

THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CENTRAL ASIA: ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

The European Union has gradually recognized the importance of Central Asia as a region of strategic significance due to its geopolitical location, vast energy reserves, and potential for economic cooperation.

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In terms of geopolitics, trade, and security, Central Asia is attracting the attention of political actors around the world. Accordingly, major international powers' interests intersect in this region. Each power develops its unique strategy for building relationships with the countries in Central Asia. There is a growing activity of the countries in close geographical proximity to the region, such as Russia, which is one of the key players in the global energy market and the major supplier of energy, and China with a rapidly growing economy and increasing energy consumption. The US is among the prominent geopolitical actors that significantly impact the region. No less important are the other regional players, such as Türkiye, Iran, and India. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states remained politically and economically tied to Russia thanks to the prevalence of the Russian language, media, and the significant movement of goods and people between Russia and Central Asia, which positioned Moscow as the key external actor in the region.¹ China's influence, on the other hand, stems primarily from its aid, trade, and development programs with Central Asian countries.² Meanwhile, the EU's normative power in the region is less visible. Central Asian states, in their pursuit of foreign policy equilibrium and the development of 'multi-vector' strategies, have attempted to balance their options after gaining independence.

The European Union has gradually recognized the importance of Central Asia as a region of strategic significance due to its geopolitical location, vast energy reserves, and potential for economic cooperation. Over the years, the EU's engagement with Central Asia has undergone significant evolution, driven by various factors including security concerns, energy diversification, economic interests, and the promotion of democratic values. This year is the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations

between the EU and Central Asian countries. The EU first established diplomatic contacts with Central Asian countries in early 1993, and its initial regional mission was opened in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The EU's expansion towards the East in 2004, its strategic location, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, coupled with its growing energy interests in the region, further elevated the importance of Central Asia in Brussels' perspective. Central Asian countries view collaboration with the European Union as a pivotal strategic objective. They are committed to enhancing trade relations with EU member states and attracting foreign investments. The EU market retains its significance due to a range of factors, including population size, income levels, regulatory standards, competitive opportunities, and trade regulations.

Consequently, in 2007, the EU launched its "Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia," aiming to usher in a new era of EU engagement with the region. This strategy was adopted during Germany's EU presidency and was primarily associated with the interests of that country in the region.³ However, this document faced ample criticism for treating Central Asia as a homogeneous entity and disregarding the specific characteristics of individual countries, rendering it abstract and ineffective. Subsequently, in June 2017, the EU Council initiated preparations for a new strategy which was adopted in 2019, taking a different approach by actively involving Central Asian partners in the process.⁴ In the words of Peter Burian, the former EU Special Representative for Central Asia, the EU aimed to understand the partners' priorities, needs, challenges, and their perception of the EU's role in addressing regional issues.⁵

This article delves into the analysis of the European Union's foreign policy towards Central Asian countries. It



encompasses an examination of areas of cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian countries. In the following sections, a historical overview of EU-Central Asia relations, tracing the roots and evolution of their relationship is presented. After that, the article explores the objectives and instruments employed by the European Union in its engagement with Central Asian countries. It provides insights into the strategies and mechanisms used to foster diplomatic, economic, and political ties. In its concluding sections, the article discusses the prospects for cooperation and potential future directions that both the EU and Central Asian nations may find advantageous to pursue. It offers an analysis of the pathways and opportunities for further development in their relationship.

The EU-Central Asia Relations: A Historical Overview

The history of the relations between the EU and Central Asian countries can be traced back to the early 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The EU's engagement with Central Asia has evolved over time, influenced by various factors including geopolitical considerations, energy interests, security concerns, and the promotion of human rights and democracy. In the early years, the EU's primary focus was on providing humanitarian aid, development assistance, and promoting political and economic reforms in the newly independent Central Asian states, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The EU recognized the strategic importance of the region due to its vast energy resources, geographical proximity, and potential for trade and cooperation. However, at this stage, the EU lacked a coherent and coordinated approach towards the region. As early as the 1990s, the European Commission initiated the implementation of the "Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States" (TACIS) program. This program aimed to provide technical support for state-building processes, facilitate economic reforms, and attract foreign direct investment in the Commonwealth of

Independent States. The program extended its support to all five Central Asian republics.

"The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements" (PCA) was signed between the EU and each Central Asian country in the mid-1990s and laid the foundation for cooperation in various fields in the early 2000s, including political dialogue, trade, investment, and development cooperation. During the timeframe of 1994 to 1996, these agreements were successfully concluded between the EU and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan later joined this framework in 2004, albeit after a period of civil war. However, it is worth noting that EU relations with Turkmenistan continue to be governed by an "Interim Trade Agreement" signed in 1998. The European Parliament has delayed the ratification of a PCA agreement, citing concerns over Turkmenistan's human rights record as a pivotal factor in this decision.

One of the key objectives of the EU's engagement with Central Asia has been to support the region's stability, security, and economic development. The EU has provided financial and technical assistance to promote democratic reforms, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law in Central Asian countries. The EU has also supported economic and trade cooperation, aiming to enhance regional integration, diversify the economies, and improve connectivity within Central Asia and between Central Asia and Europe. The EU's objective has been to facilitate trade, promote investment, and strengthen business ties through initiatives like the "Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements" (EPCAs) signed with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The economic dimension holds a central position within the EU's policy framework in Central Asia.

Trade relations between the EU and Central Asian countries are at different levels. Kazakhstan stands out as a leader in this regard, boasting substantial natural resources for the export of energy products in particular. With the exception of Kazakhstan, the majority of Central Asian

countries primarily export agricultural goods, including cotton and related products, as well as various metals to Europe. These countries have a significant dependency on imports from the EU to fulfill their requirements for industrial machinery, minerals, electronics, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and medical equipment. The partnership with Kazakhstan stands out as the most dynamically evolving among the countries in the region, contributing significantly to the overall trade turnover. Furthermore, EU countries account for over 30% of direct foreign investments in the Kazakh economy. Notably, in 2015, Kazakhstan became the first country in the region to sign the Enhanced Partnership Agreement and initiate cooperation with the EU.⁶

In 2007, the EU adopted the Central Asia Strategy, which outlined the EU's long-term approach towards the region. The strategy encompassed not only bilateral but also multilateral approaches in a broader regional context. It aimed to foster collaboration in various areas, including human rights and the rule of law, democracy and good governance, education, economic development, trade and investment, energy and transportation, environmental conservation, addressing common challenges, and promoting intercultural dialogue.⁷ Energy cooperation has been a significant aspect of EU-Central Asian relations. The EU has been interested in accessing Central Asia's vast energy resources to diversify its energy supplies and reduce dependency on other sources, particularly Russia. The EU launched the "Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia" (SECCA), aiming to enhance energy security, promote sustainable energy policies, and facilitate investments in the energy sector. Over the years, the EU has supported various projects in Central Asia, such as the "European Union – Central Asia Water, Environment and Climate Change Cooperation" (WECOOP) and the "Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia" (TRACECA). These initiatives aim to improve regional infrastructure, facilitate trade, and enhance connectivity between Central Asia and Europe. Furthermore, the EU has been engaged in promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Central Asia and supporting the "Central Asia Rule of Law Programme." It has advocated for reforms, civil society development, and respect for human rights through various channels, including political dialogues, human rights dialogues, and financial support for civil society organizations.

The first Strategy placed significant emphasis on addressing both emerging and non-traditional security challenges and threats, including terrorism, extremism, organized crime, drug trafficking, environmental hazards, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It acknowledges that the region grapples with several challenges related to radicalization and the rise of extremism. These issues compound the existing threats to stability, including disputes over water and border territories, drug trafficking, organized crime activities, and regional conflicts, with particular attention to the situation in Afghanistan. The EU's commitment to advancing both regional and bilateral dialogues on security matters with Central Asian nations, actively involving Afghanistan, stems from the EU's

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ongoing programs in areas such as migration, border management, counter-terrorism, and combating drug smuggling. This approach also emphasizes the importance of enhanced cross-border cooperation.⁸ The EU has conducted training programs, provided technical assistance, and supported the implementation of international standards and best practices in the security sector. Furthermore, the EU supported regional initiatives such as the "Border Management Program in Central Asia" (BOMCA) and the "Central Asia Drug Action Programme" (CADAP) to address common security challenges.

The European Union has achieved notable advancements in the realm of education within Central Asia. In this region, the European Union has introduced educational initiatives of global significance, including Erasmus Mundus, a program facilitating student, academic, and teaching staff exchanges, as well as Tempus (Trans-European Mobility Program for University Studies), which is geared towards reforming national higher education systems in alignment with the Bologna Process. Kazakhstan endorsed the Bologna Declaration in 2010, and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have also joined this transformative endeavor.⁹

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Objectives and Instruments of the EU Engagement

The European Union has several objectives and instruments in its engagement with Central Asia. These objectives and instruments aim to promote cooperation, stability, and development in the region. Here are the key objectives of EU engagement with Central Asia:

- **Enhancing Political Dialogue:** The EU aims to foster political dialogue with Central Asian countries to promote democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. It seeks to encourage reforms and support institutions that uphold democratic values and respect for human rights.
- **Promoting Regional Cooperation and Integration:** The EU supports efforts to enhance regional cooperation among Central Asian countries and promote regional

integration. It aims to facilitate dialogue and cooperation on regional issues such as security, water management, transport connectivity, and trade facilitation.

- **Supporting Sustainable Development:** The EU seeks to support sustainable development in Central Asia, including poverty reduction, social development, and environmental protection. It focuses on promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, improving access to education and healthcare, and addressing environmental challenges such as climate change.
- **Enhancing Energy Cooperation:** Given the region's significant energy resources, the EU aims to promote energy cooperation with Central Asia. It seeks to diversify energy supply routes, promote energy efficiency, support renewable energy development, and facilitate investment in the energy sector.

To achieve these objectives, the EU employs a range of instruments and tools in its engagement with Central Asia, including:

- **Partnership and Cooperation Agreements / Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs/EPCAs):** The EU has signed PCAs with each Central Asian country, which serve as the main legal framework for cooperation. These agreements cover various areas such as trade, investment, political dialogue, and development assistance.
- **EU-Central Asia Cooperation Forum:** The Cooperation Forum provides a platform for regular political dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries. It facilitates discussions on various issues of mutual interest and promotes regional cooperation initiatives.
- **Financial Assistance:** The EU provides financial assistance to support development projects and programs in Central Asia. It offers grants, loans, and technical assistance through various funding mechanisms.
- **Sectoral Cooperation:** The EU engages in sectoral cooperation with Central Asian countries in areas such as education, research, culture, environment, and trade. It supports capacity building, knowledge transfer, and exchanges in these sectors.
- **Connectivity Initiatives:** The EU promotes connectivity between Europe and Central Asia through infrastructure projects, transport networks, and trade facilitation measures.
- **People-to-People Contacts:** The EU encourages people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges between Europe and Central Asia. It promotes academic exchanges, scholarships, and cultural events to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.

These objectives and instruments reflect the EU's comprehensive approach to engagement with Central Asia,

aiming to address political, economic, social, and environmental aspects of cooperation.

Achievements of the EU Engagement, Prospects for Cooperation, and Future Directions

The EU's engagement with Central Asia has yielded notable achievements in various areas. In terms of political dialogue and cooperation, the EU has established regular high-level dialogues and human rights consultations, fostering closer ties and mutual understanding. Progress has also been made in economic integration and trade, with the EU signing trade agreements and providing assistance for market reforms. Energy cooperation has witnessed advancements, particularly in renewable energy projects and regional energy connectivity. The EU's development cooperation and aid programs have contributed to significant improvements in areas such as education, healthcare, and institutional capacity building. Additionally, the EU's promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law has raised awareness and stimulated reforms in Central Asian countries.

The prospects for cooperation and future directions of EU-Central Asia relations hold the potential for further deepening and expanding the partnership. Here are some key aspects and areas that could shape the future of EU engagement in Central Asia:

- **Connectivity and Infrastructure:** Enhancing connectivity between the EU and Central Asia is expected to remain a priority. This includes improving transport infrastructure, digital connectivity, and energy networks. The EU's support for the development of the Trans-Caspian and Trans-Afghan corridors, as well as the promotion of sustainable energy projects, can boost regional integration and trade flows.
- **Trade and Economic Cooperation:** Strengthening trade and economic ties will likely continue to be a focal point. The EU can work towards negotiating comprehensive trade agreements with Central Asian countries to promote greater market access, reduce trade barriers, and facilitate investment flows. Supporting economic diversification, entrepreneurship, and small and medium-sized enterprises can also enhance economic cooperation.
- **Sustainable Development and Green Transition:** Given the global focus on sustainability and climate change, the EU can play a crucial role in supporting Central Asian countries' efforts to achieve sustainable development goals and transition to green economies. Collaboration in areas such as renewable energy, climate change adaptation, water management, and environmental protection can be pursued for mutual benefit.
- **Education, Research, and Innovation:** Strengthening cooperation in education, research, and innovation can foster knowledge exchange, capacity building, and

human capital development. Scholarships, academic partnerships, joint research projects, and exchanges in science and technology can contribute to fostering innovation and promoting sustainable development in Central Asia.

- **Security and Counterterrorism:** Addressing regional security challenges, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime, will remain important. The EU can continue supporting capacity-building measures, intelligence sharing, and the implementation of effective border management systems. Collaborative efforts to counter violent extremism and promote stability in the region can enhance security cooperation.
- **People-to-People Contacts and Cultural Exchanges:** Encouraging people-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and tourism can foster mutual understanding and create stronger ties between the EU and Central Asian societies. Facilitating visa processes, promoting cultural events, and supporting tourism initiatives can help bridge the gap and promote closer interaction between the people of both regions.
- **Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution:** The EU can support regional cooperation initiatives and contribute to the resolution of conflicts in Central Asia. Promoting dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation efforts can help address regional tensions and foster stability and cooperation among Central Asian countries.

The future of EU-Central Asia relations will depend on the commitment and mutual interests of both sides. Building on the existing partnership, addressing challenges, and seizing opportunities can lead to a deeper and more comprehensive relationship that will benefit both the EU and Central Asia in various domains.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolving nature of the EU's

engagement with Central Asia reflects a dynamic relationship that responds to regional changes and the EU's evolving priorities. From its initial focus on humanitarian aid and development assistance, the EU has transitioned towards a more comprehensive approach, encompassing security cooperation, energy diversification, trade, economic collaboration, and the promotion of democratic values. This adaptive approach continues to shape the EU's engagement, which strives to foster a mutually beneficial partnership based on shared interests and values.

Looking ahead, there are promising prospects for enhanced cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. Strengthening political engagement and regional cooperation can play a pivotal role in addressing shared security challenges and promoting regional stability. Expanding economic integration and trade relations, while reducing trade barriers and increasing investments, has the potential to unlock further opportunities for mutual growth. Prioritizing energy security and sustainable development remains essential, with the potential for increased involvement in renewable energy projects and infrastructure development. Moreover, enhancing development cooperation and aid effectiveness through better coordination and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals can significantly contribute to sustainable development in Central Asia.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there are disparities in development within EU-Central Asia relations, with some areas of cooperation lagging behind. As the EU and Central Asia deepen their cooperation, it is crucial to maintain an inclusive approach that involves all Central Asian countries and takes into account their specific needs and aspirations. By addressing the existing challenges, building upon past achievements, and identifying shared priorities, the EU and Central Asia can forge a mutually beneficial partnership that not only contributes to peace, stability, and sustainable development but also works towards reducing disparities and promoting inclusive growth across the region.

Endnotes

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