

A RIFT IN THE TRANSATLANTIC STRATEGY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT. *Donald Trump's second term, starting in 2025, has intensified U.S. trade policy with tariffs on over 70% of goods imports, driven by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 and economic nationalism. Targeting China with rates exceeding 100%, the policy seeks to decouple from rivals, revive manufacturing, and assert economic sovereignty. Central Asia, notably Uzbekistan, faces rising costs but sees opportunities as alternative hubs. The UK and Japan navigate limited tariff relief, while the BRICS countries counter with de-dollarization. Legal challenges, like *V.O.S. Selections, Inc. v. Trump*, and the Trade Review Act of 2025, highlight domestic tensions. Three scenarios—trade war, selective détente, or BRICS-led realignment—shape the future of global trade, forcing smaller economies to balance risks and leverage in a fractured system.*

KEYWORDS: *Economic nationalism, trade policy, tariffs, decoupling, America First, Central Asia, BRICS, China, United Kingdom, Japan, global supply chains, protectionism, WTO, economic sovereignty, strategic competition*

Introduction

The coordinated approach from the “Transatlantic alliance” that once characterized European and American engagement in Central Asia has splintered in the wake of the election of the Trump administration. While the United States (US) and European Union (EU) previously operated with aligned strategic objectives in the region, Trump has accelerated a divergence that has profound implications for Central Asian states navigating great power competition and preserving their multi-vector foreign policy.

Since the independence of the Central Asian Five (C5), the US and EU have pursued largely complementary foreign policy strategies in Central Asia.



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Despite tactical differences—with EU countries emphasizing transportation and connectivity while the US played a larger security role—their strategic objectives remained fundamentally aligned: hedging against Russian and Chinese influence, securing access to the region’s natural resources, and promoting democracy and human rights.

The 2024 US presidential election marked a seismic shift in this coordinated transatlantic approach.

President Trump’s inauguration in January 2025 has not only strained transatlantic relations broadly but also altered America’s strategic posture toward regions where it had long-standing engagements. Even Dr. Frederick Starr, one of the most distinguished American scholars of Central Asia, acknowledged in his 2025 report that the US must reimagine its approach to the C5. He advocates for a “Greater Central Asia” strategy—one that includes Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Mongolia—while urging the US to promote private-sector development, support national elites, emphasize security, and adopt a region-wide focus. Thus, Central Asia, once viewed through a similar strategic lens by Washington and Brussels, has now become a region where divergent transatlantic approaches play out.

What are the emerging US and EU strategies in Central Asia? How do they differ from past approaches and from each other, and where do they converge? This report addresses these questions by examining contemporary EU and US strategies toward Central Asia, analyzing their similarities and differences, assessing global implications, and recommending a C5 response.

The EU’s Approach Towards Central Asia: From Modest Engagement to the Advent of a Mature and Clear Cooperation Roadmap.

In 1995, the EU released its first policy document outlining its relationship with the newly independent C5, signaling its geopolitical and economic interest in the region. Thirty years later, the geopolitical context of 2025 is markedly more volatile. What also defines the present moment, however, is a shared determination—both from the EU and the Central Asian states grouped under the C5 format—to forge a diverse and effective partnership. Anchored in the EU’s 2019 Strategy on Central Asia, the current cooperation roadmap prioritizes a broad range of sectors, including transport infrastructure, raw materials and rare earth development, green transition projects, and agriculture.

The Imperative of Connectivity

Located strategically between Europe and China, connectivity is a priority for the C5 in its ambition to become a trade hub, connecting East to West. In support of this goal, Brussels has pledged €10 billion to develop the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)—also known as the Middle Corridor—which connects China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. For the EU, this corridor holds significant strategic value, as it enhances links with Central Asia while bypassing Russian territory—a critical consideration given its own efforts to diversify away from Russia. The expansion of the TITR may also benefit China, which remains deeply economically engaged in Central Asia and eager to expand trade with Europe amid American protectionism.

EU-Central Asia Cooperation on Critical Minerals and the Green Transition

As with connectivity, the energy and green transition sectors are of strategic importance to both the EU and Central Asia, which view each other as complementary partners in efforts to diversify import and export markets. Brussels is working to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and is actively pursuing alternative sources of rare earths and critical raw materials—resources essential to the green transition and found in abundance across Central Asia. In turn, the C5 seek to strengthen their domestic industries by leveraging European technology and expertise. Key EU members, including France, have already launched cooperative initiatives with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The EU's leadership in low-carbon energy technologies positions it as a credible and capable partner for Central Asia.

Samarkand Summit (2025). The EU's "Third Way" Approach

The EU's strategy in Central Asia reached a new milestone with the landmark April 3 EU–Central Asia summit, which underscored the growing strength of this once-nascent partnership. Long anticipated and preceded by high-level visits from the heads of state and government of France, Italy, and Germany, the Samarkand Summit produced tangible outcomes: the two sides elevated their ties to a “strategic partnership,” and EU leaders pledged €12 billion to advance cooperation across key sectors—including connectivity, energy, the green transition, education, and regional security. As part of its broader Global Gateway initiative, the European Investment Bank signed additional

bilateral agreements totaling €135 million for infrastructure and environmental projects. Shortly after the summit, Uzbekistan announced it would host the next Central Asia–EU Economic Forum this November.

The summit was also timely for another reason. Just one day prior, on April 2, US President Donald Trump unveiled his sweeping round of reciprocal tariffs—marking an escalation of his protectionist economic agenda and dealing a potential blow to the multilateral trading system. Against this backdrop, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen used the Samarkand stage to draw a sharp contrast. “As we meet here today,” she declared, “we are at another turning point. New global barriers are emerging, prompting investments to be redirected or cut. Powers around the world are carving out new spheres of influence. However, here in Samarkand, we show there is another way.” Her remarks encapsulate the EU’s emerging strategy in Central Asia: one grounded in multilateralism, open connectivity, and the preservation of a liberal international order. This is also supported by the EU’s Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus program, which incentivizes developing countries to pursue sustainable development and good governance through reducing the EU’s own tariffs and import restrictions—benefits that have been extended to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the “third way” offers a clear divergence from the increasingly transactional approach emanating from Washington—raising critical questions about the direction of US-C5 relations.

The US and “America First”

While the future of US-C5 relations remains uncertain, Trump’s first six months have given hints at what the relationship may look like in the next four years. Thus far, Trump has underscored his desire to pursue transactional, bilateral relations and de-emphasized the role of American liberal-democratic programs, such as suspending nearly all of USAID’s programs in the region. These new facets of US foreign policy have already produced mixed outcomes for the C5 and prompted a swift shift in their foreign policy toward the US.

Transactional Diplomacy

Bilateral transactionalism is the centerpiece of Trump-style US foreign policy. In other words, Trump prefers to conduct relations on a state-to-state basis and secure deals, which, in his eyes, are concrete foreign policy wins. This alternative style of diplomacy may reduce the role of the multilateral

C5+1 format in US-C5 relations, which, under the then-President Biden, played a significantly larger role. Biden was, in fact, the first US president to meet with all C5 leaders under the C5+1 format. Although Secretary of State Marco Rubio has expressed interest in advancing the C5+1, the forum is more likely to be used for cooperation on rare earth extraction—such as the 2024 C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue—and for business initiatives through the B5+1 format, rather than for diplomatic issues like security and trade.

Today, several examples of bilateral transnationalism are already on display in Central Asia that supersede the C5+1 format. On April 2, Trump announced “reciprocal” tariffs on nearly all countries, including a sweeping 10% tariff on all C5 goods, except those from Kazakhstan, which was hit with a 27% tariff. Since then, Trump has slightly lowered the Kazakh tariff to 25% after a global readjustment of his trade policy in early August. Such negotiations are traditionally handled through the World Trade Organization, or in the C5 case, the C5+1 forum. Instead, shortly after Trump’s April 2 tariffs, Kazakhstan announced that it would send its own trade delegation to Washington to negotiate a deal, likely leveraging its abundant rare earth minerals to entice the Trump administration to grant it more favorable terms.

In a separate instance, the Uzbek government recently financed the full deportation of 131 citizens of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan from New York to Tashkent to demonstrate its role in tackling immigration—a crucial piece to Trump’s domestic agenda. Illegal immigration to the US is a C5-wide issue, one in which Uzbekistan’s unilateral action suggests that responses will be handled bilaterally rather than regionally.

Overall, bilateral transactionalism has not significantly altered the C5 relationship with the US. The US still expresses great interest in Central Asia’s rare earth deposits, seeks to hedge against Russia and China through the C5+1 forum—even though the forum itself may be more focused on business—and will continue collaboration on migration. Trump’s recent deals in the Caucasus to promote peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan—facilitated by Armenia granting the US exclusive 99-year access to the Zangezur Corridor (now branded the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) and by Azerbaijan planning separate bilateral agreements on oil production—offer a notable example of how transactionalism can be used to strengthen connectivity in “Greater Central Asia.”

However, in general, the C5 response has been prompt; they have mainly been non-confrontational, especially with respect to tariffs, and have conducted bilateral talks with the US, primarily on rare earth production and migration. Thus, while bilateral transactionalism may have a larger impact on other regions, its impact on Central Asia has not significantly strained current relations.

The Decline of US Liberal-Democratic Programs

Bilateral transactionalism may yield some positive results in Central Asia, but cuts to American liberal-democratic programs in the C5 are already producing adverse consequences. Including funding for NGOs and civil society groups, the US primarily advanced its liberal-democratic agenda through USAID, which, as of 2023, had over \$225 million in projects in Central Asia, ranging from health programs to peace and security, education, and social services, as well as democratic/human rights governance programs. According to Sandefur and Kenny, the Trump administration has canceled all USAID programs in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, while cutting 78% and 69% of funds to programs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respectively.

Some of the major projects to be served include regional water management projects, combating tuberculosis in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and civil society development in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. As development remains a key focus for the C5, losing US support could seriously hinder their progress. Moreover, as US support diminishes, the C5 may be compelled to increase its reliance on China to address development gaps, building on existing Belt and Road Initiative projects. China has already begun filling the void left by reduced USAID funding in countries such as Rwanda and Cambodia.

In an interview with *Gazeta.uz*, Ambassador to Uzbekistan Jonathan Henick pushed back against accusations of reduced US support for human rights and democracy promotion, stating that instead, “there will be a different approach to those issues,” likely framed through the lens of national security and economics. However, he acknowledged that the USAID cuts are part of a broader global reduction by the US and may be reversed, as they are currently under review. Still, this shift away from the traditional US liberal-democratic agenda represents a significant restructuring of US foreign policy in Central Asia and could result in losses for both the US—as China is poised to fill the void—and the C5,

which may face greater challenges in advancing their development goals.

Is There Still a Common Transatlantic Strategy in Central Asia?

The diverging strategies of the US and EU complicate selling a case for a transatlantic strategy in Central Asia. While some facets of the US-EU agenda overlap—such as rare earth cooperation, countering Russia and China, and business deals—many significant differences separate the US from what used to be a transatlantic agenda. The US now practices bilateral transactionalism under a realist prism of diplomacy; the EU seeks to promote cooperation under a region-to-region framework, stick to the promotion of the liberal-democratic agenda, and increase connectivity.

We recommend that C5 governments recognize that the US and EU maintain distinct regional agendas and should not be approached as a unified transatlantic bloc. The C5 states have already begun adapting their engagement strategies to address US and EU priorities on separate terms. Continuing this differentiated diplomatic approach would be advisable as a means of preserving both US and EU influence within the broader C5 multi-vector foreign policy framework, which strategically balances competing state interests.

Central Asia is not the only region where the notion of a typical transatlantic strategy has fragmented. In Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, the diplomatic approaches of the EU and the US are increasingly diverging. Countries in these regions may find it advantageous to adapt their foreign policy frameworks to the current geopolitical landscape while also reinforcing regionalism as a hedge against an emerging multipolar order marked by great power competition over spheres of influence. The geopolitical paradigm has shifted, and nations will likely need to recalibrate their diplomatic strategies to accommodate this new international order.

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