<sup>7</sup> "Afghanistan : dissolution du détachement air de Douchanbé" Ministère de Armées, October 29, 2014. (<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/terminees/operation-pamir-2001-2014/actualites/afghanistan-dissolution-du-detachement-air-de-douchanbe>)

Second, the enlargement of the EU and the evolution of its thinking on its neighborhood had implications as well. EU enlargement in 2004-2007 significantly shifted the center of gravity of the union eastward. Prior to this time, in its neighborhood the EU had been very focused on the Mediterranean, as evidenced by the Barcelona Process from 1995 onward, which created a mechanism for EU relations with the countries to its south, something that had no equivalent east of the candidate countries that were in the process of accession to the EU. But the accession of Central and East European states risked creating new dividing lines in Europe, and this led to the need for an instrument that would seek to support the development of countries on the EU border, in order to integrate them with EU norms and standards without necessarily providing a membership perspective. A first draft of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2003 envisaged that Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine would be part of the policy, while the South Caucasus states were reduced to a footnote.<sup>8</sup> This was nevertheless reversed and the three states included in the ENP, on account of the EU enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania making the Caucasus a “Neighbor” of the EU across the Black Sea. Notably, the ENP did not include Central Asia, and the definition of the instrument ensured that this would remain the case. However, with the EU enlargement, the EU acquired member states that had ties with Central Asia, and an interest in Central Asian affairs. Still, the creation of the ENP – and in 2009, the institutionalization of the Eastern Partnership – in effect led the EU to separate Central Asia from its policies toward other post-Soviet states, and particularly to draw a hard line at the Caspian Sea. But unlike the United States, which organizationally moved Central Asia from being grouped with Europe to being grouped with South Asia in both the military and civilian organization charts of its government institutions, the EU continued to treat Central Asia as part of Eastern

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<sup>8</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Europe and the Caucasus: In Search for a Purpose,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 2, 2004. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/9056>)

Europe. But as one observer noted, “the region is neither fully incorporated into the ENP initiative nor is it a partner to Brussels’ relations with Russia,” and nor is it part of “explicitly ‘Asian’ initiatives of the EU.”<sup>9</sup> This created a void, that would gradually be filled during the decade.

A final element that strengthened EU attention to Central Asia was the energy dimension. Russia’s growing politicization of energy politics, with its interruption of natural gas flows through Ukraine in 2006, was entirely unexpected in Europe, which had grown accustomed to viewing Russia as a reliable energy supplier. Events of 2006 sped up EU efforts to diversify its natural gas imports, something that naturally led to growing interest in the energy reserves of the Caspian region, and specifically of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

These factors all contributed to the drafting of the first EU strategy documents for Central Asia, which took place during this decade. In October 2002, the EU Commission issued a “Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia,” which, in effect, was the first rudimentary EU assistance strategy for Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> This was followed, during the 2007 German Presidency of the EU,<sup>11</sup> by a broader document, “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership,” which unlike the 2002 document was an EU-wide Strategy adopted by the European Council.<sup>12</sup>

The 2010s saw a further intensification of EU attention to Central Asia. The factors that led to this were part familiar, part new. On the familiar side, by

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<sup>9</sup> Emilian Kavalski and Young Chul Cho, “The European Union in Central Eurasia: Still Searching for Strategy,” *Asia Europe Journal*, vol. 16, 2018, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, *Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia*, October 30, 2002. ([http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/central\\_asia/rsp/02\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/central_asia/rsp/02_06_en.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> Olga A. Spaizer, “Germany’s Influence on EU Foreign Policy: The Case of the EU Strategy for Central Asia.” In Edmund Ratka, Olga Spaizer (eds.) *Understanding European Neighbourhood Policies*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012, pp.267 – 284.

<sup>12</sup> European Council, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels 2007.



2014 the deterioration of the EU's relations with Russia, and the continued impetus for diversification of energy supplies, led to a renewed emphasis on energy resources of the region. Roughly simultaneously, the scheduled pullout of NATO forces from Afghanistan also led to the closure of German and French military presence in Central Asia. But it also led to intensified concerns in Europe about the stability of Central Asia itself, and fears of a spread of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia – fears that were only exacerbated by the emergence of the Islamic State in Khorasan. More important, however, was the new factor: in the 2010s, the EU began to see Central Asia not simply in the light of Russia or Afghanistan, but through the prism of its relationship with China. This, of course, was only new to the extent that the EU has lost focus of its own TRACECA initiative of the early 1990s. In 2011, however, the U.S. State Department launched its “New Silk Road Initiative,” which nevertheless never got off the ground, failing to receive significant support from the White House. Two years later, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the “Silk Road Economic Belt” in a speech in the Kazakh capital,<sup>13</sup> which would become a crucial building block in China's BRI. This major initiative boosted the role of Central Asia as a transit corridor between Europe and Asia. This was fully in line with the EU's own interests and its TRACECA initiative. However, the mode through which China implemented its initiative, and its gradual expansion into EU countries, led to growing concerns in Europe.<sup>14</sup> This, in turn, led to an EU reaction in the shape of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy (EACS), launched in October 2018 with the aim of exporting to Asia the EU's

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries,” September 7, 2013.

([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1076334.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml))

<sup>14</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Niklas Swanström, *Compatible Interests? The EU and China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Stockholm: SIEPS, 2019.

framework for connectivity, which gives emphasis to sustainability, as well as respect for the international rule-based system, and intends to create a stronger cross-border network to facilitate exchanges and partnerships.

### **Europe in Central Asian Strategy**

If Central Asia has slowly but surely risen as a focal area of EU external policy, the reverse is true: the role of the EU has similarly risen in the foreign policies of Central Asian states. This process is part and parcel of the Central Asian states' emergence on the world stage, and the growing institutionalization of the EU and its role as a force in the world.

It should be noted at the outset that there is considerable confusion in Central Asia – as elsewhere in the world – as to the nature of the EU. This should come as no surprise: the EU is unique in international politics, being far stronger than any other organization of regional cooperation, while falling short of being a fully federal state. In the post-Soviet space, with decision-makers colored by the experience of Communist authoritarian rule, understanding how the EU works and determining its role and relevance on the world stage is a challenge that is only exacerbated by the shifting character of the EU itself, as well as its simultaneous travails from Euro-crisis to Brexit.

Simply put, the neighborhood that Central Asia finds itself in is largely defined by traditional *realpolitik* – this is certainly the case for the region's relationship with Russia to the north, but also with the politics of Afghanistan to the south. China differs somewhat by being primarily an economic power; but even here, the character of China's role in the world is changing in the direction of a more assertive, traditional power. The EU, by contrast, defines itself on the basis of norms and values rather than pure interests, though as will be discussed in this paper, in Central Asia the EU often acts on the basis of a combination of European interests and values.

This makes the EU particularly hard to pin down, and certainly implies that Central Asian leaders are predisposed to viewing the EU in the way it views other great powers. In spite of this, the role of the EU in Central Asian states' strategy has grown along the EU's own evolution. Several factors account for this.

First, the Central Asian states are inherently positively predisposed toward non-regional powers' presence in Central Asia. The chief objective of their foreign policy is to maximize their own independence and sovereignty, from which follows an urge toward what has been termed "multi-vector" or balanced foreign policies.<sup>15</sup> The approach was pioneered by Kazakhstan's then-Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in the late 1990s: Kazakhstan would continue to develop close ties with Russia, but also with China, the United States and Western powers. Rather than viewing this approach of developing ties with potentially adversarial great powers as contradictory, Tokayev argued they were perfectly complementary and strengthened Kazakhstan's independence.<sup>16</sup> In one form or another, all Central Asian states have sought – with varying degrees of success – to adopt this approach to their foreign relations.<sup>17</sup> It could be said with only mild exaggeration that Central Asian states cultivate ties with China to balance Russia in the short term; while they entertain close ties with Russia in order to be able to balance China in the long term. Most of all, they seek to welcome other powers in the region in order to dilute, to the extent possible, the domination of these giants over the region. This has led Central Asian states to welcome the opportunity to develop relations with the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, Iran, Turkey, and other powers. By

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<sup>15</sup> Reuel Hanks, "'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia," *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies*, vol. 11 no. 3, 2009, pp. 257-267.

<sup>16</sup> Kassymjomart Tokayev, *Pod Styagom Nezavisimosti: Ocherki o Vneshnei Politike Kazakhstana*, Almaty: Bilim, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> S. Frederick Starr, "In Defense of Greater Central Asia," *Politique Étrangère*, no. 3, 2008. (<https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/StarrVO.pdf>)

the same token, Central Asian states view the EU as one important player in the world, whose presence in the region further helps diversify their external relations and thus support their sovereignty.

Second, Central Asian states have seen growing trade relations with the EU. The EU is, alongside China, the region's largest trade partner, with a total trade turnover of close to US\$40 billion. While China's rise in the region's economy means it will likely eclipse the role of the EU, the EU nevertheless is a considerably more important trading partner for Central Asia than Russia, and exponentially more so than the United States. This alone means that as the EU becomes a more unified actor on the world scene, Central Asian states see the EU as a key partner.

Third, the EU is a source of both technology and ideas for Central Asia. This is not necessarily always a positive factor in the relationship, as Europeans often berate Central Asians for their human rights record and the lack of democratic reforms, criticism that Central Asian leaders do not necessarily welcome.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the EU in 2005 slammed sanctions on Uzbekistan following the violent crackdown on an armed uprising in the eastern city of Andijan.<sup>19</sup> That said, Central Asians have tended to view the EU as a more constructive partner on governance issues than the United States, whose approach – rightly or wrongly – they and many others have perceived as more aggressive, as well as associated with a propensity to support “regime change.” Particularly from 2003 to 2015, the issue of democracy and human rights was often a liability in the relationship between Central Asian states

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<sup>18</sup> “Kazakhstan to Britain: Don’t Lecture Us on Human Rights,” *Reuters*, July 1, 2013. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-britain-cameron/kazakhstan-to-britain-dont-lecture-us-on-human-rights-idUSBRE9600DM20130701>)

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know*, Washington & Stockholm: CACI-SRSP Silk Road Paper, May 2016 (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13204>); John C. K. Daly, *Rush to Judgment: Western Media and the 2005 Andijan Violence*, Washington & Stockholm: CACI-SRSP Silk Road Paper, May 2016. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13205>)

and Western powers, including the EU. But since then, as both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have embarked on a path of serious economic and political reforms, this has changed. In fact, when Central Asians look for support to their domestic reform agendas, they will invariably look west rather than north or east, for the simple reason that Russia and China have little to offer in terms of support for reforms. The EU, by contrast, has displayed both the ability and increasingly the willingness of engaging in such support. The fact that the EU includes member states that have experienced the transition from communism, provides additional relevance to the EU as the region moves forward.

## **EU Strategies in Evolution, 2002-2019**

The EU's approach to Central Asia has been governed by a series of consecutive documents. The first cohesive document was the Commission's Strategy paper of 2002. This was followed by a formal EU Strategy in 2007, which was updated in 2012 and 2015. Finally, in 2019, a new strategy was released. Even before a formal regional strategy had been launched, however, the EU had been a significant donor in Central Asia: the Commission itself claims that it disbursed €944 million in the decade before it launched the 2002 paper. Much of this had been in the realm of humanitarian assistance, with bilateral TACIS assistance accounting for €366 million, which computes to a much more modest average of €7 million per country per year.

### **A Framework for EU Assistance: the 2002 Strategy Paper**

The Commission's 2002 Strategy Paper followed a 2001 EU Troika visit to the region and a decision by the General Affairs Council to strengthen EU relations with Central Asia. But it took a dim view of the situation in Central Asia. It listed as common development problems the region's slow democratic transition and poor human rights record; "concern over" Islamic radicalization, proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. It also pointed to demographic pressures, poor business climate, slow transition to market economy, widening income disparity and poverty.

The 2002 Strategy noted that to be more effective, EU assistance would need to be "more focused in order to improve coherence" as well as adopt a long-

term perspective.<sup>20</sup> It also emphasized the need to target assistance to “sectors and issues where the partner country has expressed a clear interest in reform.” All in all, the 2002 strategy paper summed up its approach the following way:

The core objective of the new EC assistance strategy will be to promote the stability and security of the countries of Central Asia and to assist in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction.

To achieve these goals, the Strategy Paper identified three common objectives, which would undergird three “tracks” of TACIS assistance. The three common objectives were to “promote security and conflict prevention”; “eliminate sources of political and social tension”; and “improve the climate for trade and investment.” As for the three “tracks” of assistance, the Commission designed a regional cooperation program; a regional support program implemented at national level; as well as a specific poverty reduction scheme piloted in 2-3 target regions. Importantly, the Commission referenced the efforts of Central Asian states to take “steps towards dealing jointly with certain common economic and security challenges,” specifically noting the creation of the Central Asia Cooperation Organization (CACO) and the EU ambition to support such regional cooperation.

While the document notes the “overarching objective” to “foster respect” for democratic principles, human rights, and transition to a market economy, it displays decidedly realistic ambitions. It should be noted that the promotion of democracy is not an explicit “track” in the document, but subsumed under the elimination of political and social tension, where it recalls that “promoting democracy, human rights and reducing poverty are

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<sup>20</sup> European Commission, *Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia*, Brussels, 2002, p. 3.

the only means to ensure long-term stability.”<sup>21</sup> But while the document mentions the support for “functioning” civil society, it puts greater emphasis on establishing good governance and the rule of law, and an even greater focus on poverty reduction. In the indicative program for 2002-2004 that accompanies the strategy paper, the focus is on more technical matters: in the programs implemented at the national level, focus is on implementing WTO and other trade commitments; developing investment-related laws and policies, reform customs and statistical services, and restructure public administration and education systems.

### **A Holistic Approach: the 2007 Strategy**

In July 2007, the EU took a major step: the Strategy adopted that year was endorsed by the European Council, meaning this was not merely a Commission document focused on EU assistance programs, but an EU-wide document that went beyond aid, and covered EU relations with Central Asia at all levels. It was developed at the initiative of a leading member state, lending its further weight in the EU bureaucracy. During its presidency of the EU during the first half of 2007, Germany had made the development of relations with Central Asia a key priority, and the development of the strategy followed German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s trip to each Central Asian state in late 2006.<sup>22</sup>

The 2007 Strategy is therefore considerably broader in nature, and positions Central Asia in EU thinking. It starts by noting that “Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together,” and mentions the “considerable evolution in political and economic transformation” of Central Asian states, as well as the growing EU commitment to its Eastern

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<sup>21</sup> *Strategy Paper 2002-2006*, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> “Steinmeier: Europe Needs to Take a Closer Look at Central Asia,” *DW*, November 4, 2006. (<https://www.dw.com/en/steinmeier-europe-needs-to-take-a-closer-look-at-central-asia/a-2225329>)



neighbors through the ENP. Coming as it did the year after the Ukraine energy crisis, it specifically cites the EU's dependency on external energy resources as an area of cooperation with Central Asia, as well as the EU's ambition to double the financial means available for assistance to the region.

The Strategy launches several concrete steps. It introduced the ambition to launch a regional political dialogue at foreign minister level, a regular energy dialogue, a European Education initiative, an EU Rule of Law initiative; and a regular bilateral Human Rights dialogue with each Central Asian state. The Strategy seeks balance between the bilateral and regional approach; but it emphasizes bilateral relations as being of "special importance", reserving regional approaches for "common regional challenges" such as crime, transport, energy, water, environment and migration.<sup>23</sup> This is reflected in the allocation of funding: Seventy percent of assistance is earmarked for bilateral efforts, while 30 percent is dedicated to foster regional cooperation.<sup>24</sup> The EU also committed to opening the delegations in each Central Asian state, something that was soon accomplished, with the exception of a Delegation to Ashgabat, which was opened only in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

The Strategy divided EU priorities into seven areas. The first is "Human rights, rule of law, good governance, and democratization". It leads with the HR dialogue to be established, but in concrete terms, focuses mainly on the EU Rule of Law Initiative, which was subsequently set up to address specific initiatives identified by each country. Under this umbrella, the EU offered to second experts to Central Asian state institutions, as well as engage in

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<sup>23</sup> *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> European External Action Service, "High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini visited Ashgabat to sign the Establishment Agreement of an EU Delegation to Turkmenistan," July 11, 2019. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/65289/high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-visited-ashgabat-sign-establishment\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/65289/high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-visited-ashgabat-sign-establishment_en))

training, support legal reform, and foster cooperation with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

The second priority area was Youth and education, where the EU strategy adopts a very broad purview, aiming to help develop primary, secondary, vocational, as well as higher education. The third focus area was "Economic development, trade and investment," where the EU prioritized WTO accession – at the time, only Kyrgyzstan was a WTO member. In addition, the EU pledged to develop the role of Central Asian states under its INOGATE and TRACECA initiatives.

The fourth priority is "Strengthening energy and transport links," including supporting an integrated Central Asian energy market, as well as the development of sustainable and renewable energy. The strategy does speak about rehabilitating existing pipelines and building new ones, both "inside the region and towards Europe." However, this section is surprisingly weak in its emphasis on connecting Central Asia's energy infrastructure with Europe. The strategy's fifth heading was "Environmental sustainability and water," which focuses heavily on the promotion of cooperation on water management, a perennial apple of discord in Central Asia.

The sixth priority area listed is "Combating common threats and challenges", a section that focuses on the modernization of border management, fighting narcotics trade and organized crime, specifically mentioning the EU's Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA). The strategy also emphasizes the fight against corruption, as well as countering the weapons trade to and from Afghanistan, and mentions the creation of a specific "drug presence" in Dushanbe. The strategy specifically lists the Ferghana valley as an area of concern given the complex border situation between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Last but not least, the strategy's seventh priority area is entitled "Building bridges: intercultural dialogue." While this may sound very general, it is important in

emphasizing Central Asia's heritage of tolerance and religious diversity. Not staying at that, it mentions the "moderate and tolerant Islamic thinking respecting constitutional secular principle" as a hallmark of Central Asian countries, and pledges the EU to work to build on this in its relations with the region.

### **Adapting to Changing Times: Strategy Reviews**

The 2007 Strategy was subjected to considerably reviews in 2012 and 2015. These reviews maintained the general validity of the Strategy, while adding new instruments of EU activity in the region.

The 2012 review confirmed the continued relevance of six of the priority areas, but does not mention the seventh, "building bridges". However, the review notes that the Central Asia region faces growing security challenges, related primarily to Afghanistan. This review, of course, came at the time when President Obama was accelerating the U.S. drawdown of forces from Afghanistan against the advice of military commanders, and the EU, just as Central Asian states did, expected the U.S. to leave Afghanistan just as it had left Iraq in December 2011. The total withdrawal was eventually reversed, and the fears expressed in the review did not come to pass.

This review introduced several novelties. A first, reflecting the concern for regional security, was to hold a "High Level Security Dialogue" with Central Asian states, as well as to strengthen cooperation in countering terrorism and support the strengthening of Central Asia's borders with Afghanistan. In the energy field, the review remedies the absence of concrete initiatives on connecting Central Asia to Europe, and promotes a specific initiative: it calls for a Treaty between the EU, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan on a Trans-Caspian pipeline, while pledging to mobilize the private sector's engagement for its realization. This unorthodox step was a clear reaction to growing concerns of EU dependence on Russia, but has

suffered from the lack of industry engagement. Unlike the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project, the Trans-Caspian project did not and does not have an industry champion, making it difficult for the project to be launched by political fiat.

The review also mentions the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan and that country's transition to a "semi-parliamentary democracy" as an indication that a "peaceful, transparent and electoral transition of power is possible." It is correct that Kyrgyzstan transitioned to a new system of government and held reasonably well-organized elections. But the strategy entirely fails to mention that this occurred following an externally supported violent coup d'état in spring 2010 and the ensuing devastating ethnic rioting in the country's south that killed over 800 people. To call this process a peaceful and transparent one is certainly a stretch.

On a positive note, the review notes for the first time the deepening of bilateral political dialogue between Kabul and the Central Asian states, and Central Asia's potential contribution to the stabilization of Afghanistan. It also takes stock of "intra-regional strained relations", a reference most directly related to the tensions between Tashkent and Dushanbe over the Rogun dam.

As the review indicates, the EU launched its Rule of Law and Environmental initiatives, with Germany and France taking a lead in the former, and Italy and Romania in the latter. It is quiet on the education initiative, in all likelihood because no EU member state stepped forward to take the lead in it. Finally, the review expresses skepticism on the EU economic presence in the region, noting it had not increased significantly; it also notes the need to "target EU efforts more narrowly."

The 2015 review notes the many achievements of the EU's policy in Central Asia, leading with a quantitative indicator: during the 2014-20

programming period, assistance increased by 56 percent to €1.02 billion. By this time, negotiations for an enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kazakhstan had been completed. Trade between the EU and Central Asia had grown by 8 percent in two years, and a high-level security dialogue had been launched in 2013, focused on challenges in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran as well as terrorism more generally. This was followed up by a dedicated counter-terror meeting in Almaty in 2014.

Still, while noting the development of relations, the 2015 strategy review was blunt about some of the challenges to the Strategy's implementation. It emphasizes the continued centralized character of Central Asian states, and the low level of trust between them, which hampers regional cooperation. The review concludes that some regional "governments are simply not willing to engage in gradual electoral reforms," increasingly see civil society as threat, and accordingly restrict foreign funding for the NGO sector. This characterization was, generally speaking correct, and though the strategy review did not make this connection, it was written in the aftermath of the Arab upheavals that started in 2011. In Central Asia, the perception of Western enthusiasm for regime change through popular protests led governments to developing greater hostility to Western-supported NGO activity.

The strategy review is also self-critical. It specifically references the "uneven involvement of EU members" in the Strategy's implementation. In particular, it registers the difficulty to mobilize EU resources, especially the absence of an EU member state to lead the education platform. Accordingly, the review calls on member states to increase their roles as implementers.

The review also takes a realistic view of Central Asia's geopolitical situation, something that was missing from earlier documents. It cites the challenges arising from Russia's "integrationist" agenda, China's "economic expansion," and the "diminishing" U.S. presence, and emphasizes that these

challenges are exacerbated by the crisis in Ukraine. It notes matter-of-factly how the Ukraine crisis led Central Asian states to “heighten domestic security posture to avoid uprisings” and “to anticipate increased separatist tendencies.”<sup>26</sup>

Against the background of these profound changes to the regional environment, the review concludes that there is no need for a complete overhaul of the Strategy, but that the EU needs to make more effective pursuit of its priorities. In sum, the review argues for the human rights dialogue to be made more result-oriented, rather than simply a forum for the EU to register its opinions on Central Asian countries’ human rights situation. It also appears to call into question the EU’s regional approach to Central Asia, primarily with the argument that the Central Asian states deal bilaterally with Russia, China, and the United States. The drafters of the review may not have known that the U.S. would, only a few months later, launch the C5+1 mechanism for regional consultation with Central Asia, and that U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry would go on a trip visiting each Central Asian state in the fall of 2016, thus reiterating America’s regional approach to Central Asia. Still, the review does not ponder whether the Russian and Chinese focus on bilateralism – itself mitigated by the former’s leadership of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union and the latter’s championing of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – may be related to an interest in dividing the Central Asian states in order to maximize leverage, as bilateral links by default favor the more powerful party. That said, the review does indicate a healthy level of skepticism toward the Eurasian Economic Union, noting that this endeavor – and thus its leading

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<sup>26</sup> General Secretariat of the European Council, “Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia,” June 22, 2015. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10191-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

advocate, Russia – “must also fully respect the sovereign and autonomous decisions of states to decide on their participation”.<sup>27</sup>

In the field of energy and transport, the review reiterates the EU’s backing for a pipeline across the Caspian and notes the completion in 2014 of environmental scoping of a Trans-Caspian pipeline – which nevertheless continued to lack an industry sponsor. Regarding transport, the review emphasized the EU’s effort to “seek synergies between EU, Central Asian and Chinese transport policies to ensure compatibility.”

In June 2015, the EU Council conclusions on Central Asia affirm that the EU considers Central Asia “a region of strategic importance” and makes it clear the union is determined to further develop its presence in, and relations with, Central Asian states.<sup>28</sup> Two years later, Council Conclusions of June 2017 reiterate most of the conclusions of 2015, but identified a need to “review and renew our relationship”, and thus ordered the development of a new Central Asia strategy in 2019 “in accordance with the EU Global Strategy.”<sup>29</sup>

### **An Upbeat Take at a Time of Change: the 2019 Strategy**

The new EU strategy, adopted by the EU Council in June 2019, starts off in a much more positive tone than earlier documents. While a palpable sense of mounting challenges transpired those documents, this new strategy exudes optimism. It begins by noting the “longstanding relationship based

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<sup>27</sup> General Secretariat of the European Council, “Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia,” June 22, 2015. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10191-2015-INIT/en/pdf>, p. 26

<sup>28</sup> General Secretariat of the European Council, “Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia,” June 22, 2015. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10191-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>29</sup> General Secretariat of the European Council, “Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia,” June 19, 2017. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23991/st10387en17-conclusions-on-the-eu-strategy-for-central-asia.pdf>

upon strong mutual interests” between the EU and Central Asian states, and speaks of an “unprecedented level of cooperation.” It underlines the “new opportunities” in the relationship and cites both “reform processes” in the region as well as “new momentum in regional cooperation” in Central Asia.

While the new strategy takes a forward-looking approach to the relationship, it is less clearly organized than the 2007 document. Rather than seven concretely defined priority areas, the 2019 Strategy has three “interconnected and mutually reinforcing priorities” whose titles could have been derived from a marketing campaign: “partnering for resilience,” “partnering for prosperity,” and “working better together.” It then addresses a cross-cutting priority with a more accessible title: “investing in regional cooperation within Central Asia.”

Interestingly, while the 2007 strategy and its subsequent reviews emphasized security issues, these are harder to locate in the new document. The introductory paragraph of “partnering for resilience” does not even mention security matters, focusing instead on reform, modernization, rule of law, and climate. This priority area’s sub-sections, however, have greater levels of continuity with the EU’s past priorities.

The first sub-section, not surprisingly, is “promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law.” Here, the EU emphasizes its intention to step up efforts to promote democracy, rule of law and good governance. It aims specifically to invest in justice and legal reform, and in fighting corruption. A novelty is the intention to support cross-regional training and sharing of experience between Central Asia and countries of the Eastern Partnership, thus working to soften the hard distinction between those states and Central Asia. This is a logical step, given the gradual shift of the Eastern Partnership from a one size fits all approach to more individualized agreements. Three countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – do not aspire to Association Agreements with the EU, making the agreements that Armenia has



achieved with the EU and the one Azerbaijan is currently negotiating similar in many ways to the Enhanced PCA Kazakhstan concluded with Brussels in 2015.

While earlier EU documents were careful to adjust to Central Asian states' priorities, the 2019 strategy aims to act more unilaterally: the EU aims to strengthen training and support for civil society human rights advocates and promote their cross-border contacts within Central Asia.

The second focus area under "partnering for resilience" is where security matters do appear, under the rubric "strengthening cooperation on border management, migration and mobility and in addressing common security concerns." While this rubric is somewhat unwieldy, it represents considerable continuity with earlier EU policy. The EU continues to promote border security and the fight against organized crime. There are new elements, however: the 2019 Strategy has a considerably stronger focus on preventing violent extremism and radicalization, and specifically discusses the issue of returning Islamic State (IS) fighters, which it terms a "top priority for the partnership." Indeed, the EU pledges to establish the post of a "EU security and counterterrorism expert with regional competence for Central Asia," an indication that in spite of first appearances, the strategy does not reduce the EU's commitment to security matters. The strategy also has a greater emphasis on addressing irregular migration, including expressing support for Central Asian countries to develop national migration policies and to cooperate regionally on migration. Another new element is the EU engagement with Central Asia on developing an open cyberspace as well as on cybersecurity.

A third section focuses on the familiar themes of environment, climate and water "resilience." A new theme in this regard is the EU's support for economic reforms that aim to move Central Asian economies from "linear production to a circular economy" with a view to reducing waste and

diminishing the impact of climate change. Aside from this, the EU continues to promote a regional agenda for water, while a new element is the EU intention to promote the implementation of the 2018 agreement on the legal status of Caspian Sea – a priority that is not surprising, given that this agreement may open the way for littoral states to develop pipeline infrastructure across the Caspian. Finally, the EU pledges to strengthen cooperation with the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia on water and security.

The Strategy's second heading, "Partnering for Prosperity," in turn has four subheadings. The first, promoting economic reform, continues to emphasize the EU's intention to help transform economies that are over-dependent on commodities, low value-added exports, and migrants' remittances. This, of course, is a tall order; the EU aims to contribute to this task by supporting the development of the private sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as building capacity for economic reform in Central Asian states' administrations by twinning programs and the like.

The second sub-heading is equally familiar: promoting trade and investment. The EU's insistence on accession to the WTO is maintained, and this strategy specifically mentions removing technical barriers to trade. This includes improving reciprocal market access for goods and services, as well as improving customs cooperation. In addition, the EU proposes to promote geographic indicators to help diversify agricultural production and increase the added value of regional economies.

Third, in another new initiative, the EU sets out to promote "sustainable connectivity." This repeats the language of EU connectivity strategy and is implicitly a counter-offer to China's BRI policy, as the EU emphasizes market principles, transparency, and international standards. Among other, the EU aims to promote compatible customs transit systems. It also promotes Central Asia's role in the EU's security and diversification of

energy supply. To this effect, the strategy aims to advance the task of “building” the trans-Caspian pipeline.

The fourth sub-heading is education, innovation, and culture. The strategy emphasizes promoting the Bologna process on higher education, as well as the Torino principles on vocational education. In addition, the EU aims to promote European studies in Central Asia; and seeks to intensify cooperation in research and innovation.

The third priority area is “working better together,” which is rather diffuse: it emphasizes the need for better synergies among EU institutions and member states. Under the heading “strengthening the architecture of partnership,” it calls for more frequent meetings with Central Asian leaders; and for the promotion of enhanced PCAs that will provide a stronger framework for bilateral relations. In addition, the language in this section calls for greater cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states in multilateral fora and for greater inter-parliamentary dialogue. Within this framework, the EU also strives to develop better coordination between its activities in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Specifically, the EU strives to develop greater dialogue with Central Asian states on matters relating to Afghanistan, and in the future to develop greater synergies between its assistance efforts in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

### **Central Asian Reactions**

The 2019 EU Strategy was well received in Central Asia. This should come as no surprise, given the involvement of Central Asian governments in extensive consultations for the strategy’s development, and the strong traffic of EU officials to Central Asia in recent years, indicating a high-level of attention to the region. EU High Representative Federica Mogherini has been a frequent visitor to the region. She took part in a ministerial summit with Central Asian countries in Samarkand in November 2017, participated

in the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan in March 2018, visited Ashgabat in July 2019 to open the EU delegation there, and continued on to Bishkek for another summit with Central Asian Ministers of Foreign Affairs, at which the newly unveiled Strategy was discussed. In addition, European Council President Donald Tusk toured the region in June 2019, visiting Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

While all Central Asian states reacted positively to the new strategy, their reactions also indicate differences in their respective priorities. Kazakhstan emphasized its leading role as the first regional country to conclude an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). Soon after the Strategy's adoption, Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko called the Strategy "visionary," adding that "we have been consulted, we have provided our contribution to the strategy and we do find reflected there some of the proposals that we have suggested."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, following the Bishkek summit in July, the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement welcomed the inclusion of a number of Kazakh proposals in areas ranging from entrepreneurship and business to environmental and education initiatives.<sup>31</sup> Meeting with Tusk in Nur-Sultan, President Tokayev welcomed the new EU strategy by noting the EU's interest "in the politically stable, economically sustainable and safe development of the Central Asian countries."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Georgi Gotev, "Kazakhstan Calls EU's New Central Asia Strategy 'Visionary'", *Euractiv*, May 29, 2019. (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/interview/kazakhstan-calls-eus-new-central-asia-strategy-visionary/>)

<sup>31</sup> "Kazakhstan vystupaet za jeffektivnoe ispol'zovanie instrumentarija otnoshenij po linii ES-CA v svetenovoj Strategii ES." *Ministerstvoinostrannyh del RespublikiKazahstana*, 7 July 2019, <http://mfa.gov.kz/ru/content-view/kazahstan-vystupaet-za-effektivnoe-ispolzovanie-instrumentaria-otnoshenij-po-linii-es-ca-v-svete-novoj-strategii-es.>

<sup>32</sup> "New State in Nur-Sultan-Brussels Dialogue: Tokayev and Tusk told about Reached Agreements." *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, May 31, 2019.

The launch of the Strategy followed closely upon the visit to Brussels by Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, in November 2018. During this visit, which coincided with the 14<sup>th</sup> EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting, the EU and Uzbekistan formally started negotiations on an EPCA.<sup>33</sup> In line with President Mirziyoyev's main priority of kickstarting Uzbekistan's economy and attracting foreign investment, Uzbekistan's reaction has focused on the economic area. Thus, Tashkent in particular welcomed assistance to join the WTO, and noted the growth of economic and trade relations with the EU. When Tusk visited Tashkent in June 2019, the focus of his discussion with President Mirziyoyev was reportedly on "economy, trade, innovation and investment, transport, science, education and health." In addition, regional security issues, not least the situation in Afghanistan, were on the agenda.<sup>34</sup>

As for Turkmenistan, Ashgabat took the opportunity of Mogherini's visit to emphasize its interest in promoting parliamentary cooperation, expressing a desire to be integrated into the "international legal space." Official media also noted Turkmenistan's participation in the EU Rule of Law platform and annual human rights dialogues with the EU.<sup>35</sup> Following the Bishkek summit, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry noted that it had conveyed

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(<http://www.kazpravda.kz/en/news/president/new-stage-in-nur-sultan-brussels-dialogue-tokayev-and-tusk-told-about-reached-agreements>.)

<sup>33</sup> "EU and Uzbekistan Launch Negotiations for a New Agreement," *European Interest*, November 23, 2018. (<https://www.europeaninterest.eu/article/eu-uzbekistan-launch-negotiations-new-agreement/>)

<sup>34</sup> "Президент Республики Узбекистан принял Президента Европейского совета," *Narodnoe Slovo*, June 2, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> "Turkmenistan - Evropeiskii Soiuz: Rasshirenie Sotrudnichestvav Tseliakh Ustoichivogo Razvitiia." *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, 8 July 8, 2019.

“concrete proposals” particularly in the areas of “security, energy, transport, ecology, education and culture.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan mainly emphasized the potential for cooperation in trade, economic matters, and education. This differs considerably from the focus areas emphasized in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

While President Emomali Rakhmon also emphasized his interest in broadening economic ties with the EU during Tusk’s visit to Dushanbe, the discussion focused to a much greater extent on security issues. The Tajik side focused on the “joint struggle against manifestations of terrorism ... the spread of terrorism and extremism in the region and the world, drug trafficking and arms smuggling.” In this context, Rakhmon pointed to the presence of terrorist groups in northern Afghanistan, and the role of the EU’s border assistance and counter-narcotics programs were particularly highlighted.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Tajikistan appears focused on security issues to a visibly greater degree than its neighbors, viewing the EU’s role in the region in this context. This stems, of course, from Tajikistan’s greater vulnerability to extremist currents entering the country from neighboring Afghanistan.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan’s reaction to the EU’s Strategy diverges greatly from the rest of the region by emphasizing normative issues. It should be noted that Mogherini’s visit to Bishkek also saw the initialing of an EPCA between the EU and Kyrgyzstan, negotiations for which had been ongoing since

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<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkmenistan, “The Delegation of Turkmenistan Participated in the Meeting of the Heads of External Policy Agencies of EU and Central Asia Countries,” July 7, 2019. (<https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/news/1498>)

<sup>37</sup> “Oficial’nyj visit Prezidenta Evropejskogo Soveta Donal’da Tuska v Tadzhhikistan.” *Harodnaya Gazeta* 13 June 2019. ([http://www.narodnaya.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9125:2019-06-13-05-48-37&catid=74:prezident&Itemid=190](http://www.narodnaya.tj/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9125:2019-06-13-05-48-37&catid=74:prezident&Itemid=190).)

December 2017.<sup>38</sup> Meeting with Mogherini, Kyrgyz President Sooronbai Jeenbekov spoke of his country's commitment to its course of "strengthening democracy, building an economically sustainable and stable state, ensuring human rights and freedoms, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance and pluralism of opinions..."<sup>39</sup> In other words, Kyrgyzstan continues to market itself in relations with the EU as the state most receptive to European norms and values, at least on a declaratory level.

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<sup>38</sup> European Commission, "EU and Kyrgyz Republic initial Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement," July 6, 2019.

(<http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2046>)

<sup>39</sup> "Vazhnyi dlia Kyrgyzstana partner." *SlovoKyrgyzstana*, July 9, 2019.

(<http://slovo.kg/?p=108057>)

## Issues in EU Strategy

The launch of an EU Strategy is an opportunity to take a step back and assess the EU policy toward Central Asia. The overview of EU policy in preceding pages suggests that from relatively modest beginnings two decades ago, the EU has devoted considerable attention and resources to its relationship with Central Asia – with a very organized approach, involving the production of concrete strategies, reviews of these strategies, and European Council conclusions on the region on a bi-yearly basis. This is laudable and compares well to the more disorganized policy of the United States toward Central Asia. While a new U.S. Strategy was being developed by the Trump administration in 2019, U.S. policy has been guided by ad hoc decision-making for close to two decades. The absence of a U.S. strategy has allowed Central Asia to be a corollary to policies toward other issues or powers rather than a goal in itself. The EU's approach, by contrast, has allowed it to define its relations with Central Asia on the basis of its interests in the region itself, and not as an appendix to something else. That said, an overview of EU strategies raises a series of issues that continue to confront EU policy in Central Asia.

First among these is scope. The EU is active on numerous fronts and has to take into account the interests of 28 member states, different EU institutions, civil non-government and activist organizations, and Central Asian governments. Navigating the different priorities advanced by different actors raises the risk of the EU trying to do too much with too little, instead of focusing its energies on several specific matters. Second is the regional question: the EU is frequently criticized for taking a regional approach to countries that have distinct differences. Is the EU right to frame its



interactions with Central Asia on a regional rather than bilateral basis, and if so, what is that region? Third, should the EU advance norms or interests in Central Asia? Are these inherently incompatible? Fourth, how should the EU approach security affairs in a region dominated by hard security actors?

### **Scope: Doing Too Much with Too Little?**

A recurrent criticism of EU policy in Central Asia is that it is trying to do too much with limited resources, and that it should increasingly focus its efforts. This criticism is visible in the EU's own strategy reviews, as well as in the commentaries of European and regional analysts.

The development of the 2019 Strategy differed markedly from the 2007 document in at least two ways. First, in line with the EU's aim of policy coherence, the 2019 Strategy had to take its basis in the EU Global Strategy and the Connectivity strategy. Second, the 2019 strategy was based on extensive consultations with government and non-government actors in both the EU itself and in Central Asia. Those involved in the consultations can testify to the genuine nature of this process, and to the EU's good-faith effort to incorporate the views expressed in the strategy itself. Since the EU appears to have ensured that both civil society organizations and Central Asian governments felt included in the development of the strategy, this effort must be considered a resounding success. On the other hand, that in turn may be a source of concern: as Fabienne Bossuyt observes, "the question remains ... to what extent it is the purpose of a foreign policy strategy to reflect nearly all the concerns raised by the stakeholders."<sup>40</sup> Put otherwise, incorporating opinions by a wide variety of actors may risk reducing the EU policy to a low common denominator – or giving everyone something they want.

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<sup>40</sup> EUCAM, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: First Reactions," June 25, 2019. <https://eucentralasia.eu/2019/06/new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia-first-reactions/>

The 2019 strategy's structure suggests a conscious effort to narrow down the scope of the strategy. This is visible first of all in the attempt to jettison the 2007 approach of seven distinct priority areas, and instead organize the strategy around three key guiding concepts: resilience, prosperity and cooperation. It is also visible in the effort to promote a limited number of concrete deliverables under each priority area, compared to the long wish lists that accompanied the 2007 document. That said, many of the existing priorities remain in force, only being relegated to subordinate priorities under the respective key rubrics. Indeed, few of the priorities expressed in the past have been dropped from the new strategy; but the EU has made it clearer where it is intending to invest most of its resources and has indicated concrete priorities. These include training civil society activists, promoting twinning to assist in economic reforms and helping to develop statistical systems; appointing a specific counterterrorism expert; strengthening regional cooperation on environmental and water issues; promoting sustainable waste management; extending the TEN-T transportation network to Central Asia; facilitating the funding of "sustainable" connectivity projects; and increasing the number of Central Asian recipients of EU scholarships.

While there are more concrete indications in the strategy, it still encompasses a very broad range of policy areas; it is doubtful that the EU will truly live up to the ambition of focusing its efforts in the areas where it can have the most decisive impact. Then again, it is not necessarily the role of a strategy to delve into the most concrete details of policy implementation. By definition, a strategy must set the broad priorities, while allowing for flexibility and giving EU institutions the room to respond to events in the region. In this sense, the document is a hybrid between a true strategy that seeks to set broad priorities, and a laundry list of disparate initiatives.

**Is there a Central Asia? Focusing on Regional or Bilateral Relations**

EU policy toward Central Asia since 2002 has stubbornly stuck to a regional approach, grouping five Central Asian states together. Only in 2015 was some hesitation visible in the EU's determination to treat Central Asia as a region – that year's strategy review pondered whether the EU should follow the example of other powers and adopt a bilateral approach to relations with Central Asia. But by 2019, all doubts on the wisdom of a regional approach had dissipated: the EU now made the promotion of regionalism a cross-cutting priority.

The regional approach to Central Asia has been criticized from at least two viewpoints. One view asserts that Central Asia is not really a region, because its five states do not behave as one. In fact, by some standards, Central Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world. And the disparities between its states have duly been pointed out. The IMF divides the region into oil-exporting and oil-importing states, noting the dramatically different conditions of states in these two categories. Kazakhstan, now classified as an upper-middle income country, is no longer a recipient of foreign aid; by contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan continue to be plagued by high poverty rates and much weaker government delivery of services. Even in terms of international organizations, Central Asia is divided: two states are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, three are not; three are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, two are not; four are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, all except neutral Turkmenistan.

This has led to skepticism that Central Asia should be approached as a region. Writing in 2012, Neil Melvin argued that the "EU concept of the region of Central Asia as five former Soviet republics was always an unimaginative one ... lumping Kazakhstan together with Tajikistan never had a political logic" ... Melvin argued the concept of former Soviet Central Asia "will continue to lose its already fragile coherence," and that regional

states would have to be approached “in the context of their relationships with neighbouring countries,” mentioning particularly China, Russia, and “Afghanistan-South Asia.”<sup>41</sup> In calling the EU’s approach linked to “outdated regional definitions”, Melvin is not far from Alexander Knyazev, who as recently as in 2018, and using the Soviet-era terminology for the region, argued that “Central Asia is not a region. Countries of Middle Asia and Kazakhstan have no unifying interests, on the contrary, their interests contradict each other in most cases.”<sup>42</sup>

This argument must at this point be dismissed as having been tried and failed. For one, Central Asian states themselves have stressed their belonging to a distinct Central Asian region. This is most clear in the official foreign policy doctrines of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which both make “Central Asia” the priority of their foreign relations. Second, the argument that Central Asia should be seen from the perspective of their neighbors has the direct implication of removing the focus from Central Asia itself, and seeing its states as loose appendages to other great powers or conflict zones.

This, in turn, would advertently or inadvertently strengthen the centrifugal tendencies that only benefit the interests of the regional powers that seek to divide Central Asian states as to better be able to dominate the region. Conversely, there appears to be no upside to such an approach: it was tested by the Obama administration, which viewed Central Asia precisely as an appendage to its policies toward Afghanistan and Russia (but never integrated it into its China policy.) The result was a disengagement from both the region’s security and its internal political and economic development, and in the end led to a policy that was helpless to prevent or

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<sup>41</sup> Neil Melvin, “The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for Its Central Asia Strategy,” *EUCAM Policy Brief*, no. 28, October 2012. (<https://eucentralasia.eu/2012/10/the-eu-needs-a-new-values-based-realism-for-its-central-asia-strategy/>)

<sup>42</sup> Victoria Panfilova, “Regional Integration in Central Asia is Slowing Down,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, September 7, 2018.

mitigate the political decay and subsequent violent upheavals in Kyrgyzstan, where the United States operated a military base. In more general terms, an approach that views Central Asian states as appendices to other priorities logically implies a view of Central Asian states as weak, rather immature or even illegitimate actors whose security must be provided for by outsiders (for example Russia) – as opposed to an emerging world region that must be supported in building security and prosperity from within.

An approach that denies Central Asia's regional identity ignores (or endorses) the active efforts of Russian diplomacy to prevent the emergence of regionalism in Central Asia. As Martha Olcott observes, already in Soviet times, "Central Asian regionalism was viewed as potentially seditious by Moscow's rulers."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the common narrative of Central Asia as a hopelessly disconnected region is not a correct rendering of recent history. Central Asian states *did* cooperate within the confines of the USSR; they then developed a promising initiative of regional cooperation in the 1990s, leading to the formation of the Central Asia Cooperation Organization. Its dissolution stemmed from its incorporation into Russian-led *Eurasian* cooperation structures, particularly the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec). This was a highly conscious Russian policy to weaken the budding regionalism in Central Asia itself. Moscow benefited from the apprehensions of Central Asian leaders toward the wave of "color revolutions" sweeping across the post-Soviet space, and particularly from the deterioration of U.S.-Uzbek relations. Central Asian states are not blameless, as they allowed their efforts to develop regional cooperation to be undone; but it is important to recall that this happened at the instigation

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<sup>43</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "The Myth of 'Tsentral'naia Aziia'" *Orbis*, Vol. 38 no. 4, Autumn 1994, Pp. 549-565.

of a former colonial overlord, and as a result of that overlord's forceful promotion of Eurasian integration over regional cooperation.<sup>44</sup>

Happily, recent developments in the region itself have made the view of Central Asia as hopelessly divided rather obsolete, while strengthening the validity of treating Central Asia as a region. As a result of Central Asian diplomacy, the UN General Assembly in June 2018 adopted a resolution that confirms Central Asia's status as a world region in its own right, and endorses its efforts at strengthening regional cooperation.<sup>45</sup> From a European viewpoint, the rationale is straightforward: given the situation in the world and the number of acute or imminent crises decision-makers have to deal with, it is impossible to develop a coherent EU approach to an individual Central Asian state for very long, and certainly not for any other than negative reasons, such as responding to a major crisis. If these states are not to be tucked in as appendices to other issues, they must be viewed in a regional context. Importantly, while the EU's *interests* in the region must be defined regionally, the implementation of the policies that derive from these interests can be either regional or bilateral, depending on the context.

In other words, events in the region have vindicated the EU's long-standing approach to treat Central Asia in regional terms. In this, the EU – probably because it was guided by a formal strategy review process – exhibited more tenacity than the United States, which lost focus of Central Asia as a region during the same period.

Whether the region is correctly defined is another question, and one that is in constant evolution. The present-day political definition of Central Asia

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<sup>44</sup> Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Washington/Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, November 2018. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/1811CA-Regional.pdf>)

<sup>45</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 72<sup>nd</sup> Session, Resolution 72/283, "Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region." (<https://undocs.org/a/res/72/283>)

dates to the Soviet era. Each passing year, however, sees greater interactions between post-Soviet Central Asia and the lands to its east and south, which were historically also considered parts of Central Asia. In 1993, the leaders of the five Soviet republics east of the Caspian Sea met in Tashkent and declared that the area formerly known as *Srednaya Aziya i Kazakhstan*, "Middle Asia and Kazakhstan," would now be known as *Tsentrálnaya Aziya*, "Central Asia." This was a conscious move on their part, and at the time there was little appetite for viewing any adjoining areas as part of this geographic entity. While that largely remains true today, their approach has begun to shift ever so subtly. Most prominently, while Central Asians not long ago sought to shield themselves from the instability of Afghanistan, they now increasingly view that country as part of Central Asia; and seek ways to help stabilize Afghanistan, realizing that efforts to isolate that country will yield no positive results either for Afghanistan or the rest of Central Asia.

Many Central Asians still view themselves as different from Afghanistan on the basis of their greater social and economic development, secular traditions, and Europeanized education systems; but the growing acceptance of a larger definition of Central Asia is unmistakable. More sensitive is the issue of Xinjiang, the Chinese part of Central Asia. While there is great openness to growing economic interaction with this territory, populated by a mix of Central Asian peoples and immigrant Han Chinese, politically the Central Asian relationship with Xinjiang is more complex, and its role in Central Asia will depend on decisions taken in Beijing. Recently, the large-scale internment of ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang have complicated the relationship to a considerably degree, generating considerable public resentment against China especially in Kazakhstan. It should be noted that Xinjiang is represented in some forms of regional cooperation such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC).

In parallel, the relations across the Caspian Sea are also developing rapidly. Kazakhstan has well-developed ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan have intensified their relations, and more recently Uzbekistan has also taken a greater interest in the South Caucasus, as evidenced by President Mirziyoyev's October 2019 visit to Baku, and Uzbekistan's joining the Turkic Cooperation Council. Conversely, Azerbaijan is increasingly looking east to Central Asia in its own foreign economic relations. Against this background, the EU's 2019 Strategy is wise to suggest greater efforts to link its policies in Central Asia with those in Afghanistan and in the Eastern Partnership. As Nargis Kassenova observes, "less bureaucratic geographic divisions among Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe could help create good synergies and foster one single European neighbourhood, rather than having 'neighbours' and 'neighbours of neighbours.'"<sup>46</sup> If anything, this aspect of the strategy could have been even more pronounced, as this possibility is mentioned only in general terms – while more specificity might be needed to counteract the bureaucratic divisions that view the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan as separate entities both within the EU institutions and many of the EU's partner organizations, including IFIs.

The 2019 Strategy emphasizes support for Central Asian regional cooperation as a cross-cutting priority. This is a very timely priority, given the efforts to restart the efforts at regional cooperation that existed almost two decades ago. This objective faces two key challenges, one from within and one from the outside. From within the region, differences between several of the region's states hamper the development of cooperative ventures. This includes the border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and more seriously, the recent controversies between Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. At present, the efforts toward regional cooperation are

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<sup>46</sup> EUCAM, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: First Reactions," June 25, 2019. <https://eucentralasia.eu/2019/06/new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia-first-reactions/>



spearheaded by Tashkent and Nur-Sultan, which appear to face difficulty in getting Ashgabat, Bishkek and Dushanbe to commit. From the outside, the effort toward regional cooperation faces open Russian hostility, as Moscow sees Central Asian regional cooperation as an alternative, and therefore a threat, to Russian-led Eurasian integration. By contrast, Beijing appears neutral if not positive toward greater Central Asian cooperation that is not dominated by Russia.

In this context, the EU can benefit from the fact that it is not a traditional geopolitical power, and take steps to promote regional cooperation. Its stated support for such ventures helps counter Russian efforts to disrupt cooperative efforts; and the EU could take steps in various international fora to encourage and facilitate meetings among Central Asian states, including taking a step back and allowing them to meet without outside participation. Whether the EU can also help iron out some of the differences among Central Asian states remains to be seen, but few outside powers would have more credibility than the EU to take a role as provider of good offices for such efforts.

Most importantly, however, the EU can function as an engine for boosting Central Asian cooperation with Afghanistan and with the South Caucasus. The EU has yet to fully coordinate its policy toward Afghanistan with its policy toward Central Asia, whether in terms of seeking synergies for its assistance programs, or more deeply, its strategic approach to these countries. And while the EU Connectivity Strategy is mainly an implicit response to China's BRI, there is no reason for the EU's investments in connectivity in Central Asia to focus exclusively on an east-west transportation axis. Quite to the contrary, it is in the interest of both the EU and Central Asian states to develop transit corridors linking Central Asia with South Asia across Afghanistan. While the prospects of these corridors are hampered by the ongoing violence in Afghanistan and the India-

Pakistan relationship, in the longer term, South Asia may be as important a trade partner for Central Asia as China is, given that in thirty years, South Asia's population will be both larger and younger than China's. While the possibility of coordinating Central Asia and Afghanistan policy is mentioned in the Strategy, implementing this through concrete steps will require a political will to overcome bureaucratic geographic boundaries that can be mustered if high-level attention exists.

The same is true for Central Asia's connection to the South Caucasus, as port facilities in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan come online, which can serve the growing continental trade between Europe and Asia. While the EU has focused strongly on developing energy infrastructure across the Caspian, with only limited success, it may make greater strides if it looks at these connections holistically, by supporting the development of all types of transportation infrastructure that connects the western and eastern shores of the Caspian. If such connections develop, that will make the eventual completion of energy links across that sea all the more likely.

### **Advancing Norms or Interests? The Controversy over Democracy Support**

A perennial challenge for the EU's policy in Central Asia has been to balance the normative elements of its agenda with the pursuit of European interests in the spheres of trade, energy or security. On one hand, the EU rhetorically continues to put support for democracy and human rights at the center of its agenda. On the other, it is a fact that Central Asian governments' appetite for political liberalization has been decidedly limited, while the EU's interests regarding energy diversification and counter-terrorism, to name only two examples, have required the development of closer relations with the governing elites of Central Asia. The apparent tension between these EU objectives has led to considerable criticism of EU double standards.

In fact, most academic research on EU-Central Asia relations focus in part or in whole on this particular matter. Writing in 2007, Melvin questions the feasibility of the EU's ambition to advance its interests "while also remaining true to its values," given that the "region's leadership has shown an almost genetic disposition to despotic rule."<sup>47</sup> A year into the 2007 Strategy, Gordon Crawford posited that "lowly self-interests" had trumped "lofty principles" in EU policy, with the result that the EU has ended up strengthening and legitimizing existing regimes in the region rather than move these states toward political liberalization.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Katharina Hoffmann has concluded that the implementation of EU policy in the sphere of governance is "conditioned by the compliance of Central Asian regimes," and that Central Asian leaders have proven adept at "emasculating" this aspect of EU policy, preventing "initiatives from going beyond seminar level and involving non-governmental actors." In sum, Hoffmann argues that "weak ambitions on the part of the EU to enforce conditionalities further widen the scope for the Central Asian regimes to benefit from cooperation with the EU and prevent changes that might challenge their power." In consequence, she recommends shifting the EU policy to "emphasise activities relating to the transfer of ideas of good governance and democracy in society."<sup>49</sup>

In the same vein, Boonstra and Hale lament the Commission's preference to "be responsive to governments rather than 'imposing' an agenda from the outside," and the Commission's refusal to make aid conditional on

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<sup>47</sup> Neil J. Melvin, "Building Stronger Ties, Meeting New Challenges: The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia," *CEPS Policy Brief*, no. 128, March 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon Crawford, "EU Human Rights and Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: From Loft Principles to Lowly Self-Interests," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 9 no. 2, 2008, pp. 172-191.

<sup>49</sup> Katharina Hoffmann, "The EU in Central Asia: Successful Good Governance Promotion?" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 31 no. 1, 2010, pp. 87-103.

democracy and human rights criteria.<sup>50</sup> And in 2012, Melvin saw his earlier skepticism confirmed by events: “The EU Strategy has been a clear failure at reversing the deterioration in the human rights and democracy situation in Central Asia. The shift to engagement and to mechanisms of dialogue has delivered no results in these key areas that are traditionally seen as being at the core of the EU’s external policies.”<sup>51</sup>

This issue is an important one, as it has bearing on the very legitimacy and internal consistency of the EU’s Strategy and policies in Central Asia. It needs to be unpacked, as it contains at least three distinct questions. First; is criticism that the EU ignores normative matters for the sake of self-interest correct? Second; is there really an incompatibility between the promotion of democracy and engagement with ruling elites? Third; relatedly, should the EU’s efforts in this area work with or against governments?

Addressing the first question, it should be noted that EU has consistently emphasized its commitment to the promotion of democracy and human rights in Central Asia. Crucially, however, the EU has made the determination that this is a long-term endeavor, which is not likely to be achieved overnight. As viewed above, reviews of EU assistance have explicitly acknowledged the reluctance of governing elites to engage in political liberalization, but have continued to maintain a policy that puts increased emphasis on this issue area in spite of this reality. The EU actually succeeded in launching human rights dialogues with each Central Asian state, including Turkmenistan, a feat that few thought doable. And while these dialogues remain “seminars,” in the words of their detractors, this is certainly a starting point in the socialization of Central Asian government officials into the norms promoted by the EU. With the 2019 Strategy, the EU

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<sup>50</sup> Jos Boonstra and Jacqueline Hale, “EU Assistance to Central Asia: Back to the Drawing Board”, *EUCAM Working Paper*, January 2010, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Neil Melvin, “The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy,” *EUCAM Policy Brief* no. 28, October 2012.

aspires to convene meetings with both officials and civil society representatives, indicating a growing level of ambition.

But what of the argument that the EU is simply talking about its norms and values, but that this is really only a subterfuge for a cold-hearted policy advancing its own interests? A 2011 study by Vera Axyonova and Fabienne Bossuyt suggests otherwise. They first observe that Central Asian states perform weakly on the objective conditions commonly associated with democratic development, exhibiting among other “high levels of poverty and an economic structure that leaves the most valuable resources in the hands of political elites,” as well as “problems of stateness and nation building.” They further note that the EU’s understanding of democracy promotion focuses “much more on the promotion of good governance and the socio-economic requisites for democracy than on democratic transition in the narrower sense.” Indeed, as they correctly note, the EU’s good governance efforts target “stateness” issues including “national and local administrative capacity and management.” Crucially, they observe that while these efforts account for 20-25 percent of the EU’s budget allocation for the region, another 40-45 percent are earmarked for poverty reduction, a priority that the EU “explicitly links to the goal of democratization.” On this basis, and a comparison of the diverse amounts allocated to the different EU priority areas, they conclude the following:

The promotion of socio-economic requisites of democracy, in particular, poverty reduction and education, is valued more than the pursuit of strategic (energy and security) interests, suggesting that interest-based calculations might be less determinant for the EU’s Central Asia policy than generally held in the literature.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Vera Axyonova and Fabienne Bossuyt, “Advancing Democracy on Difficult Terrain: EU Democracy Promotion in Central Asia,” *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 16, 2011, pp. 639-658.

This makes it clear that an assessment of the EU's policy in support of democracy promotion will differ depending on the observer's definition of what democracy promotion means. If one means aggressive and even coercive promotion of political change, then one will find EU policies disappointing; if, on the other hand, one means a measured and cautious long-term promotion of the prerequisites for sustainable democracy, the conclusion will be, rather, that the EU is putting its money very much where its mouth is. Either way, however, the notion that the EU is ignoring normative matters on the basis of narrow self-interest is not borne out in fact.

A more conceptual issue regards the compatibility of democracy promotion with a broader engagement agenda. Are these necessarily incompatible with one another?

On one level, the argument that the EU puts interests above "values" may seem self-evident and, depending on one's position, either appalling or entirely unobjectionable. While the EU is a union built on common normative values, it has made it clear that it has no intention to integrate Central Asian states into the EU *acquis communautaire* in the way it intends for the Western Balkans or even Eastern Partnership countries. As such, the diffusion of these values is not the overarching objective of the EU's relations with Central Asia and was never meant to be. To a democracy activist, this may appear an inexcusable example of cynicism; to a realist, it is just the way the world is, and the EU is a union of states, not a union of advocacy NGOs. But just as one's views of EU priorities, discussed above, depend on one's understanding of democratization, so one's views of the tension between values and interests will depend on the tactics employed in the service of democratization.

There are at least two ways to approach this objective. One is a conditionality-based, coercive approach that seeks to utilize pressure on

governments and support for non-government groups to achieve political change. The logical conclusion of this approach, which many of its proponents advocate, is support for regime change – preferably peaceful regime change through popular protest. This is the approach favored by many activist organizations, and is reflected in much of the opinion expressed in research on the EU policy – questioning the benefits of engagement, advocating for conditionality and tactics that are antagonistic toward governments, whether through circumventing governments to focus on civil society, or changing governments' behavior by exerting pressure on them. This approach seeks immediate, or at least very rapid transformation. A second approach sees democratization as a result of evolutionary change, whose result – and sustainability – depends on the development of certain prerequisites, such as secure statehood and sovereignty, quality of institutions, and economic development. This approach is skeptical of revolutionary change, pointing to the poor track record of transitions to electoral democracy in the absence of strong institutional reforms. In other words, this approach sees democracy as the result of a long-term process of institutional change.

An important reason for the criticism of EU policies expressed by many Western academics and activists is the divergence in approach: where activists espouse the former approach to tactics, EU policies clearly take the latter approach, and view democracy support in Central Asia as a long-term goal. This is a result of an adequate reading of the regional situation, and of the leverage available to the EU. Leaving aside the crucial issue of the prerequisites for sustainable democratic transition, democracy activists appear to overrate the ability of the EU (and United States) to promote democracy and human rights in an environment such as Central Asia. In reality, the sticks and carrots available to democracy promoters in Central Asia are limited. Neither the U.S. nor the EU play a key role in security matters in Central Asia, and the provision of some form of collective security

mechanism for regional states is not on the agenda. This means that the most powerful incentive that led Central and East European states to engage in difficult reforms in the 1990s – integration into the EU and NATO – is not present. And while the EU and U.S. do provide significant sums of assistance to Central Asia, these sums pale in comparison to the figures made available for Central and Eastern Europe, or more recently the Balkans. Given that the Central Asian states exist in a geopolitical environment dominated by Russia and China, who actively discourage the development of democracy, the leverage of Western democracy promotion is limited at best – particularly the coercive promotion of rapid democratic transition. An approach that works *on* or *against* rather than *with* governments stands very little chance of success: the EU has nowhere near the leverage to implement such an approach, as Central Asian states are no longer the weak entities they were in the 1990s: they have ample capacity to restrict activities they find hostile, and the effect of such policies would simply be to push Central Asian elites closer into the Russian or Chinese embrace.

There is considerable evidence for this in the events of the past fifteen years. On two occasions, Western powers supported and celebrated waves of popular protests that resulted in regime change; first, the “color revolutions” of 2003-05 in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and later the 2011 Arab upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya. In both cases, these Western policies led Central Asian states to do two things: first, they curtailed cooperation with Western powers they viewed as agents of destabilization, instead opting for closer integration into Russian-led cooperative structures. Second, as the domestic power balance shifted in favor of state security structures at the expense of pro-Western reformers, they tightened control over society in order to avoid a repeat of these events within their own borders. Thus, Western support for regime change had the effect of pushing Central Asian states away from the West and weakening



the influence of reformist forces both within government and society as a whole.

By contrast, there is some evidence that an approach focused on engagement has proven more fruitful at engendering progress in the direction of good governance. Between 2001 and 2004, there was a deepened American engagement with Central Asia as a result of the conflict in Afghanistan. This led, for example, to what Freedom House called “modest progress in addressing some judicial and human rights problems” in Uzbekistan.<sup>53</sup> When U.S.-Uzbek relations collapsed following a crackdown of an armed uprising in Andijan in 2005, an event that directly followed the color revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the modest progress in Uzbekistan was rapidly reversed. A decade later, the Obama administration decided to adopt an engagement policy with Central Asia through the C5+1 format, which dovetailed with the EU’s approach to Central Asia and its high-level dialogue with the region. This period of increased trust between Central Asian states and the West coincided with a move toward political and economic reform in Kazakhstan and from 2017 also in Uzbekistan.

While these episodes are too few to constitute incontrovertible evidence, they clearly suggest that antagonistic Western approaches to democracy promotion have had a counter-productive effect, while a policy of engagement has been associated with modest progress.

More broadly, there is growing agreement in the development literature that democratic development does not happen in the absence of improvement in governance and the commitment of local elites. Stephen Krasner, for example, has argued that “the support or endorsement of local political elites is a necessary condition for success [in democratization].

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<sup>53</sup> Freedom House, “Uzbekistan”, *Nations in Transit*, 2005.

(<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2005/uzbekistan>)

Without such support, external actors will fail in their efforts to improve local governance ...They must therefore focus on modest objectives that include the preferences of the national elites."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Harvard Latin America specialist Merilee Grindle has concluded that democratic reform requires a solid base of "good enough governance," which she defines as including three key elements: basic security, better provision of services, and economic growth.<sup>55</sup>

As a result, the EU should be lauded for having adopted, in the face of strong criticism, an approach to the support of democratic development in Central Asia that focuses exactly on good governance and economic development, criteria that are necessary for long-term democratic development, and which require cooperation with governments rather than efforts to circumvent or undermine them.

### **Can the EU Avoid Geopolitics?**

Central Asia is a region dominated by hard security actors, and where states face hard security questions that touch directly on their sovereignty. The EU, however, is an entity that has only reluctantly been forced to accept the continued primacy of geopolitics. In fact, the EU was designed as the antithesis of traditional geopolitics: a union based on common norms and values, seeking to spread these in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. But over the past decade, it has become clear that to maintain its relevance in the world, the EU would have to adjust to the reality that the rest of the world, and particularly Eurasia, is moving in the opposite direction. The rise of a more assertive China is taking place in parallel with the challenge of

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, "Autocracies Failed And Unfailed: Limited Strategies For State Building," Atlantic Council Strategy Paper, no. 3, 2016.

([http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Failed\\_States\\_SP\\_0315\\_web.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Failed_States_SP_0315_web.pdf))

<sup>55</sup> Merilee S. Grindle, *Audacious Reforms: Institutional Invention and Democracy in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

managing a more aggressive Russia, an increasingly chaotic neighborhood east and south of the Mediterranean, and a Transatlantic link that is increasingly in doubt.

These developments all point to a world governed not primarily by international norms and rules of conduct but by raw power. As Robert D. Kaplan has observed in *The Return of Marco Polo's World*, Eurasia is increasingly characterized by a "tightly wound interconnectedness of weakening states and faded empires." Kaplan's insight is that anarchy and greater connectivity will happen simultaneously, not one at the expense of the other, and may in fact reinforce each other.<sup>56</sup> In this emerging Eurasia, large powers such as Russia, China, Iran and Turkey seem once again to increasingly behave as empires, rather than as nation-states bound by the rules of the international system. They increasingly engage in brinkmanship, assertively seek influence on the territory of neighboring states whose sovereignty they circumvent or ignore, and simultaneously engage in rivalry and cooperation with one another.

This means that in Central Asia, the EU must simultaneously adapt to this hard power reality, but carve out a niche on the basis of how it differs from hard power actors. It will never be able to compete with Russia, China or the United States in terms of hard power; but it cannot carve out its niche unless it is prepared to adjust its policies to take into consideration a reality where concerns of sovereignty, statehood and security are at the center of its Central Asian counterparts' mind. The launch of the EU's Global Strategy and the Connectivity Strategy suggest that conceptually, the EU is adapting to this reality; and Central Asia will be an important test case. In the past, the EU has not sufficiently articulated geopolitical interests in developing its relations with Central Asian states. Given the changing nature of world

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<sup>56</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Random House, 2018, p. 28.

politics *away* from the rules-based international order that the EU was designed to promote, the EU can no longer rely solely on the power of its normative values. It must act more as a power, not an integration project. This applies very directly to the EU's approach to the Central Asian states' efforts to balance China and Russia. Thus, for example, China's BRI supports the EU's interest in weakening Russia's dominance over the Eurasian continent and makes available resources that the EU itself cannot muster. Meanwhile, its implications for certain countries' debt burden, and its lack of transparency and implications for rule of law go against EU interests in the stability and political development of these countries. Weighing these positive and negative implications against each other must be the guiding light for EU approaches to China's rise in Central Asia.

More broadly, the EU finds itself in a new position: it is now the Western power most directly engaged in Central Asia, a role that the United States laid claim to a decade ago. But the Obama administration's disengagement from the region took place just as the EU was ramping up its presence. The U.S. essentially took a page from the EU's playbook in launching the C5+1 process, and the Trump administration showed initiative by inviting both Presidents Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev to Washington. The current administration is also in the midst of preparing a Central Asia strategy of its own, but the fact is that the EU has shown considerably more consistency in its approach to the region in recent years. This means that the EU has a heightened role to play from the perspective of Central Asian states, whose key interest is to maximize the presence of friendly foreign partners in order to be able to balance the dominant roles of Russia and China. In other words, in the multi-vector foreign policy of Central Asian states, there is an assigned role for the EU, as there is for the U.S., Japan, Turkey, Korea, and other powers. While none of these can balance Russia and China on their own, collectively their interaction with Central Asia can be sufficiently significant to provide breathing room for Central Asian states to pursue

their own priorities instead of following the lead of Moscow or Beijing. Key in this regard is the facilitation of Central Asian regional cooperation, a matter raised as a cross-cutting priority by the EU.

### **Education: Not Only Higher**

The 2019 Strategy highlights the importance of education for Central Asian states to develop their economies as well as their political systems. However, the EU – and Central Asian governments – often focus too strongly on cooperation in higher education when discussing education. While much remains to be done in higher education in Central Asia, the fact of the matter is that these issues cannot be resolved without tackling the deep problems of K-12 education across the region, which have received comparatively less attention from national governments. Furthermore, while the integration of Central Asian states in the Bologna process is laudable, the development of Central Asian economies is dependent less on the strengthening of academic excellence than on the development of practical skills in the Central Asian labor force. As such, the EU may be well served by focusing its attention on vocational training in areas, such as agriculture, where the Central Asian states can see further economic development, and succeed in creating jobs for the great numbers of their populations that otherwise are forced to move abroad as labor migrants.

### **Preventing Violent Extremism: The Role of Secular Governance**

The 2019 Strategy wisely focuses attention on the continued challenge of violent extremism in Central Asia, not least given the continued presence of VE groups in northern Afghanistan. But the struggle against violent extremism should not be limited to a struggle against armed groups; it is also a struggle against the ideologies underpinning violent acts. In this regard, it is unfortunate that the emphasis put in the 2007 strategy on the

domestic religious traditions of Central Asia, and their acceptance of secular governance, has fallen by the wayside. As described above, this formed part of the seventh priority area of the 2007 strategy, which was not picked up by subsequent reviews, nor carried into the 2019 strategy.

However, it has importance both for Central Asia and for a much wider audience. In fact, the commitment to secular governance makes Central Asian states stand out in the Muslim world, providing a point of commonality with Europe that is, with some exceptions, largely absent in the rest of the world of Islam. It is true that the forms through which secularism has been implemented in Central Asia has often included strongly restrictive measures that have generated Western criticism of limiting religious freedom. That being the case, however, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: in focusing efforts on cooperating with Central Asian states on countering and preventing violent extremism, the EU should support the further development of secular governance, seeking to work with Central Asian states to reform and improve their implementation of secularism in a more positive and constructive direction.

### **The Centrality of High-Level Attention**

The launch of a new EU strategy comes, timewise, at the end of an EU bureaucratic cycle. This creates a certain level of vulnerability: it is the outgoing leadership of the union, represented by Donald Tusk and Federica Mogherini, that are invested in the strategy document, and more importantly, in relations with Central Asia itself. Meanwhile, the importance of this high-level attention to the region cannot be overstated: the EU's success in developing relations with Central Asia is to a considerable degree a function of the fact that the most senior EU officials – unlike their predecessors – have taken Central Asia seriously, and have devoted time and energy to meeting their Central Asian colleagues and not

least, to listen to their concerns. By contrast, Mogherini's predecessor – Catherin Ashton – at more than one occasion let subordinates handle meetings with Central Asian dignitaries. Not stopping at that, Ashton abolished the position of EUSR to Central Asia in 2014, leaving it vacant for close to a year before downgrading the position to that of a Special Envoy. That decision was nevertheless reversed with the appointment of Peter Burian as EUSR in 2015.

Central Asia is no longer a geopolitical backwater: regional states are frequently visited by leaders of China and Russia, as well as Turkey and Iran. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe toured the region in 2015. In July 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all five Central Asian states. In April 2019, South Korean President Moon Jae-in spent a week in the region, visiting Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Against this background, only the U.S. stands out. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has met repeatedly in Washington and New York with Central Asian foreign ministers and continued the C5+1 mechanism, and lower-ranking officials have led C5+1 working group meetings in Central Asian capitals. Still, no U.S. president has ever visited Central Asia, and it will soon be five years since a U.S. Secretary of State visited the region.

Against this background, the task of keeping EU-Central Asia relations at the current level, and ideally to intensify them further, requires the incoming leadership of the EU – particularly incoming VP Josep Borrell – to take a similar level of interest in Central Asia and visit the region as soon as possible. It is also a positive sign that EUSR Burian's mandate has been extended, as he has developed deep and close links with the leadership of Central Asian states, and can, in conjunction with the Central Asia desk at the EEAS, continue to advocate for closer attention to the region as the new EU leadership team takes office and by necessity focuses most of its efforts on more acute matters.

## Conclusions

The 2019 Strategy is a solid next step in the EU's engagement with Central Asia. It has strong elements of continuity with the previous EU documents, while also showing the ability of adaptation to new developments, as seen most directly in the EU's stronger endorsement of regional cooperation in the region. The 2019 document also fulfilled an important and difficult task through the very process through which it was developed, succeeding in ensuring that important constituencies in both Central Asia and the EU were consulted, without losing control of the scope and breadth of the document's priorities.

As the EU turns toward implementing the priorities set out in its new Central Asia strategy, this study proposes several concrete recommendations for policy. It welcomes the EU's steadfast approach to focus on cooperation *with* governments rather than working *on* or *against* them and endorses its focus on assisting the improvement of the quality of governance across the region. It welcomes the EU's focus on education, but proposes that Brussels put greater emphasis on primary and secondary education rather than tertiary. It sees a special role for the EU in promoting not only regionalism within Central Asia, but connections between the region and its southern and western neighbors, specifically Afghanistan and the South Caucasus. It urges the EU to restore, particularly in its work to counter violent extremism but also in its broader interaction with Central Asia, the emphasis on supporting secular government and moderate religious traditions that was identified in the 2007 strategy but is left out of the 2019 document. And finally, it argues that maintaining high level attention to Central Asia is crucial for the EU's continued success.



This overview of EU strategy toward Central Asia suggests that over time, the EU has paid an increasing amount of attention to Central Asia and is in many ways the primary force representing the West in the region. Not only has the EU's attention to the region been on the ascendant, its constantly evolving approach to the region has exhibited consistency and predictability, while succeeding in conducting a realistic assessment of the most fruitful way to advance both European norms and European interests in Central Asia. Most important, the EU has continued to maintain a regional approach to Central Asia. For this, the EU is to be lauded, and its approach to Central Asia is one that like-minded states like the U.S. and Japan can, and have, learned from.

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