

Central Asia: A New Priority in EU Policy

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Abstract. This thesis explores the growing significance of Central Asia within the strategic frameworks of the European Union (EU) amid global geopolitical shifts. It examines key factors influencing EU–Central Asia relations, including energy resources, counterterrorism efforts, transport corridors, and economic cooperation. The study traces the evolution of the EU’s strategic interest in the region in the context of recent geopolitical, economic, and energy transformations. Particular attention is given to the EU’s new Central Asia Strategy, adopted in 2019 and updated for the period 2022–2025.

Keywords: Central Asia, European Union, EU strategy, energy, security, economic cooperation, transport corridors, geopolitics, EU foreign policy.

Introduction. Central Asia has emerged as one of the key regions attracting the attention of major global actors, including the European Union (EU). In recent years, the EU has intensified its efforts to strengthen cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, reflecting the region’s growing importance in global geopolitics and economics. Until recently, Central Asia was largely perceived in Europe through the lens of the post-Soviet space; however, it is now acquiring a strategic role in the context of energy security, transit potential, and regional stability. Comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Central Asia has gained increasing prominence in international affairs over the past decades. For the European Union, the region holds strategic significance in both energy and geopolitical dimensions.

Since 2007, the EU has pursued its own strategy for Central Asia, which was updated in 2019 with a renewed focus on sustainable development, regional

connectivity, and security. In 2025, the first EU–Central Asia summit at the level of heads of state was held, marking a significant step toward institutionalizing the dialogue. Over time, the EU’s approach to Central Asia has evolved from a primarily observational and economically oriented stance to one characterized by more active geopolitical and infrastructural engagement, particularly after 2022. [1]

Contemporary EU Priorities in the Region

Geopolitical Context. The influence of Russia and China in Central Asia remains substantial; however, the European Union seeks to develop independent approaches to regional engagement, driven by its ambition to diversify energy sources and strengthen partnerships across the Eurasian space. Another key factor is the intensifying rivalry among major powers, with Central Asia emerging as a strategic “crossroads” of interests for the United States, China, Russia, and the EU. [8]

Amid growing geopolitical challenges and competing spheres of influence, Central Asia has become a stage for strategic competition among the EU, China, Russia, and Turkey. The EU promotes its “soft power” through investments, educational initiatives, and support for governance reforms. Nevertheless, competition with China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s enduring regional presence necessitates a more proactive and coordinated EU policy toward the region. [12]

Economic Cooperation. The European Union is one of the largest trading partners of Central Asia. The EU’s strategic emphasis on infrastructure development, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, technological innovation, and education enhances its attractiveness as a regional partner. Financial instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Instrument, the development of transport corridors, and digitalization initiatives play a crucial role in fostering economic engagement. [3]

Energy Security. Central Asia is rich in hydrocarbon resources, which are of strategic interest to the EU as it seeks to reduce its dependence on Russian and Middle

Eastern energy supplies. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan possess substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, and the development of alternative supply routes contributes to the diversification of the European energy market. In addition to hydrocarbons, the region holds significant reserves of uranium. The EU is committed to diversifying its energy sources, particularly in the wake of reduced reliance on Russian imports. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are regarded as key partners not only in hydrocarbon exports but also in the advancement of renewable energy initiatives. [9]

Transport Corridors and Infrastructure. The construction and development of transport corridors—including the “New Silk Road” initiative and the Eurasian Transport Corridor—contribute to deeper integration between the European Union and Central Asia. The EU supports projects aimed at improving logistics and transport connectivity, thereby reducing the time and cost of freight movement between Europe and Asia. A key priority for the EU is the development of the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), which enables the delivery of goods from China to Europe while bypassing Russia—an especially relevant route amid current geopolitical tensions. The EU is investing in infrastructure projects, including the modernization of ports and railways, to enhance the corridor’s efficiency and reliability. [11]

Security and Counterterrorism. One of the core areas of cooperation is the fight against extremism and terrorism, as well as the prevention of drug trafficking. The EU provides substantial assistance in strengthening the capacity of security forces, enhancing border control, and facilitating information exchange. These efforts help stabilize the region and foster trust between the EU and Central Asian states. Regional security remains a top priority, particularly in light of ongoing instability in Afghanistan. The EU supports programs aimed at combating terrorism, transnational crime, and radicalization, while also promoting the rule of law and human rights. [4]

Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Development. In the context of global climate change, the European Union places increasing emphasis on the environmental dimension of its cooperation with Central Asia. Issues such as water resource management, desertification, and biodiversity protection are addressed through various EU programs and initiatives that offer technological and financial support to the countries of the region. [10]

Cultural and Educational Cooperation. A vital component of the EU's strategy involves fostering cultural exchange and programs aimed at cultivating new generations of leaders capable of engaging with European institutions. Initiatives such as Erasmus+, scientific collaboration, and academic mobility contribute to the strengthening of long-term partnerships. [2]

Digital Transformation and Green Initiatives. Digital transformation is another emerging priority in EU–Central Asia cooperation. The EU supports efforts to enhance digital infrastructure, promote e-governance, and bridge the digital divide, thereby facilitating innovation, connectivity, and inclusive economic growth across the region. The European Union supports digital transformation in the region, including the development of e-governance, cybersecurity, and digital literacy. In parallel, projects related to water resource management, environmental protection, and green energy are being implemented in alignment with the European Green Deal. [6]

Prospects and Challenges. Central Asia occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, making it a key region for the development of transport corridors—such as the Silk Road—and the strengthening of economic ties. The region is also rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and uranium. The EU is particularly interested in diversifying its energy supply sources to reduce dependence on Russia and the Middle East. At the same time, the EU views Central Asia as a region facing potential threats from terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking, necessitating joint

efforts to ensure regional stability. The EU aims to expand trade, invest in infrastructure, energy, digital technologies, and education, thereby contributing to the region's modernization. It also supports democratic transformation, the rule of law, and the improvement of human rights conditions in the Central Asian states. [11]

Challenges and Strategic Outlook. Despite positive momentum, significant challenges persist. These include political instability, authoritarian tendencies in several countries, competition with other geopolitical actors, and limited transparency in resource governance. Russia and China exert considerable influence in the region through organizations such as the CSTO and SCO, as well as through large-scale infrastructure initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, creating strategic competition for the European Union. [5]

Conclusion. Central Asia is becoming an increasingly important component of the European Union's strategic agenda, representing a nexus of economic, energy, transport, and political interests. The region's strategic role in European policy is expected to grow, necessitating a comprehensive and multidimensional approach. Mutually beneficial cooperation can enhance stability and prosperity for both Central Asia and the European Union.

The rising importance of Central Asia in the EU's strategy is driven by the need to diversify foreign policy and economic partnerships, as well as by the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The region is emerging as a key partner in ensuring energy security, developing transport corridors, and advancing sustainable development. To achieve its objectives, the EU must deepen political dialogue, expand economic cooperation, and remain attentive to the interests and priorities of the Central Asian.

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