

The EU's Central Asia Policy in a Shifting Regional Geopolitical Landscape¹⁶

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Abstract: Historically situated as a crossroads of great powers, Central Asia has regained prominence in the contemporary global arena. For decades, the European Union (EU) has been a significant player whose normative power, geopolitical interests and geoeconomic needs influence (Central)Asian (inter)regional dynamics. This paper examines the EU's evolving policy towards the region, assessing its responsiveness to shifting (geo)political and security realities, currently and notably shaped by China's rise and constant search for stability. Moving beyond a primarily aid-centric approach, the EU is strategically prioritizing facets such as energy security, connectivity, human rights, and the promotion of regional cooperation. This article examines the transformation and ramifications of the EU's policy trajectory concerning Central Asia amid the rapidly changing regional landscape. The effectiveness of the EU's existing strategies and initiatives in the region is examined, alongside an analysis of the challenges posed by the increasing influence of other powers, which has triggered a New Great Game. Through a study of key policy dimensions, diplomatic undertakings, and collaborative endeavors within the region, the paper aims to illuminate how the EU navigates the complex dynamic of a regional environment, seeking to support cooperation, address shared challenges, and foster stability in its engagements with Central Asia. In doing so, this paper provides insights into the EU's role in shaping and recalibrating its policy framework in response to the evolving geopolitical and economic dynamics characterizing Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, European Union (EU), EU's Central Asia Strategy, Geopolitical dynamics

JEL: F50, F53, F55, O10, Q40

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1. Introduction

1.1 Different Readings and Understandings of the Map of Central Asia

In the (academic) literature of history, diplomacy, international relations, studies of security, geography and brochures released by international institutions and governments, we can find different spatializations of the meanings or “covered” space in the two words “Central Asia”. The widest determination of the space of the Central Asia is given by the UNESCO. Namely in 1978, UNESCO in the region of Central Asia included Afghanistan, north-eastern Iran, Pakistan, northern India, western China, Mongolia and the five former Soviet Central Asian Republics, [...] “which corresponds to a clearly discernible cultural and historical reality” (Mayor, 1992, p. 8). This is one of the many different definitions and understandings about the Central Asian region. Different understandings and readings of Central Asia followed its dynamic historical, political, strategic and wider social changes, issues and new trends. Having this (un)predictable dynamism of Central Asia in mind, it becomes obvious that there is no one commonly accepted definition of the Central Asian region. On the contrary, given definitions depend on which features (solely geographical or with a wider perception including political, cultural and other elements) we take for their basis (Trailović, 2022, pp. 80–81). Different understandings provided by different countries or international institutions mean different strategies and ways of behaviour towards the region of Central Asia.

Different understanding and readings of the region of Central Asia corroborate the fact that geopolitics should be critically re-conceptualized as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft “spatialize” international politics in such a way as to represent it as a “world” characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas. In our understanding, the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of the international politics by core powers and hegemonic states (Dalby, Routledge, and Tuathail, 2003). Thus, (critical) geopolitics does not assume that “geopolitical discourse” is the language of truth; rather, it understands it as a discourse seeking to establish and assert its own truths (Dalby et al., 2003).

For the purpose of this paper, we will rely on a political concept that implies a narrower spatial-geographic scope of—the Central Asian region including five former Soviet Republics—Kazakhstan (capital Astana), Tajikistan (capital Dushanbe), Turkmenistan (capital Ashgabat), Uzbekistan (capital Tashkent) and Kyrgyzstan (capital Bishkek) —which for the very first time became independent states in the last decade of the 20th century.¹⁷

Although, this is a landlocked region, due to its energy resource abundance, religious particularism, porous institutionalism, weak borders, central geographic position, vicinity of Russia, China, Afghanistan, India, and the Golden Crescent, it attracted the attention of both geographically close and states located a long distance from this region. Drawing attention of powerful states is a tradition of the Central Asian states. For example, during the 19th century, it was a playground of the British Crown and Imperial Russia. Russia wanted to reach, that is, to be positioned in warm waters making an undisrupted channel for spreading its influence, whilst the British side prevented this from becoming a reality. Their skirmishes and confrontations in this particular part of the globe, in the literature, are defined as a *Great Game* and/or *Tournament of Shadows*.

Since that period of time, many states expressed the ambition to spatialize that space and make the geopolitical order¹⁸ in accordance with their needs and interests. With a population of over 70 million, the Central Asian region spans around four million square kilometres. Rich in natural resources such as uranium, oil, natural gas, and gold, Central Asia is strategically important and attractive from a geopolitical standpoint, drawing significant political and economic engagement from major global powers as well as regional players.

17 In the current form/boundaries, but before getting independence after dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states were created under direct Stalin's directives. Firstly, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan were recognized in 1924, and after that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1929 and 1935, respectively. The creation of the Central Asian SSRs was primarily driven by Stalin's desire for a pyramidal political structure and integration into the Soviet economic plans. While ethnicity played a role, historical and religious factors were less emphasized. This approach led to the creation of republics with sometimes arbitrary borders, which continues to have consequences in the region today (Trailović, 2016).

18 For the definition of the geopolitical order look in (Agnew and Crobridge, 2002).

1.2 Shifting Regional Geopolitical Landscape

In contemporary history, besides voluntary foreign involvement in the region of Central Asia, there is an impression that Central Asian sovereign republics are pursuing multi-vector foreign policy for attracting capital and political presence of powerful states with simultaneous reinforcing of the independent intraregional interconnectivity. This kind of perplexed situation opened the question of the type and form of the *New Great Game*. As noted by Qamar and Zafar (2014), compared to the 19th century Great Game, the new one is based on diversified objectives, strategies, players, and interest. As it was noted, players in the *New Great Game* are diversified and more numerous. First of all, all five republics included in this research were a part of the Soviet Union with Russia for their leader. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the world entered an era of unprecedented changes, Russia continued to perceive the five Central Asian states as its backyard, i.e., the space for exerting its further and unquestionable geopolitical and geoeconomic influence. Expectedly, Russia was the first state to start diverse both economic and security processes of integration in this specific part of the globe. That resulted in creating the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Russia became/sustained the position as the most important influence in every aspect of the Central Asian society, politics, economy and security.

When the Soviet Union was dismantled, instead of one neighbor, China obtained three new neighbors—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with unresolved and non-defined borders as a heritage of history. Non-defined borders could be used by some Turkophone groups located in Central Asia to give support to separatist movements which are trying to transform the Chinese Uyghur Autonomous Region into an independent, so-called state of “East Turkestan”. In the moment when the five Central Asian republics became independent for the very first time in Central Asia, China was a much powerful partner and neighbor, but instead of pursuing the course of securitization (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998) of mutual relations followed by potential conflicts, China selected diplomacy, diplomatization of relations (Štambuk and Popović, 2022) and mutual economic development. By doing so, China achieved two instrumental and strategic goals—firstly, it created a space for investing money in

economic development instead in weaponry race, and secondly it made the space for a third party, as a broker, in developing cooperation unnecessary (Popović, 2018a; Popović and Stevic, 2023). This kind of behaviour resulted in the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization whose current member states are Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. The nurturing of sincere and strategic good neighborhood diplomacy resulted in China's announcement of the continental part—Silk Road Economic Belt—of the One Belt One Road Initiative/Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan in 2013. Through its initiatives and ambitious plans, China became one of the most powerful economic actors in this region.

Since Central Asian states obtained independence, the United States recognized their importance for American geopolitical interests. The then leaders of the USA understood that possible stronger presence of their country in Central Asia, besides their stronghold in the Pacific region, could be crucial in pursuing the strategies for the containment of Russia and planned growth of China. Thus, in 1992, the USA released the following document *Freedom Support Act/Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act*. According to this Act, one of the main goals that new Central Asian republics should achieve was to become part of the democratic world defined by the West (Congress, Public Law 102-511, 1992).

After that, the USA published the *Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999*. Through this strategy from 1999, the USA defined goals that should be achieved in the region of Central Asia. Those goals were reinvigorating cross border trade, protecting sovereignty, modernization of energy, transportation and telecommunication infrastructure, and investing in education and business development (Congress, H.R. 1152, 1999). The new *Silk Road Strategy Act* was adopted in 2005, in which was accentuated the importance of dissemination of the American ideological interests through fighting terrorism, religious extremism and securing energy security (Congress, S. 2749, 2006). In 2015, Anthony Blinken (2015) gave a speech entitled *An Enduring Vision for Central Asia*, in which he accentuated that the USA with each of the Central Asian states is striving to achieve the following goals: strengthening partnerships to advance mutual security; forging closer economic ties; and advancing and advocating for improved governance

and human rights.¹⁹ Some of the USA interests in Central Asia were realized in 2017 by signing the agreement about the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in Ashgabat (Rahim, 2017). The mentioned activities gave great impetus in defining *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*. In this strategy, the Central Asian region is understood through Central Asian relations with other regions and USA relations with Central Asian neighbors (US State Department, 2019).

With its aim of securing a better position for achieving some of its goals through cooperation with Central Asia, the USA, that is the then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry paid a visit to the Central Asian states and launched the C5+1 mechanism of cooperation. The very first meeting was held on November 1, 2015 in Samarkand with a series of bilateral consultations with governments of each of Central Asian republics that allowed the Washington U.S. to deliver the specific political messages to each country in the region. In fact, John Kerry's visit to the region was the most extensive by the U.S. Secretary of State since James Baker's post-Soviet diplomatic tour to Central Asia in January 1992 (Parkhomchik, 2016). The C5+A dialogue platform was additionally reinforced by starting the B5+1 (Business 5 + 1) mechanism of cooperation on the level of private entrepreneurship (US Embassy in Tajikistan, 2023).

US President Joe Biden met with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan for the inaugural C5+1 presidential summit at the United Nations in 2023. The summit marked a significant milestone in Central Asian-United States relations, as it was the first time a US president had convened with these leaders in this format (The White House, 2023). Although one of America's main focuses after withdrawing from Afghanistan was to pacify it by including Afghanistan in the wider region, now it is certainly focused on deepening political and military, but above all economic engagement through the "C5+1" format of cooperation with Central Asia, providing the republics with a counterbalance to Russian and Chinese influence.

¹⁹ For example, the US invested about one hundred million US dollars in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in order to implement the Caspian Basin Protection Operation. The goal of this operation was to protect oil facilities from terrorist or other types of attacks (European Commission, 2007, p. 10).

On the other hand, alongside the United States of America's intention to increase engagement within its "C5+1" format, China has also initiated a new "China+5" cooperation format launched in 2020. This move represents the expansion of China's role in the region and marks a gradual transition from mainly economic cooperation with the region to the realm of political relations. It is the first multilateral forum where only China and the Central Asian republics are present, without the involvement of other actors. In addition to its previous focus on bilateral relations with these republics individually, China has now decided to treat them as an integral region. It has been observed that in recent years, intra-regional transitions of power have been occurring within the Central Asian republics, leading to an internally driven process of strengthening regional connections and integration through consultative meetings among the heads of state of Central Asia (Helf, 2023). Simultaneously, there have been shifts in the geopolitical dynamics of the region, evidenced by a more assertive approach from major powers, primarily China and the USA. Their engagement with the region through diplomatic platforms such as "5+1" cooperation signals the onset of a new phase in geopolitical relations and indicates that both countries remain prepared to vie for influence in Central Asia. This competition aims ultimately to diminish the excessive or dominant dependence of Central Asian republics on other major powers.

In analyzing the *New Great Game* and balance of interconnectedness in that particular part of the globe, we should not exclude the strategies of Japan (Popović, 2018b), South Korea (Hwang, 2012), and Turkey (Sasley, 2010)—who is insisting on the Turkophone identity of the region—India (Gupta, 2013) and Pakistan (Javid and Naseem, 2014). However, for the purpose and the length of this article we are not able to analyze the strategies of the mentioned states.

Aware of Central Asia's strategic significance and opportunities for collaboration, the European Union has also demonstrated an interest in interacting with the region. The European Union seeks to foster stability, economic growth, and connectivity in Central Asia by means of many programs and collaborations. In the following part of the paper, the focus will be on European Union strategies towards this region. We will follow changes that occurred within the behaviour and goals that the EU set to achieve through cooperation with these five sovereign republics.

2. The Evolution of the EU's Central Asia Policy: Overview of the EU Strategy on Central Asia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the republics of Central Asia became independent states that gradually began to open up to the outside world. The European Community acknowledged the independence of Central Asian republics with the “Joint Declaration of Twelve” issued in December 1991. Following this, “Memorandums of Understanding (MoU)” between the republics of Central Asia and the European Commission were signed in 1992. European countries subsequently developed their approach to Central Asia, with Germany being the sole country to maintain diplomatic representation in all five Central Asian nations, while others primarily managed diplomatic affairs in the region from Moscow. Initially, progress in relations was slow, with the EU concentrating on providing humanitarian aid and supporting the transition to democracy and a market economy. The EU established a delegation in Kazakhstan in 1994, later expanding it to include Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Melvin, 2008, p. 2). The European Union Commission specifically highlighted the EU's strategic interests in Central Asia in its 1995 “Communication on Relations with Newly Independent States of Central Asia” (Yunusov, 2018, p. 105).

Recognizing the strategic importance of Central Asia, the EU began to engage more actively in the region. In 1996, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) were signed between the EU and the republics in Central Asia. Specifically, PCAs were signed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (although the latter was not ratified) in 1996, while Tajikistan did not sign until 2004 (Melvin, 2008, p. 2). These agreements aimed to foster political dialogue, economic cooperation, and development assistance, providing a framework for collaboration in various areas such as trade, investment, human rights, rule of law, and security.

According to data presented in the document *Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Program 2002-2004 for Central Asia*, from 1991 to 2002, the European Union provided Central Asia with aid totaling more than €944.4 million. This aid included €366.3 million in bilateral technical assistance through the TACIS Programme, €153.5 million in humanitarian assistance via ECHO, €137.4 million from the Food Security Programme,

and €265.7 million in macro-financial assistance (European Commission: DG External Relations, 2002, p. 38).

The European Union's approach and strategies for Central Asia have evolved through three distinct periods: 2002–2006, 2007–2015, and from 2019 until the present day.

In 2002, the EU issued a *Strategy Paper 2002–2006 & Indicative Programme 2002–2004* for Central Asia. It was essentially a basic strategic approach that clearly defined the means of delivering technical assistance to Central Asia, relying primarily on the TACIS program. TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), established in 1990, was a special program of the European Community aimed at supporting the ongoing process of economic reforms and development in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, including the five Central Asian republics (European Commission, 1992). The Program in the region was activated in 1991 and it was in operation until 2006. During this period, the European Union's approach to Central Asia focused on poverty reduction, stability and economic development, with an implicit consideration of democratization. The strategy for Central Asia in the period of 2002–2006 prioritized three main areas: “support for institutional, legal, and administrative reform”; “natural resources/networks”; and “support in addressing the social consequences of transition” (European Community, 2007, p. 16). In this period of time, resource allocation reflected a balanced approach, with 26 percent directed towards regional cooperation initiatives, 54 percent allocated to bilateral programs, and 25 percent designated for targeted poverty reduction schemes (European Community, 2016, p. 16). The international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 marked a significant shift in EU-Central Asian relations. The EU became increasingly interested in the region due to its strategic location and the potential for instability to spill over from Afghanistan, prompting security issues to come into focus. Following the attacks of September 11 and the onset of the “war on terror,” Central Asia gained greater global importance, prompting the EU to pay more attention, particularly in the security sector, with an emphasis on border issues. The EU launched aid programs such as the Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) to address security concerns (Melvin, 2008, pp. 3–4). Recognizing the strategic importance of the region and the escalating competition for energy resources, the EU

decided to strengthen its involvement in Central Asia by establishing the role of the European Union Special Representative for Central Asia in 2005 (Melvin, 2008, pp. 4–5). Since the 1990s, EU engagement in Central Asia has evolved from focusing on internal economic reforms to recognizing the region’s significance for energy security.

In 2007, the EU reached a significant milestone when the Strategy for Central Asia it adopted was endorsed by the European Council. This marked a departure from a Commission-centric focus on EU assistance programs to a comprehensive EU-wide document encompassing relations with Central Asia across various levels (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 30). Although the policy establishes broad guidelines and concepts, the funding commitments are outlined in detail in the EU’s Regional policy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia in 2007–2013 (Voloshin, 2014, pp. 45–46). The “Strategy for a New Partnership” (2007) acknowledges that developments in Central Asia have a direct impact on EU interests. It emphasizes the shared interest in diversifying energy exports, aligning with Central Asia’s aspiration to diversify its energy exports and the EU’s necessity to diversify its energy imports (Juraev, 2017, p. 82). Moreover, the Strategy explicitly prioritizes good governance and democratization, gradually transitioning from a cautious focus on state-building to a stronger emphasis on democratization, often embedded within broader efforts to promote stability, security, and poverty reduction. Key approaches include promoting civil society, strengthening the rule of law, and supporting independent media (Winn and Gänzle, 2023, pp. 1348–1350). These strategies underscore the EU’s acknowledgment of the critical role of democracy and governance in achieving long-term stability and development in Central Asia. During this period, the European Union paid increased attention to state-building initiatives such as border management, social and economic development, and water management (Norling and Cornell, 2016, pp. 10–11).

However, the adoption of the document occurred during Germany’s tenure as the EU presidency and predominantly mirrored Germany’s interests in Central Asia. This clarifies why the Strategy sought to harmonize democracy and security, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Germany’s significant involvement in neighboring Afghanistan, where it ranked as the second-largest contributor of troops after the United States, likely

shaped this perspective (Fawn, Kluczevska and Korneev, 2022, p. 624). The EU also developed human rights dialogues as part of its democratization policy toward Central Asian republics after the 2007 Strategy was adopted. The goal of these bilateral discussions with each of the five Central Asian republics was to address shared concerns about human rights and to strengthen collaboration, particularly in multilateral fora such as the UN. The Dialogs are formal gatherings involving human rights representatives from the European Commission, Council Secretariat, EU Presidency and representatives of relevant departments of the Central Asian republics (Axyonova, 2011).

According to Cornell and Starr (2019, pp. 22–23), starting from 2010, the European Union began to pay additional attention to the Central Asian region for several reasons. Firstly, this was due to the deterioration of relations with Russia in 2014, followed by the announcement of the planned withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan. Additionally, there was a completely new reason: the EU no longer viewed Central Asia solely through the prism of relations with Russia and the situation in Afghanistan, but also in relation to the increasing presence of China.

In that sense, the Strategy adopted in 2007 underwent two revisions in the following period, namely in 2012 and 2015. The revision from 2012, among other areas, significantly related to matters of regional security, as well as economic development, human rights, good governance, corruption and energy issues with a focus on the lack of concrete initiatives that would strengthen the connection of Europe and Central Asia (Winn and Gänzle, 2023, p. 1350; Cornell and Starr, 2019, pp. 33–35). As Cornell and Starr (2019, pp. 35–36) have noted, the 2015 revisions filled a vacuum in earlier papers by providing a practical evaluation of the geopolitical conditions surrounding Central Asia. It draws attention to issues raised by China's "economic expansion," Russia's "integrationist" program, and the waning influence of the United States. Furthermore, it emphasizes how the Ukraine situation has made these challenges even more complex.

2.1 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia – “New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”

In recent years, Central Asia has gained growing significance for influential international actors, including those in close geographic proximity to the region like Russia and China, as well as those farther away but with their own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, such as the USA and the European Union. As stated in almost all previous EU strategic documents on Central Asia, this region is crucial for the Union for at least three reasons. One is its strategic geographical position at the heart of Eurasia, serving as the land link between Asia and Europe. Additionally, the area is rich in energy resources, which are vital to the European Union’s economies. Furthermore, regional and broader security issues in Eurasia are significant factors, particularly in relation to the situation in Afghanistan and the new conflict in Ukraine.

For the European Union and its further and more comprehensive engagement in Central Asia, the newly self-initiated process of intraregional cooperation between the republics of the region is particularly important. The Central Asian region has long been viewed as a region that is not characterized by comprehensive cooperation between the Central Asian republics, but rather as a fragmented region that is mainly characterized by conflicts and rivalry. Now that the Central Asian states have initiated the process of political intraregional cooperation embodied in the summits of the heads of the Central Asian states, other actors, including the EU, look at the region as a single economic and political space (Fawn, 2022, pp. 678–681). Accordingly, the relationship towards Central Asia is such that, in addition to bilateral cooperation, attention is also paid to regional cooperation and assistance, looking at the region as a whole. Some scholars claim that rather than promoting norms and values, the European Union’s new approach to Central Asia is now more driven by political and economic concerns (Khitakhunov, 2023, p. 27).

As Winn and Gänzle (2023, p. 1343) observed, the EU’s foreign policy in Central Asia has evolved from a primary focus on normative power and democracy promotion to embracing a stance characterized by principled pragmatism and resilience. Although democracy promotion continues to be important within this framework, there is a realization

that the EU occupies a secondary position in the region when compared to other influential powers like Russia, China, and the United States. For these reasons, in 2019, the EU adopted a new strategy for Central Asia called “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”. This strategy reflects the EU’s new approach to the region, with greater emphasis on resilience, prosperity and regional cooperation. The EU aims to cooperate with Central Asian republics to address socio-economic challenges, promote democracy, and climate issues. Additionally, the strategy aims to unlock growth potential by fostering a competitive private sector and improving investment environment. It also emphasizes strengthening partnerships through political dialogue, civil society involvement, and public diplomacy to underscore the benefits of cooperation for the region (European Commission, 2019).

The goal of the EU’s “Partnering for Resilience” effort is to make Central Asia more resilient to challenges resulting from globalization, new security risks, climate change, fast population expansion, strain on water and energy resources, and environmental degradation. It places a high priority on human rights, democracy, inclusive economic and political government structures, and the empowerment of civil society. The EU also prioritizes gender equality, fair work standards, and sustainable growth. According to the strategy, security, migration, and border management are also identified as significant areas for cooperation. Through the Paris Agreement, the circular economy, and sustainable resource management, the EU also promotes environmental resilience. Initiatives also include scientific research on water management, climate change and renewable energy (European Commission, 2019, pp. 3–8).

Within a second strategy priority “Partnering for Prosperity” the EU hopes to support Central Asia’s sustainable economic growth by expanding the private sector, fostering a more favorable investment environment, embracing a green economy, lowering socioeconomic disparities, investing in human capital, advancing decent work, and boosting regional trade and connectivity. The European Union prioritizes economic modernization and reform, promoting capital markets, a competitive private sector, and business-to-business communication. It is in favor of encouraging regulatory convergence, removing non-tariff obstacles, and pursuing conformance with WTO, EU, and World Customs Organization international customs

standards. In order to promote exports and economic diversification, the EU will increase its efforts to assist Central Asian recipient nations in better utilizing the unilateral preferential access to the EU market granted by the GSP and GSP+. The emphasis is on sustainable connectedness, with particular attention to energy, transportation, and digital links. The European Union will persist in emphasizing the increased contribution of Central Asia to the energy supply security and diversity of the EU's suppliers, sources, and routes. This will involve evaluating the feasibility of constructing the Trans-Caspian Pipeline. Additionally prioritized are investments in youth, education, innovation, and culture (European Commission, 2019, pp. 8–14).

According to the third strategy priority “Working Better Together” the EU plans to implement a new strategy in Central Asia, focusing on fostering synergies between its institutions and Member States. In addition to regular and formally established cooperation mechanisms, the EU plans to enhance institutional frameworks for dialogue, including *ad hoc* senior officials’ meetings and informal ministerial consultations on the sidelines of international gatherings in order to strengthen the architecture of the partnership. The EU will enhance dialogue frameworks, encourage inter-parliamentary dialogue, and engage with civil society. The partnership will continue to focus on development assistance, promoting policy dialogue, and cooperating with international financial institutions. A dynamic communication strategy will be developed to highlight the benefits of EU engagement in Central Asia (European Commission, 2019, pp. 14–16).

3. Key Elements and Objectives of the EU’s Central Asia Policy

3.1 Political Cooperation

In order to address a variety of issues including trade and investment, democracy and human rights, justice, energy and transport, environmental issues, regular meetings and annual cooperation councils have been established. Three main mechanisms that facilitate political cooperation and dialogue between the European Union and Central Asian republics are: Ministerial meetings, Regional High-level Meetings between the President of the European Council and the Heads of State of Central

Asia, and High-level Political and Security Dialogue. These structures function as crucial official forums that facilitate comprehensive dialogues and promote cooperation between the European Union and the Central Asian republics on a plethora of political and security issues. The EU and all of the Central Asian republics now have more diplomatic exchanges as a result of these arrangements.

A regular platform for communication between the European Union and the five Central Asian nations is the EU Central Asia ministerial meetings. The first EU Strategy for Central Asia was adopted in 2007, which prompted the start of these ministerial sessions. Since then, the EU and a capital city in one of the five Central Asian nations have alternated hosting them every year. During these talks, Central Asian foreign ministers meet with counterparts from EU Member States, notably the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commissioner for International Partnerships. October 23, 2023, saw the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting take place in Luxembourg. Stressing the common interests and principles that have been shown in prior meetings, both parties reiterated their commitment to their strategic collaboration. The participants committed to respecting international law while cooperating for peace, security, and sustainable development (Council of the EU, 2023). All of them supported the Joint Roadmap for Strengthening Relations between the European Union and Central Asia. This plan presents a thorough framework with high goals to strengthen the cooperation with an emphasis on prosperity and sustainability. It addresses a number of important topics, such as improving people-to-people interactions and mobility, trade and economic ties, energy, the climate-neutral economy, connectivity, and interregional political discussion (Council of the EU, 2023; Xinhua, 2023).

The importance of Central Asia for the EU was also confirmed in 2022, when the first high-level meeting between the presidents of the CA states and the President of the European Council was held. The second meeting in a row was held in 2023, and it confirmed the commitment that such a high-level dialogue platform should continue to be held in order to address all those priority areas that both parties previously identified. This marked progress in the further institutionalization of political relations between the two partners. It was also decided that the meetings will continue to be

held regularly in the form of a summit starting in 2024 (European Council, 2023).

The establishment of this type of cooperation formats at the highest level should be seen in the light of the initiatives of other important international actors in the region, such as “China+5” and the American C5+1 diplomatic cooperation format, which marked their greater political engagement in Central Asia.

The High-level Political and Security Dialogue has been held regularly since its launch in 2013. Meetings are held at the level of Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian republics and Deputy General Secretary for Political Affairs of the European External Action Service. The tenth round of the annual Dialogue was held in Astana in 2023. On this occasion the EU reaffirmed its strong commitment to the region and expressed its readiness to support all efforts aimed at intensifying cooperation with Central Asia (European External Action Service, 2023).

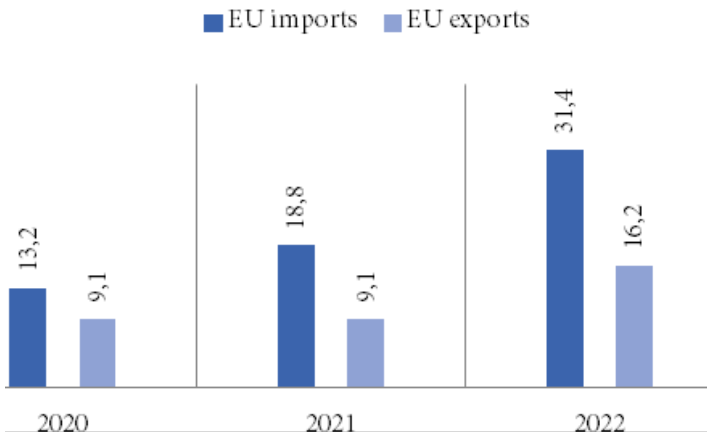
The European Union also dedicates significant attention to bilateral cooperation with the republics of Central Asia. Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) serve as vital instruments in strengthening bilateral relations between the European Union (EU) and the republics of Central Asia. These agreements encompass a broad spectrum of areas, including promotion of human rights and democracy, facilitation of trade and investment, promotion of sustainable development, protection of intellectual property rights, enhancement of security cooperation, management of energy resources, protection of the environment, and more (Yunusov, 2018, p. 112). The core element of EU engagement in the region will be the new generation of bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), which the European Union (EU) could enter into with specific Central Asian republics (European Parliament P9_TA(2024)0027, 2024). Kazakhstan was the first state in Central Asia to sign an EPCA in 2015, and it went into effect on March 1, 2020. The EU concluded negotiations on an EPCA with Kyrgyzstan on July 6, 2019, but the agreement has not yet been signed. The EU concluded negotiations on an EPCA with Uzbekistan on July 6, 2022, and the EU began negotiations on an EPCA with Tajikistan in early 2023 (European Parliament P9_TA(2024)0027, 2024; European Commission, 2019, p. 2)

3.2 Mechanisms for Economic Cooperation and Connectivity

The expansion and strengthening of economic cooperation stand as primary objectives of the European Union, as outlined in its strategy for Central Asia. The EU aims to enhance regional economic growth, foster collaboration across various economic domains, and strengthen its economic relations with the nations of Central Asia.

Since the EU adopted its new strategy for Central Asia in 2019, political and economic cooperation between the European Union and the republics of Central Asia is becoming more and more developed. With its commitment to the operationalization and implementation of the goals defined in the EU Strategy, it has established itself as a key economic and trade partner in the region (Figure 1.; Figure 2.), as well as a significant investor. According to preliminary data from the EU Commission, EU goods imports from Central Asia rose by 67 percent in 2022, while EU exports to Central Asia increased by 77 percent (European Commission, 2024a). The annual average growth rate for imports was 14.2 percent and for exports was 20.9 percent between 2019 and 2023 (European Commission, 2024b).

Figure 1. Trade in goods, € billions (2020–2022).



Source: European Commission, 2024a.

Figure 2. Trade in goods, million € (2023).

Year	EU Imports	EU Exports	Balance
2023	32.562	20.198	-12.364

Source: European Commission, 2024b.

It is important to note that the European Union had a trade deficit with Central Asia amounting to €15.2 billion in 2022, and €12.364 billion in 2023 (European Commission, 2024a; 2024b). For instance, the EU's significant trade deficit with Kazakhstan is primarily due to Kazakhstan's exports of oil and gas (European Commission, 2024c). For the EU, the primary imports from the region include energy and raw materials, such as oil from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and gold from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Pomfret 2022, pp. 52–54). According to Pomfret (2022, p. 52) the general trend in EU-Central Asia merchandise trade involves exchanging primary products from Central Asia for European manufactured goods.

In the past decade, EU member states have invested more than €105 billion in the republics of Central Asia, which exceeds 40 percent of the total amount of direct foreign investment in the region. The EU accounts for more than a third of total foreign trade in Central Asia (European Commission, 2021). With aid totaling €1.1 billion between 2014 and 2020, the EU continues to be the leading donor in this region. Additionally, throughout the pandemic, the EU raised €123 million for Central Asia (Khitakhunov, 2023, p. 28).

The Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+) is a unique incentive program designed to encourage good governance, economic cooperation, business opportunities, and sustainable development. Under this program, the EU lowers most of its tariffs to zero percent for nations that agree to ratify 27 international agreements pertaining to good governance, environmental and climate protection, and labor and human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Specifically, these programs imply a reduction of tariffs for users by 66 percent of all EU tariff lines. The EU granted Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan GSP+ status, enabling these republics to export 6200 products to the EU without facing any tariffs (Khitakhunov, 2023, pp. 28–29; Herman,

2022). As a beneficiary of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) provided by the European Union, Tajikistan has recently demonstrated its dedication to become a member of the Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+). Preferential imports from Tajikistan are predominantly concentrated in two sectors: industrial products such as base metals, and textiles (Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan, 2021).

As one of the most important mechanisms of economic cooperation between the European Union and the republics of Central Asia, the Economic Forum European Union—Central Asia was created. Back in 2020, this new regional platform for economic dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Central Asian states was launched, with the aim of accelerating the diversification of Central Asian economies, improving trade relations, strengthening the rule of law and modernizing regulatory frameworks. In this sense, the first formal European Union-Central Asia Economic Forum was held in Kyrgyzstan in 2021. Strengthening economic ties between the EU and Central Asia was the primary focus of the forum, as well as green recovery, digitization, and the improvement of the business environment (European Commission, 2021). The second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum was held in Kazakhstan in 2023. Discussions within the Forum focused on improving the business environment, transitioning to a green and digital economy, and fostering trade relations. The forum emphasized the importance of respecting international law and principles, promoting inclusive and sustainable development, and facing the challenges of climate change. Key findings included plans for future prosperity programs, the possibility of cooperation on critical raw materials, and efforts to improve regional connectivity through sustainable transportation infrastructure (Khitakhunov, 2024; Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

One of the important aspects of cooperation between the European Union and Central Asia is the need for the EU to diversify land transport routes that connect Europe with Asia, in order to avoid possible problems that could arise on maritime transport routes, but also to bypass those land transport corridors that imply the transit of goods through Russia. Although most of the transport of goods from Asia to Europe and vice versa is carried out by sea routes, a significant part of the transport is also carried out via three land

routes, namely: Northern Corridor (China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland); Trans-Caspian International Transport Route—Middle Corridor (Kazakhstan, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bulgaria or Romania) and The Southern Corridor (Kyrgyz Republic or Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria or Greece and Afghanistan, Central Asia, Caucasus) (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2023, p. 11).

For the reasons mentioned above, the European Union conducted a special study on which transport route would be the most efficient, i.e. to identify the most sustainable transport connections between the five Central Asian republics and the EU's extended Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). Based on this study, the Central Trans-Caspian Network (CTCN) is identified as the most sustainable transport connection between Europe and Central Asia as opposed to the other two corridors, Northern and Southern Trans-Caspian Corridor (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2023, pp. 13–16).

In order to implement the conclusions of the study, the Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity was held in 2024. The Investors Forum is a high-level gathering that includes representatives of the European Commission, EU member states, republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Turkey. Other participants include the G7 countries, as well as financial institutions and the private sector. As noted, the Forum relies on a study on sustainable transport links between Europe and Central Asia, identifying infrastructure needs and key actions to improve Trans-Caspian transport networks. The European Commission is working to implement the findings of the study and is mobilizing €10 billion with its partners for the development of key transport networks in Central Asia. This effort strengthens the EU's long-standing partnership with the republics of Central Asia, with the aim of establishing direct transport links through the Black Sea and Caucasus regions within the Global Gateway Strategy (European Commission, 2024d).

Additional agreements reached include the implementation of the EU-funded Regional Transport Program, which is planned for adoption in 2025. The program aims to provide technical assistance for current and future transport projects in Central Asia, contributing €1.5 billion

allocated by the European Commission and European Investment Bank for the improvement of transport infrastructure in the region. A Coordination Platform will also be established to monitor progress and ensure cooperation in the development of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor. A Regional Prosperity-focused Programme will begin in 2024, with the mediation of the International Trade Centre and the OECD, focusing on the practical use of Trans-Caspian transport networks. In addition, the Senior Resident Twinning Advisors initiative will place advisors in transport ministries in five Central Asian republics starting in 2024 (European Commission, 2024d).

When it comes to cooperation in the energy sector according to Kizeková (2022, pp. 1–2) despite potential agreements, the EU has not fully utilized the region's resource potential, partly due to its limited diplomatic presence and competition from global powers such as China, Russia, and others. While the EU has expressed interest in accessing Central Asian energy resources, particularly oil and gas, and bypassing Russia, its gas import goals have not been fully achieved. However, it has had more success with oil imports, notably from Kazakhstan. Supporting alternative energy corridors, such as the Trans-Caspian route/Southern Gas Corridor could address barriers and reinforce energy cooperation.

3.3 Security Cooperation

Security is a key component of the 2019 Strategy, as the EU recognizes the significance of stability and security to its own interests in Central Asia, delineating several domains for cooperation including combating violent extremism and terrorism, addressing drug trafficking (CADAP 7)²⁰ and border management, enhancing online safety, fostering legality in security establishments, and preventing the spread of extremist beliefs.

20 Since 2003, CADAP has supported the governments of Central Asian states in their efforts to reduce drug demand, encourage preventative measures, and improve the treatment that drug users in the area receive from public institutions. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will serve as the implementation guide for CADAP 7, which is compliant with pertinent UN Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Central Asia Drug Action Programme, 2024).

The EU and Central Asia have a long-standing security partnership, as evidenced by regular meetings like the EU-Central Asia High-level Political and Security Dialogue. Seeking to deepen collaboration, the EU addresses underlying issues of insecurity such as poverty and corruption, while integrating environmental concerns into policy discussions across Central Asia. Terrorism and violent extremism present significant challenges, prompting actions to prevent extremism and terrorist financing, with a focus on enhancing community resilience. Cooperation extends to border management, with intensified efforts against organized crime and human trafficking, along with support for legal migration channels and the reintegration of returnees (European Commission, 2019, pp. 5–6).

Border management in Central Asia (BOMCA) stands as the premier and most extensive EU-funded Program in the area. Launched in 2003, its successive phases have concentrated on enhancing capacity and institutions, establishing trade routes, streamlining trade, enhancing border control, and combatting drug trafficking throughout Central Asia. BOMCA includes activities to improve security, for instance by training border guards, providing equipment, and helping to create databases (European External Action Service, 2021).

4. Conclusion

The presence of major international players such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union underscores the geopolitical significance of the Central Asian region. The interaction among these actors highlights the enduring geopolitical attractiveness of Central Asia, characterized by historical competition for influence and the region's strategic importance in global affairs. This engagement has led to both complementary and competing visions for Central Asia, with initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the United States' strategic realignment in the region ("C5+1"). Due to this competitiveness, the region has seen a rise in investment, infrastructure development, and diplomatic initiatives.

The multi-vector foreign policy approach adopted by Central Asian republics reflects their efforts to balance the influence of major powers. Recent intra-regional changes, including transitions of power (changes in the highest positions of political power occupied by cadres who have replaced those who have governed the country since the nineties) and efforts towards regional integration (consultative meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia), have also contributed to a new geopolitical dynamic in the region, evidenced by the diplomatic platforms “5+1”, which signal a renewed phase of geopolitical maneuvering in the region. This signifies ongoing efforts by global players to assert influence, underscoring the enduring relevance of Central Asia throughout the wider regional and even global geopolitical context.

The European Union’s (EU) relationship with Central Asia has evolved considerably since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially focused on providing humanitarian aid and supporting democratic transition, the EU’s strategy has matured into a multi-level approach encompassing political cooperation, economic development, and security. The establishment of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) in the mid-1990s laid the groundwork for fostering political dialogue, economic cooperation, and development assistance. Over the years, the EU’s approach has adapted to changing geopolitical dynamics, with a greater emphasis on security issues, energy cooperation, and regional connectivity, as reflected in the adoption of strategic documents in 2002, 2007, and 2019.

The increasing institutionalization of relations between the EU and Central Asian nations is another significant indicator of a rising degree of cooperation. By establishing formal structures such as regular summits, ministerial meetings, and working groups, the EU and Central Asian republics create a platform for consistent dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. The new generation of bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), which the European Union (EU) may sign with Central Asian nations, will be the central component of EU engagement in the region, although some of them have already concluded EPCAs.

The difficulties and opportunities that lie ahead for the EU as it works to strengthen its cooperation with Central Asia highlight the significance of flexible and adaptable strategies to deal with the region's changing geopolitical environment. The 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia, titled "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership," reflects this shift. It prioritizes three key areas: resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation. Resilience encompasses socio-economic challenges, democracy, human rights, and environmental issues. Prosperity focuses on fostering economic growth through private sector development, improved investment climates, and regional trade connectivity. The EU actively supports the diversification of Central Asian economies and their integration into the global market. Regional cooperation recognizes the interconnectedness of Central Asia.

The EU's commitment to Central Asia is further demonstrated by its growing economic engagement. The EU is a major investor and trading partner for the region, and it actively supports infrastructure development, particularly in the transport sector. Security cooperation remains a crucial aspect of the EU-Central Asia partnership. The EU recognizes the importance of stability in Central Asia and cooperates with regional partners to address issues like terrorism, drug trafficking, and border management.

The EU faces competition from other global powers in the region, and its ability to fully utilize Central Asia's potentials is limited, especially when compared to the power of influence of Russia and China. Additionally, progress on human rights and democratic reforms in Central Asia continues to be a concern for the EU.

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