

THE RECALIBRATION OF EU FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the growing engagement of the European Union with five Central Asian countries. Until recently, the European Union has been a secondary actor in the region lagging behind Russia, China, and the US. However, due to recent geopolitical developments and the ever-increasingly growth of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia, the EU has recalibrated its foreign policy in Central Asia and set up to enhance cooperation with the states in question. The present paper analyzes the EU's intensified engagement with the aforementioned countries through the examination of primary and secondary sources. The findings showed that the EU wants to change its secondary power status in the region and achieve new geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions and tackle security concerns over the region and beyond. The EU's ambitions in the region seem relatively feasible. However, the EU will have to compete with behemoth Russia and China, along with other rising regional powers in the region like Turkey, India, and Iran.*

Keywords: *EU-Central Asia Relations, Europe in Central Asia, EU-Central Asia Leaders' Meeting, Diplomacy, Geopolitics, Security, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan.*

All over the history, Central Asia – comprising Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – has been a strategically vital region of Eurasia in terms of trade, energy, and infrastructure. Therefore, regional and other foreign powers turned their attention to the region immediately after the Central Asian states achieved independence from the Soviet Union. Unlike other powers, the European Union for the most part looked at the Central Asia states as “neighbors of its neighbors” due to its geographical and political distance,¹ and EU foreign policy vis-à-vis the region was driven mostly by democratic values and normative policies. However, in recent years, with the rising importance of Central Asia in the Eurasian geopolitics, the EU has tried to intensify cooperation with all five states of Central Asia. At the end of October 2022, President of the

¹ Sieglinde Gstöhl, The European Union's approach to the neighbors of its neighbors: From fragmentation to strategy? *Studia Diplomatica* 68, no.1, (35–48): 2015.

European Council Charles Michel paid his first official visit to Astana and held a summit with the leaders of all five Central Asian states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. President Michel called the summit “more than just a dialogue between two regions” and stressed that the two regions are “coming closer together and becoming more and more connected.”² While in the Kazakh capital, President Michel also called for greater cooperation between the EU and Central Asia.³ One month later, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell paid a visit to Uzbekistan and attend the Samarkand EU Central Asian Connectivity Conference.

This paper is set out to focus on EU’s growing engagement in Central Asia. The paper is guided by the question: Why is the EU increasing cooperation with Central Asian states? It will be argued that the EU is intensifying cooperation with five Central Asian countries in order to achieve its new geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions and tackle its security concerns over Central Asia and beyond.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it will present the EU’s geopolitical ambitions in Central Asia. Then, it will discuss the EU’s geo-economic goals in the region. Third, it will discuss potential security concerns of the EU in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In the end, it will draw a conclusion.

EU’s Geopolitical Ambition

The rising European engagement in Central Asia is driven by its geopolitical ambition to adjust its status as a secondary actor in the region that straddles a strategic geographic space at the heart of Eurasia, bordering Russia to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan and Iran to the south. Until now, the region has been largely seen through the lens of a new “great game” competition among three great powers — Russia, China, and the United States. The three have attempted to dominate the region in pursuit of their largely divergent interests by applying classic “divide and rule” tactics. Russia, with firm persistence, has attempted to maintain a strong presence in the region by forming security and

² “Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting with President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Astana,” *Press release of the European Council of EU*, 22th November, 2022.

³ *Ibd.*

economic alliances – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁴ China, in turn, loaned Central Asia billions to build major import-export and energy supply connectivity projects as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that complement its economic and geopolitical ambitions. Meanwhile, the U.S. sought to encourage neoliberal institutions in Central Asian states and develop them on the path toward democracy and market economy. In startling contrast to these powers, the EU did not have significant geopolitical interests in Central Asia and presumably put it into the fold of its wider European Neighborhood Policy.⁵ However, with the continuing Western crisis and growing Chinese and Russian assertiveness in Central Asia, the EU has begun to reconsider its foreign policy direction, taking into account the differences of the states in the region. This led to the adoption of the New Strategy on Central Asia in 2019, which shifted EU foreign policy from a Brussels-centric normative power to principled pragmatism and resilience.⁶ This is guided by a series of changes in the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) toward identifying geopolitics as an essential if not definite factor of EU foreign policy in the 21st century.⁷ The promotion of democratic is still an essential factor of the EU foreign policy in this prescription.⁸

It is also argued that the EU's growing engagement in Central Asia is not necessarily driven by power politics with China and Russia. Instead, it serves as an "honest agent" and attempts to balance its and other external powers' security interest in the region "with its internal values by projecting those values externally."⁹ To this background, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock explicitly stated that Germany wants to see Central Asia having a choice and not

⁴ Russia pursued this strategy in accordance with the third principles of the Primakov Doctrine.

⁵ European Parliament, *Parliamentary questions. Written question by Charles Tannock on Kazakhstan and potential membership of the ENP*, Brussels, 2006.

⁶ Neil Winn a and Stefan Gänzleb, "Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 4, (2022).

⁷ Anne Wetzel, J. Orbie, F. Bossuyt, Special Section - Comparative Perspectives on the Substance of EU Democracy Promotion. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 1, (2015): 21–155.

⁸ A. Wetzel, J. Orbie, and F. Bossuyt, eds. Special Section - Comparative Perspectives on the Substance of EU Democracy Promotion. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 1, (2015):21–155.

doi:10.1080/09557571.2015.1019726

⁹ S. Jurayev, Comparing the EU and Russia engagements in Central Asia, *L'Europe En Formation* 374, no. (2014):77–93. doi:10.3917/eufor.374.0077.

“being straitjacketed in Russia’s front yard or being dependent on China.”¹⁰ This statement clearly demonstrated the geopolitical aspirations of both Germany and the EU to take part in a new “great game” to prevent the unhindered growth of Russian and Chinese influence in the region. However, in this new “great game”, the EU’s efforts still lag behind China’s BRI initiative and Russia’s CSTO and EAEU in Central Asia.

EU’s Geo-economic Ambition

The EU aims to intensify cooperation with Central Asia in order to attain its geo-economic ambitions to increase Euro-Asian connectivity — physical and non-physical infrastructure via which resources, products and human capital can move freely. Although the EU has not introduced its own BRI in Central Asia, it has been deeply involved in the sphere of connectivity. In the 2007 Central Asia Strategy, the EU set a priority to establish energy and transport connections linking the two regions. However, Brussels has been passive in actualizing the Caspian-Black Sea pipeline and an “e-silk highway,” lagging behind the Chinese BRI and Russian-led EAEU.¹¹ In late 2018, the EU put forward its strategy on connecting Europe and Asia with concrete policy proposals and initiatives to improve energy, transport, digital, and people-to-people connectivity in Eurasia.¹² The strategy states that non-engagement is not a choice for the EU while China is growing its influence in Central Asia.¹³

By endorsing the revised strategy on Central Asia, the EU acknowledged the strategic importance of Central Asia in its global efforts to strengthen sustainable, comprehensive, and rule-based connectivity within Eurasia.¹⁴ To that end, the EU intended to bolster relations with the Central Asia states through a bilateral approach based on broad-based and mutually beneficial Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCA), which has been underscored over the regional approach considering the unique characteristics of each and

¹⁰ Statement by Foreign Minister Baerbock prior to her departure for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, *Press release of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 30th September, 2022.

¹¹ Raffaello Pantucci, Europe’s Pivot to Central Asia, *RUSI Commentary*, May 2 2018.

¹² Council of the EU, *Connecting Europe and Asia: Building Blocks for an EU Strategy*, September 2018.

¹³ Martin Russell, “Connectivity in Central Asia: Reconnecting the Silk Road,” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, April 2019.

¹⁴ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, *General Secretariat of the Council*, 22th June, 2015.

every country in the region.¹⁵ The EU, for instance, implemented the EPCA with Kazakhstan in March 2020, which generated enhanced cooperation between Brussels and Astana in such spheres as trade and customs, environmental affairs, and energy. In July 2022, the EU and successfully completed three-year talks with Uzbekistan and signed a new EPCA in Brussels.¹⁶ Furthermore, the EU's revised strategy on Central Asia proclaims that Brussels is also committed to implementing EPCAs with the other interested states of Central Asia¹⁷ — Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.¹⁸

In late 2021, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen proclaimed that the EU would mobilize up to 300 billion euro of investments for the launch of a new connectivity initiative — Global Gateway for 2021-2027.¹⁹ This strategy is aimed at developing EU partners' infrastructure throughout the world, including Central Asia, in order to connect them in trade, transportation, and digitalization.

One of the important aspects of EU's "Global Gateway" connectivity strategy is the development of logistics which enable goods, people, ideas, and services move freely via the "Middle Corridor" across the Caspian Sea, over the Caucasus, and via the Anatolian Peninsula in West Asia into Europe. This ambitious project can be elucidated as a response to China's BRI, which is now affiliated with 139 countries.²⁰ It also gives signals that in the upcoming years, the EU will push forward networks with various states in different parts of the world and extend up to the Central Asian countries.

EU's Security Concerns

The EU aims to step up cooperation on security challenges in Central Asian states and Afghanistan. It should be noted that the EU's security interpretation is

¹⁵ "Report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy," *The European Parliament*, 8th March, 2016.

¹⁶ "Uzbekistan: The European Union and Uzbekistan complete negotiations for a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement," *The Diplomatic Service of the European Union*, 6th July 2015.

¹⁷ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, *General Secretariat of the Council*, 22th June, 2015.

¹⁸ The EU has signed a Temporary Trade Agreement with Turkmenistan.

¹⁹ "The Global Gateway," *The Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, 1st December 2021.

²⁰ David Sacks, Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In and Who's Out, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24th March 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>

strikingly broad and entails a larger number of threats and a wider range of actors than traditional definitions.²¹ With the foreign policy shift to principled pragmatism/resilience, the EU developed a pragmatic approach to broader issues of global security underlining the impact of neighboring states and their close neighbors on the EU with respect to security, terrorism, migration, and economics.²² For that reason, the EU gives priority to domestic and border security in line with a pragmatic ad hoc emphasis on external powers close to Europe.²³ In this context, it is to the strategic benefit of the EU to promote the resilience of states and societies in Central Asia.²⁴

The EU is particularly interested in enhancing cooperation with Central Asian states against such common security issues as radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism. The EU furthermore emphasizes the significance of confronting the socioeconomic roots of radicalization.²⁵ During Michel's official visit to Astana at the end of October 2022, the EU and Central Asian leaders remarked on the potential of cooperation in border management and security, the joint fight against terrorism, transnational organized crime and drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and other new security threats in compliance with universal principles.²⁶

The EU intends to closely cooperate with Central Asian states to champion a free and open cyberspace and reinforce cybersecurity.²⁷

The EU is willing to engage with the states in the region on non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, alongside with the export restraint of dual-use products, and nuclear safety and security. In addition, the EU is interested in establishing the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Risk Mitigation Centre of Excellence in the region. To these ends, it aims to

²¹ Edward Lemon, Critical approaches to security in Central Asia: an introduction, *Central Asian Survey* 37, no.1, (2018):1-12.

²² Jolyon Howorth, EU Global Strategy in a Changing World: Brussels' Approach to the Emerging Powers, *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no.3 (2016): 389-401.

²³ Neil Winn a and Stefan Gänzleb, "Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 4, (2022).

²⁴ The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, *The Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, 15th April 2019.

²⁵ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, *General Secretariat of the Council*, 22th June, 2015.

²⁶ Joint press communiqué by Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council, *Press release of the European Council of EU*, 27th October, 2022.

²⁷ The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, *The Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, 15th April 2019.

conduct closer dialogue with the states in the region on crisis management and peacekeeping.²⁸

The EU considers environmental degradation and climate change as multipliers of security threats. Therefore, the growing European engagement in Central Asia is aimed at further integrating the connection between the environment, climate and security in its policy dialogue, conflict prevention, development and humanitarian actions and disaster risk reduction strategies all over the region.²⁹

The sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan Republic government worried both Central Asia and the EU; both were concerned about Afghanistan turning into a source of threats to regional and international peace and security. Acknowledging the crucial role of Central Asia in global efforts to promote inclusive peace, security and sustainable development in Afghanistan and emphasizing that these efforts should bring advantage to the region, the EU aims to encourage closer connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia via Afghanistan.³⁰

Overall, the first official summit between the president of the European Council and Central Asia's leaders is a crucial development in the new "great game." The EU's engagement is driven by its geopolitical and geo-economic interests to prevent the unhindered rise of Russian and Chinese influence, and by its domestic concerns to tackle security challenges in Central Asia and beyond. New EU ambitions will give an opportunity to the states in the region to intensify comprehensive partnerships with the EU, which can play a positive part in the region by offering an alternative to Moscow and Beijing and assisting the Central Asian states to diversify their economies, intensify regional connectivity, and develop their societies. In this context, the EU's ambition to change its secondary player status seems relatively feasible. However, the EU will have to compete with Russia and China, along with other rising regional powers in the region like Turkey, India, and Iran.

²⁸ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, *General Secretariat of the Council*, 22th June, 2015.

²⁹ The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, *The Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, 15th April 2019.

³⁰ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, *General Secretariat of the Council*, 22th June, 2015.

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