

### ON THE EVOLUTION AND RECENT CHANGES IN THE STRATEGIC RELATIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

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#### Abstract

In this report, the author expresses his views on the role of the European Union, which is one of the important directions in the foreign policy of the Central Asian republics in the modern era. The researcher has been engaged in this field for many years and tries to separately assess the role of a number of factors connecting Central Asia and the European Union - trade and energy, global security and challenges, the Afghan problem, transport and logistics, etc. According to the author, despite the fact that strategic relations between the parties have been defined as long-term cooperation since the 1990s, certain global geopolitical changes have affected this. In recent years, relations between the regions have been intensifying due to the participation of China and Russia in the region. The convergence of the positions of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries on the Afghan issue, as well as the positive environment in the region, are also contributing significantly to the quality of foreign relations.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, European Union, strategic relations, China and Russia factor, transport and logistics, global security, opening of the region to the world, Afghan issue, multilateral political cooperation

**Introduction.** It is widely known that Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics, located in the heart of Asia, have formed a unique region, inextricably linked with the countries of the world in political, economic, cultural-humanitarian, transport-logistics and energy terms. The common past and future of the republics of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, all of which border Uzbekistan, are based on close ties, and there are also unanimous views on their multilateral political relations with such an integration structure as the European Union

(hereinafter referred to as the EU). According to a report prepared by the European Parliamentary Research Service, “Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the EU began negotiating Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the newly independent states of Central Asia.” These agreements have entered into force with all Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan. During this period, negotiations on future cooperation agreements (Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation) were launched. These agreements are designed for one year, and meetings of the EU and the Central Asian republics on issues such as strengthening diplomatic relations, human rights, justice, home affairs and trade have been held. At the regional level, annual meetings of the EU High Representative and the Foreign Ministers of the five Central Asian republics have been held. The EU also appointed a Special Representative for the region in 2005. The EU’s initial strategy for Central Asia in 2007 defined the region’s place for the EU. In this regard, the document contains the following sentences: “Central Asia has a certain tradition connecting Europe and Asia. The region is strategically located at the crossroads of two continents <sup>1</sup>”.

**Interregional connectivity areas.** The need to scientifically and practically study various aspects of interregional relations is also characteristic of the expansion of democratic statehood based on a market economy around the world. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, even from the launch of the then European Communities’ technical assistance program for newly independent states (TASIS – in force in 1991-2006) to the present, various regional and global projects (TRACECA, BOMCA, CADAP, INOGATE), cooperation mechanisms were mainly aimed at accelerating integration processes in Central Asia and ensuring the integration of the countries of this region into an open, global system<sup>2</sup>. In today's globalization environment, it is difficult to ensure the full development of a country without entering the world financial and investment, information and communication systems. Historically, various connections were established through the Great Silk Road, which served as a large global platform for trade between the countries of the East and the West, as well as the exchange of information, culture,

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unwto.org/silk-road>

## E- Global Congress

Hosted online from Dubai, U. A. E., E - Conference.

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025

**Website:** <https://eglobalcongress.com/index.php/egc>

ISSN (E): 2836-3612

and experience. It is noticeable that the political and diplomatic relations between the countries of Central Asia and the EU have developed at different stages, spanning a period of more than a quarter of a century. Each stage has its own characteristics, which are associated with certain historical processes. In particular, geopolitical factors took precedence in this matter, and the continuation of relations to one degree or another was associated with the interests of the parties, whether they were consistent or contrary to each other. In fact, the early years – the 1990s – were characterized by a certain uncertainty for the EU in the Central Asian region, during which the Union had not yet sufficiently formulated its priority strategy and common foreign policy. The EU's activation in the region was almost identical to that of the United States, one of the world's leading powers and a close partner in global politics, and over the years, differences emerged between them on the issue of Central Asia. This was especially evident in the EU's use of a somewhat different strategy and diplomatic tools from the United States on security issues, and in its independent position on the issue of Afghanistan from New York. Today, it is difficult to even talk about a US-European or Euro-Atlantic alliance on the issue of regional security in Europe<sup>3</sup>.

Also, the EU focused its foreign policy on its neighbors, in particular, on the countries of Eastern Europe, that is, the post-Soviet states located in a relatively close geographical area - the Baltic countries, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan. The EU approached them within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Program and the Neighborhood Policy mechanisms. The possibility of including the countries of Central Asia in this framework was also envisaged. That is, it was assumed that the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe would become members of the EU in the future, and through them there was a possibility of developing neighborly relations with Central Asia. However, this plan did not fully materialize and, with the exception of the Baltic countries, began to cause a lot of problems for the EU. The intensification of competition among the world's major powers, the re-emergence of Russia as a leading geopolitical power at the beginning of the 21st century, and the growth of the economic potential of the PRC have necessitated a review of the EU's "Eastern

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence/news/four-reasons-europe-cant-trust-the-us-to-protect-it-anymore/>

Expansion" plan and a special approach to Central Asia. In addition, one of the factors that somewhat hindered the EU's emergence as a dominant power in Central Asia was Turkey's economic and military strength and its re-establishment of its position in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The existence of historical, cultural, religious, and fraternal ties between Turkey and the peoples of this region played an important role in this.

**Europe's understanding of Central Asia.** During the formation of positions on cooperation between the parties, an atmosphere of mutual trust was created, but the EU did not always take into account the national-state characteristics of the region, the Central Asian states were not sufficiently prepared for political renewal, and the lack of skills in diplomatic relations led to a number of problems remaining unresolved or "frozen". Also, the EU's unilateral approach to the Central Asian issue, demanding that the young republics that had gained new independence and were trying to strengthen their statehood traditions accelerate democratic processes, hindered the consistent development of relations between the regions. One of the main reasons for this was the EU's unilateral conclusions without sufficient consideration of the processes in the internal affairs of the Central Asian states<sup>4</sup>. The deterioration of relations between Turkmenistan and the EU due to sharp criticism of the local government's governance policy (early 2000s), the critical approach of some leading EU countries in information attacks on the Uzbek government over the "Andijan events" (2005) led to a slight weakening of cooperation with them. Also, the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) summit in Tashkent in the fall of 2005 did not bring the expected results for both the EU and the countries of the region. The only exception was mainly Kazakhstan and partly Kyrgyzstan. These countries retained some investment cooperation from the EU.

One of the important stages in the interaction between the EU and Central Asia was the termination of TACIS (Technical Assistance to the CIS countries) in 2006 and the adoption of the "EU New Partnership Strategy for

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<sup>4</sup>[https://www.omct.org/site-resources/legacy/report\\_to\\_the\\_european\\_parliament\\_uzbekistan\\_poverty\\_inequality\\_and\\_violence\\_october\\_2007.pdf](https://www.omct.org/site-resources/legacy/report_to_the_european_parliament_uzbekistan_poverty_inequality_and_violence_october_2007.pdf)

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Central Asia” at the initiative of Germany in 2007. Within the framework of this program, special emphasis was placed on the establishment of both bilateral and multilateral relations. It became clear that it was in the EU’s interest to take into account the internal conditions in the countries of the region. This contributed to the implementation of a number of projects aimed at cultural and humanitarian, judicial and legal reforms, and the creation of an ecological and green economy.

By 2015, the EU side began to conclude “Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements” with the countries of the region, replacing the previously existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs). This information was also widely commented and analyzed in the media.

Indeed, in Eurasia at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, economic, technical-technological, political-cultural, ideological changes occurred that had tectonic consequences. In particular, at one time, the newly independent states began to deviate from their development paths, which, paradoxically, required significant steps in the EU integration project on the old European continent (major enlargement in 2004 and the signing of the Lisbon Treaty on the draft EU Constitution in 2009), as well as for the newly independent Central Asian republics to take a course based on global realities in domestic and foreign policy. For example, the EU, like Western countries and a number of international organizations, has begun to recognize that views on democracy and human rights have changed positively in the countries of Central Asia, which have their own political systems, in line with the historical turning points that have occurred in certain years (changes of presidents in Turkmenistan, acceleration of political reforms in Kyrgyzstan, intensification of foreign policy relations in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, increased political stability in Tajikistan, and the implementation of development projects)<sup>5</sup>. This has been reflected in the statements and speeches of senior officials of the Union, the High Representatives of the EU for Common Foreign and Security Policy, in particular the Special Representatives for Central Asia, as well as in practical actions.

<sup>5</sup> <http://tashkenttimes.uz/world/7695-eu-is-interested-in-strengthening-regional-ties-in-central-asia-says-josep-borrell>



While technical and financial assistance programs aimed at cooperation in international security, the development of democratic and market relations, the implementation of important reforms in the environment, justice, and the judicial system previously occupied a leading place in Central Asia-EU political relations, starting from 2019-2020, comprehensive trade, economic, investment, and transport and logistics cooperation between the countries of our region and the EU based on mutual interest has been intensifying<sup>6</sup>.

It should be noted that the process of cooperation between the parties in the political-diplomatic, economic, cultural-humanitarian, educational and judicial spheres has not been uniform, and this has also been influenced by changes in the foreign policy vectors of the countries of the region and the EU member states. One of the important events in the modern history of the region is, of course, the acquisition of state independence by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and we can say that European countries, as well as the EU, played an important role in their recognition by the world community and gaining their status. Consequently, there is a need for a specific approach to the internal problems inherent in each of the countries of the region, regardless of whether they are related to economic reforms or even human rights. In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize that the political dialogue with the EU has not been uniform in the globalization of Central Asia.

**The revival of the strategic relationship between Central Asia and the European Union.** The adoption of the new Strategy for Central Asia by the EU in 2019 marked a new stage in the history of multilateral relations between the parties. Of course, this was also due to changes in world politics and the renewal that has begun in the region since 2017. After all, from a historical perspective, aspects related to the region's geostrategic position were the cause of stagnation in previous periods. In recent years, however, there has been a revival in mutual relations, and meetings at the level of Central Asia-EU foreign ministers, which have been held since 2004, have begun to be organized in a broader format. For example, on March 10, 2022, a conference was held in Tashkent to launch the new EU “Multiannual

<sup>6</sup><https://mift.uz/uz/news/evropa-ittifoqi-va-uzbekiston-2021-2027-jillarga-mulzhallangan-amkorlikni-kengajtirish-bujicha-jangi-kup-jillik-indikativ-dasturni-ishga-tushirdi>

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Indicative Program” for Uzbekistan for 2021-2027<sup>7</sup>. Another confirmation of the EU's increased attention to the region is the “EU-Central Asia Sustainable Connectivity Forum” and the Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Samarkand on November 17-18, 2022. This event was initially mentioned in the EU's new “Global Gateway” Strategy, adopted on December 1, 2021<sup>8</sup>. According to many European experts and officials, this platform also provides interregional dialogue on common understanding. I believe that it is necessary to study the objective realities surrounding the idea of “new Central Asia” put forward in a broader theoretical and practical way, relying on these and other international processes. There is no doubt that multilateral political relations with the EU will play an important role in this.

In addition, the implementation of the new EU Strategy adopted in 2019, the promotion of foreign investment in Central Asian countries, the popularization of green technologies, the development of regional trade and the diversification of transport and trade corridors are on the agenda at the current stage of interregional cooperation. The EU is interested in expanding mutually beneficial relations with New Uzbekistan in both bilateral and multilateral formats, as emphasized by European experts and officials at high-level meetings and gatherings<sup>9</sup>. Especially considering the new conditions emerging in the system of international relations today after the global pandemic observed since the spring of 2020 and the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Europe, relations with the EU play an important role in increasing the international prestige of New Uzbekistan and jointly combating the problems of sustainable development.

In short, the political and diplomatic relations between the Central Asian countries and the EU initially emerged as a unilateral relationship of the Union and later developed based on various historical events and processes. This was equally influenced by the situation in the region and global factors. In the near future, the expansion of the EU's political relations with Central Asia in a multilateral format, as well as the need for mutual support from international powers and structures such as China, the UN, and Russia, has

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/eu-central-asia-ministerial-meeting-and-first-regional-eu-central-asia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/eu-central-asia-ministerial-meeting-and-first-regional-eu-central-asia_en)

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.iru.org/join-us/events/global-gateway-investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity-2024-01-29>

become even more urgent. The role of the EU in the internationalization of Central Asia has increased, and the institutionalization of development cooperation in the alliance with China has intensified.

**Conclusions and recommendations.** Thus, it was observed that there were differences in the political relations of the EU and Central Asia over the years:

- 1) Despite the fact that extensive research has been conducted in this regard and many specialists have emerged in the field, there is a lack of research that comprehensively studies Central Asia-EU relations using the example of all countries in the region. Even among the few studies that have approached the issue in this context, there are almost no special studies that compare and study each other;
- 2) A number of theoretical views have been expressed about the past, present, and future of bilateral relations. In particular, it is noticeable that Western, including European, experts and researchers, while studying relations with the countries of the region, approached the issue based on their own strategic assessment criteria;
- 3) It is clear that Central Asian experts and researchers expressed their opinions on the development of relations to one degree or another based on the ideology, political system, and state interests of the country to which they belong;
- 4) When studying the issue, not only representatives of Central Asian and EU countries, but also scientists from leading countries of the world, including the USA and Russian experts and researchers, presented their own approaches, and in this, it is noticeable that their views were influenced by the environment to which they belong. It is especially worth noting that, as a result of the “repolarization” that has occurred in recent years, there is no unanimity in the views of researchers belonging to these power centers, while there is relative unanimity on this issue among representatives of the Western world (the USA and the EU), while Russia-centric researchers have developed approaches that are quite different from them.



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