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## Report

# EU Strategy in Central Asia: Competition or Cooperation?

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## Abstract

For more than 20 years, the EU has structured its own pragmatic interests in Central Asia in security and economic terms. However, the EU hardly has the means to back its ambitions. Thus far it has not succeeded in reconciling its contradictory agendas and its own diverse actors. Conscious of its limited influence, the EU is attempting to position itself as a balancing actor between the different stakeholders (Russia, China, US, and also Turkey and Iran) in the region. This is the context for assessing the EU's strategy in Central Asia, highlighting the potential for maximizing competition or cooperation. The article argues that in both security and development, the EU's strategy displays both areas of convergence and divergence with key actors such as Russia, China, among others, not only in terms of discourse but also practice of international relations.

## Introduction

The European Union has been slow to emerge on the Central Asian scene. However since the mid-2000s, a European common foreign policy has taken shape and the EU has gained more visibility. It aims to create various niches, in which it can become a leading actor, and has structured its own pragmatic interests in the region in both security and economic terms. EU is now Central Asia's second-largest trading partner (22 billion dollars in 2014), behind China (45 billion dollars). Moreover, it has long-term advantages in terms of levels of education and specialized know-how, and as a symbol of soft power that searches for synergy rather than conflict. It strives to impose its presence beside much more prominent actors like China and Russia. However, the EU hardly has the means to back its ambitions and it did not succeed in reconciling its contradictory agendas and diverse actors. Its immediate neighborhood in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe is naturally privileged and Central Asia remains a kind of modest extended neighborhood of the EU<sup>(1)</sup>.

## A double challenge: elaborating strategies, delivering messages

After a very limited EU role in Central Asia in the 1990s, a “Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia,” approved in 2007, was designed to give renewed impetus to relations between the two regions. EU interests in Central Asia are multiple: the promotion of human rights, civil society, and the rule of law, which is a fundamental part of the EU’s value engagement; emerging energy (oil, gas and uranium) interests; and fostering security in ‘Greater Central Asia.

Europe involves many actors, which gives it richness, but also limits its capability to act as a unified player, and inhibits its international visibility. The European Union itself is a complex structure with three heads—the Commission, Council, and Parliament—and with different spokesmen. It is hindered by internal contradictions between the Commission’s administrative services, all the more that the allocated resources for the region are limited and destined to remain so. In practice, EU objectives and interests have competing logics; the European desire to diversify gas export routes and reduce its dependence on Russia has led to a sudden relaxation of human rights pressure.

Member states have conflicting perceptions of their interests in the region. Germany, Italy and to a lesser degree France have advocated for a clearly utilitarian view of Central Asia, while the UK and Nordic countries wish to emphasize the values agenda. Some European experts believe that it is impossible to impose democracy from the outside and that it is necessary to “work toward the future” by maintaining a dialogue with the Central Asian regimes, even the most repressive ones. By this logic, the EU will be influential in Central Asia if it is present there, which means building relationships based on common economic and security interests, and leaving aside areas of contention. For others, the EU risks being “on the wrong side of history” by supporting corrupt regimes and thus weakening local supporters of reform. The 2011 Arab Spring reinforced such a view by showing an overwhelmed EU that was gradually forced to abandon its special relationships with established authoritarian leaders and accept less advantageous geopolitical terms in order to take into account the local democratic aspirations.

Conscious of its limited influence, the EU is attempting to position itself as a balancing element between the different actors in the region, while cooperating with them, especially with the United States, with whom it shares many interests.

## A common US-EU strategy in Central Asia?

The main points of EU-US convergence are the pursuit of human rights standards, democratic development, stability and security, and the broader economic and social development of the Central Asian states. Both the United States and EU hold regular human rights dialogues with Central Asia. However, although they continue to use values rhetoric, short-term stability and trade interests clearly override a genuine focus on human rights and democratization. There are several reasons for this, ranging from the low priority attached to Central Asia to local governments' unwillingness to reform, as well as high levels of corruption and curtailed US and EU development budgets.

Despite many shared interests, the EU and United States see Central Asia from very different perspectives. The EU's strategy is an extension of its links with its Eastern neighbors and Russia, while at the same time being a policy in its own right, with separate funding mechanisms and policy structures addressing Central Asia as a distinct region. Washington looks at the region through two lenses in particular. 1. It regards it as part of its South Asia policy. The State Department has one bureau for South and Central Asia, and the Defense Department has included Central Asia within CentCom, which covers North Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. 2. Central Asia seemed to be an appendage of the United States' Afghanistan policy. This became apparent when former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton introduced the new Silk Road vision in 2011 – a vaguely defined plan that seeks to foster regional economic cooperation and trade in a broad region in which Afghanistan serves as linchpin.

In terms of trade, the EU is a much more influential actor than the United States. Both focus largely on trade with Kazakhstan but the US prism on Central Asian economies rests essentially on the involvement of a few energy firms in the Kazakh part of the Caspian Basin. The EU and United States are engaged in security sector reform, although they tend to focus on different topics and use different methods. Washington focuses more on hard security and short-term assistance through training and materials. There is practically no coordination and no forum to discuss Central Asian challenges similar to the EU-US dialogue and engagement on Asia-Pacific issues or the regular exchanges on the Middle East and North Africa. The EU and United States prefer to channel their cooperation concerning hard security through NATO; the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) regarding soft security; and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on development. But delegating cooperation to multilateral institutions does not seem to be working. NATO does not play an active role in the region (besides the low-impact membership of Central Asian states in the Partnership for Peace program); the OSCE is marginalized in a region where local governments are weary of democratization initiatives; and the UNDP is only one of many development actors.

The EU and United States try to push the Central Asian governments to become more responsible stakeholders on broader cooperation around Afghanistan. Their view of Central Asia as Afghanistan's neighborhood is however mainly oriented toward short-term security issues. They needed Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent the other Central Asian regimes, to withdraw large quantities of material from Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network. The EU and the US have thus been supporting the Central Asian narrative centered on a spillover threat from Afghanistan, which have distracted attention from their own security challenges that often stand separate from Afghanistan – inter alia opposition to and uncertainty about the incumbent regimes, poverty and migration, and tensions over natural resources – and served to ensure continuous Western involvement in Central Asia. Consequently, EU and US policies have probably benefited more the Central Asian regimes seeking to extract as much revenue as possible during this short 'window of opportunity'.

While Afghanistan has moved down the list of priorities for transatlantic actors, there is no perceived urgency in joining forces in Central Asia. The EU and United States clearly acknowledge their status as secondary actors in Central Asia. Opportunities in and challenges from South and South-East Asia, crises in the Middle East and concerns in Europe over the neighborhood rank much higher on their agendas.

### **What the EU's strategy means to Russia, China and other regional actors in Central Asia**

There are a multitude of other actors, including Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Iran. All are trying to develop political and economic relations with the region, although to date they remain very limited. However, the EU cannot avoid cooperating with Russia and China in Central Asia. Moscow still plays a *primus inter pares* role regarding security, while Beijing has over the last decade taken the lead in the economic and trade domains in Central Asia.

Both countries do not share Europe's view on numerous international questions and have criticized its policies in Central Asia, denouncing interference in internal affairs in the name of human rights and democracy promotion. They give support to the Central Asian ruling elites, despite the fact that Russian and Chinese experts have voiced their concerns about the inability of the governments to reform and modernize. The EU's point of view, which is that long-term state stability is possible only with a certain level of political diversity and realistic alternatives, is not shared by Beijing and Moscow nor put into practice by Central Asian regimes.

In security thinking the European approach also diverges from that of Russia and China. In contrast to Russia the EU does not give priority to hard security, and does not seek to

engage the Central Asian states in new strategic alliances. It has not put forward any proposals for regional security structures that might compete with the CSTO. The multilateral and soft-security-based approach of the China-led SCO seems closer to European thinking. Although in practice the EU is unable to agree with the SCO's security narrative, which is modeled on the Chinese concept of the "three evils", and which serves to justify repressive policies in the region.

Another point of contrast with Russia is the fact that Europe unambiguously emphasizes the relationship between long-term security and development. It believes that a commitment to economic development and social well-being is a major element of internal stability. Russia does not hold a counter-narrative, but neither does it consider its actions in Central Asia in such terms, even more so with the current economic crisis and sanctions that followed the Ukrainian crisis. At first glance therefore, Europe seems to share more similarities with the Chinese discourse, insofar as it recognizes that inequalities in wealth and a lack of prospects directly fuel political crises. However, the Chinese definition of development is limited to a socio-economic understanding of the term; the need for political reform is not part of its official preoccupations. Russia, China and the EU therefore have divergences in the prioritization of their interests in Central Asia, as well as in their conceptions of the link between security and development.

Although China and Russia have the capacity to engage on all fronts in Central Asia, they are not without restraint. As spectacular as China's rise in power has been over the last ten years, it may suffer partial setbacks due to domestic difficulties. Such difficulties include growing social unrest and the current slowdown of economic dynamics. For Russia, even if territorial contiguity and cultural legacies are in its favor, the economic crisis and a change in the established political regime at the Kremlin might contribute to a reshaping of Russia-Central Asia relations. Consequently, the evolving context and the need for cooperation between all the regional actors involved in Afghanistan offers the EU a window of opportunity to establish some cooperation with Russia, the Central Asian governments, and maybe even China and other actors such as India and Iran<sup>(2)</sup>.

## Conclusion

None of the external actors has a genuine desire to dominate in Central Asia and to take on direct security involvement unless its own vital territorial interests are at stake. So far, Russia remains Central Asia's main partner in security affairs and prefers other parties to stay out of the region. The EU's support for democratic reform and human rights in the Central Asian states is perceived by Russia and China as interference in Central Asian domestic affairs and as strategies to contain their own influence. Moreover, concerns over competition largely arise from the oil and gas reserves the region has to offer, at a time when all these actors need some new energy resources to sustain their

economic development. However, beyond the contradictory or complementary nature of these external actors, Russia and China's, Turkey and Iran's primary interests are to protect their domestic situations from any destabilization coming from Central Asia. There are therefore potential areas for cooperation, for instance in the development sector, in which the different priorities of the external actors are complementary: food security and humanitarian aid for Russia; Chinese infrastructure projects; and the EU's focus on poverty reduction.

Meanwhile the local governments encourage the competition patterns between external actors, as they enable the regimes to enforce 'multi-vector' strategies by pitting these actors against each other. This results in multiple uncoordinated initiatives over which they can exert greater control. Central Asian regimes are interested in having good links with Europe, which is an alternative to the more direct and substantial influence of Russia and China.

Nevertheless, EU policy will remain torn between different approaches, but with an already visible trend to prioritize energy and security over the values agenda. Even dynamized, the EU Strategy in Central Asia remains without measure compared to the Eastern Partnership (directed toward Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the three South Caucasian states). Meanwhile the status of the Euro area, the economic crisis in Greece and in Ukraine, and the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq (ISIL) divert attention from non-priority areas such as Central Asia. The EU's impact on 'moral' norms of behavior in the region is therefore very likely destined to remain limited.

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1. For more details, see: Marlene Laruelle, Sebastian Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia. Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2012).
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