



# The New Great Game

*An opportunity for European Union's Common and Foreign Security Policy*

This paper expresses the views of the author and not the views of the European Institute for Asian Studies. It is selected for the Conference *European Union in the International Affairs V*.

**The New Great Game:**  
**An Opportunity for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy**

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**Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy for Central Asia, utilizing a combination of primary and secondary sources to build an accurate picture of the European strategy in this fundamental area for global order. The study will provide a detailed analysis of the EU pivot to the region between the Caspian Sea and Western China, considering all the pillars of its engagement and the sectors of potential partnership such as energy, trade and security.

The paper argues that major international players such as China, United States, Russia and Europe are positioning themselves on the Eurasian landmass, creating a "New Great Game" for the control of the strategic region defined by Halford Mackinder as the "Heartland". Once again, this geopolitical paradigm seems to be validated, providing the EU with the opportunity to emerge as an important global power in this new complex "chessboard". In particular, while all the other players strive to keep each other in check by focusing on strengthening their security alliances in the area, the European pivot, by contrast, seems to be based on economic, monetary, and soft-power and technological realms.

Among the different theatres where the EU's foreign and security policy is involved, Central Asia represents the perfect litmus test to analyse Europe's influence compared to the other big powers. The paper is thus formulated around the fundamental importance for the EU to obtain a relevant position along the ancient path of the Silk Road. In conclusion, this study aims to determine the steps necessary for the European Union to finally demonstrate its influence and impact as an independent and strong actor within the international scenario.

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## List of abbreviations

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BOMCA	Central Asia Border Management
CADAP	Central Asia Drug Action Programme
CFSP	Common Foreign Security Policy
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
EPCA	Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
GDP	Gross Domestic Production
HLSD	EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NOC	National Oil Company
OBOR	One Belt - One Road
OCSE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Co-operation Agreements
PRIO	Peace Research Institute
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia
WTO	World Trade Organization

## 1 Introduction

The theory of the “New Great Game”<sup>1</sup> led numerous analyses on Central Asia to consider the five republics as “passive pawns” of a chessboard that involves the major international players. Instead, these nations are active actors with their own political agenda, being able to determine foreign policies visible within the international system.<sup>2</sup> The rising interests of major big powers – such as China, the United States and Europe – united with the long-standing Russian attention toward the area are undoubted. Nonetheless, the five countries must be taken into consideration individually for an in-depth study of Central Asia.

This key region has always been “*defined in terms of its common history, shared strategic assets, common concerns and challenges*”.<sup>3</sup> In 1990-1991, with the sudden break-up of the Soviet Union, the five republics of Central Asia obtained their independence. After several decades of uncertainty and instability, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan established their own political bodies after a long period of national building.<sup>4</sup>

From an economic point of view, all the five republics experienced negative trends during the first half of the 1990s, leading to a decrease of the living standards and an increase in economic inequality.<sup>5</sup> The precipitous drop of GDP, caused by the loss of the traditional markets of the USSR, increased the instability in the region (*Table 1*).<sup>6</sup>

Following the dramatic initial transition phase, the GDP per capita started to rise again, in particular in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan thanks to oil exports.<sup>7</sup>

The transition from completely centrally planned to market economies in conjunction with the different policies embraced by governments led to distinctive effects among the five nations. Kazakhstan, owing to its great abundance of oil reserves, was able to reap important economic benefits,<sup>8</sup> becoming the leader of trade and investments within the region.<sup>9</sup> Kyrgyzstan, embracing

Table 1

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Kazakhstan	0	0	-13	-3	-9	-13
Kyrgyz Republic	8	3	-5	-19	-16	-20
Tajikistan	-3	-2	-7	-29	-11	-19
Turkmenistan	-7	2	-5	-5	-10	-17
Uzbekistan	4	2	-1	-11	-2	-4

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	1999 (1989 = 100)
Kazakhstan	-8	1	2	-2	2	63
Kyrgyz Republic	-5	7	10	2	4	63
Tajikistan	-13	-4	2	5	4	44
Turkmenistan	-7	-7	-11	5	16	64
Uzbekistan	-1	2	3	4	4	94

Source: EBRD Transition Report Update, April 2001, p. 15.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2003 (1989 = 100)
Kazakhstan	-2	3	10	14	10	9	7	101
Kyrgyz Rep.	2	4	5	5	0	7	4	78
Tajikistan	5	4	8	10	9	10	6	66
Turkmenistan	7	17	18	12	5	11	9	110
Uzbekistan	4	4	4	4	4	1	3	110

Source: EBRD Transition Report Update, April 2004, p. 16.

Notes: 2003 figures are preliminary actual figures from official government sources. Data for 2004 represent EBRD projections.

<sup>1</sup> Kleveman, L. (2004). *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*, London.

<sup>2</sup> Isaacs R. (2016). *Geopolitics in Central Asia*, Presentation delivered on January 22 at CERIS Brussels.

<sup>3</sup> Maior, G.C., Mihaela M. (2005) The Black Sea region in an enlarged Europe: changing patterns, changing politics, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Pomfret, R. (2006). *The Central Asian Economies Since Independence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.1. retrieved from: <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8279.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Pomfret, R. (2006). *The Central Asian Economies Since Independence*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Kurečić P. (2010). The New Great Game: Rivalry of Geostrategies and Geoeconomies in Central Asia. *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*, 72/1, p.27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Lala, R. (2012, September 29). *European Union - Central Asia relations after the Lisbon Treaty*, Centre for European Studies, p.2.

liberal reforms, was the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>10</sup> Uzbekistan, due to its high population density, chose a more gradual approach maintaining the control over key agricultural products while it privatized few other sectors.<sup>11</sup> Turkmenistan, driven by President Saparmurad Niyazov's personalised government, embraced an isolationist path embedded with regional disengagement adhering to the principles of neutrality.<sup>12</sup> Even with few economic reforms, Turkmenistan could benefit from its great abundance of natural gas reserves.<sup>13</sup>

Although the civil war between the Tajik government and Islamist guerrillas was concluded in 1997, Tajikistan still has problems to exercise full control of its national territory, compromising its growth development.<sup>14</sup>

Despite their different historical paths and development processes, common challenges arose for the five governments with the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> First of all, due to the uniqueness of their geographic position, almost all five republics still have on-going border disputes among them.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the clash over the Caspian Sea's status and the contentious issue of the fertile Fergana Valley, which created the basis for regional rivalry and exacerbated the tensions due to the difficulties in finding a common agreement.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the sudden lack of a central control triggered the spread of organized crime, poverty and lawless areas across the whole Central Asia.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the ethnic groups, left outside the borders of their own countries, undermined the old fragile stability crafted by the Soviet Authority.<sup>19</sup>

The initial stage after independence, for all the five republics, was characterised by a nation-building phase and also by a lack of any particular interest from foreign actors in the region.<sup>20</sup> Spurred by the terrorist attacks of September 11 and in the aftermath of the Afghanistan War, a new phase began for the Central Asian countries.<sup>21</sup> This moment was a watershed for modern Central Asia, because it once again espoused the strategic importance of the region for global stability. The sudden

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<sup>9</sup> Romanowski M. (2016, January 25). The EU in Central Asia: Regional Context, *Directorate-General for External Policies European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, p.4. Retrieved from: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/535020/EXPO\\_IDA\(2016\)535020\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/535020/EXPO_IDA(2016)535020_EN.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Pomfret, R. (2003 July). Central Asian Since 1991: The Experience of the New Independent States, *OECD Development Centre*, Working Paper N.212. p.8. retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/countries/kyrgyzstan/5961227.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Lala, *European Union - Central Asia relations after the Lisbon Treaty*, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Romanowski M, *The EU in Central Asia: Regional Context*, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Pomfret, R. *Central Asian Since 1991: The Experience of the New Independent States*, p.9.

<sup>15</sup> Aubert, L. (2012). The European's Union Policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus: a Coherent Strategy? *Bruges Regional Integration and Global governance Papers*, College of Europe, p.4. Retrieved from: [http://www.cris.unu.edu/fileadmin/workingpapers/BRIGG\\_papers/BRIGG-1-2012\\_Aubert.pdf](http://www.cris.unu.edu/fileadmin/workingpapers/BRIGG_papers/BRIGG-1-2012_Aubert.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, (2002, April 4). Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential, *Asia Report N. 33*. Retrieved from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/033-central-asia-border-disputes-and-conflict-potential.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup> Blandy, C. (1998). The Caucasus Region and Caspian Basin: Change, Complication and Challenge, *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, Report S36, London.

<sup>18</sup> Eisenbaum, B. (2005). *Guerres en Asie centrale: luttes d'influence, pétrole, islamisme et mafias, 1850-2004* Paris: Grasset, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Kurečić, *The New Great Game: Rivalry of Geostrategies and Geoeconomies in Central Asia*, p.22.

<sup>20</sup> Krumm, R. (2007, January). Central Asia The Struggle for Power, Energy and Human Rights, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Compass 2020. pag.3. Retrieved from: [http://www.fes.de/kompass2020/pdf\\_en/CentralAsia.pdf](http://www.fes.de/kompass2020/pdf_en/CentralAsia.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

establishment of foreign presences created the basis for a renewed interest from western governments toward the region, which further opened again itself to influences from outside.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kurečić, *The New Great Game: Rivalry of Geostrategies and Geoeconomies in Central Asia*, p.23.

## 2 The Geostrategic value of Central Asia

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Considered one of the pillars of geopolitics, *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder defined the region – which is currently called Central Asia – as the Heartland. In 1904 while the “Great Game” was still going on, the British geographer theorized a paradigm that carries fundamental implications for any analysis on Central Asia pertinent even today:

*“Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-island;  
Who Rules the World-island commands the World”.*<sup>23</sup>

Although Mackinder’s hypothesis dates back to over a century ago, it still represents a cornerstone to understand the geostrategic value of this area. In particular, the Heartland’s dictum highlights the implications of the control over this sizable region of Eurasia, leading any dominant player in the area to become a supreme actor within the international scenario.<sup>24</sup>

Situated at the crossroads between the Caspian Sea and Western China, Central Asia has always been a strategic region for a variety of reasons. First of all, thanks to its geographic position, it has always represented one of the most important hotspots for world trade. Situated along the path of the Silk Road, it allowed different populations and cultures to enter into contact, leading the economies of Europe and the Middle Kingdom to flourish. Fully aware of the strategic importance of the area, President Xi Jinping, visiting Astana, launched the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) initiative in 2013 to re-establish the ancient economic corridor in a modern-day retelling. With the intention to “*forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region*”,<sup>25</sup> Beijing started to invest deeply in the region.

Pushed by the withdrawal of the United States troops from Afghanistan and encouraged by the decrease of Russian influence across the region, the Chinese government started to engage the five republics with a precise strategy: the so-called “March to the West”(西进).<sup>26</sup> This moment represented a shifting point for the regional dynamics among the five republics, undermining also the historical Russian influence.<sup>27</sup> Although the strong Chinese pivot in the region supplanted Russia’s leading trade role within the five republics, Moscow still retains great political influence in

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<sup>23</sup> Mackinder, H. J. (1962). *The Geographical Pivot of History in Democratic Ideals and Reality*. New York: Norton and Company. p. 261.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, M. Alcenat W. (2008, May 9). *Revisiting the Pivot: The influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics*, Macalster College. Retrieved from: [https://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The\\_Pivot\\_-\\_Alcenat\\_and\\_Scott.pdf](https://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The_Pivot_-_Alcenat_and_Scott.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Witte, M. (2013, September). Xi Jinping Calls For Regional Cooperation Via New Silk Road, *The Astana Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.astanatimes.com/2013/09/xi-jinping-calls-for-regional-cooperation-via-new-silk-road/>.

<sup>26</sup> Among the different factors that drove PRC to Central Asia – such as energy, security and economic development - this plan highlights the renewed interest created to answer the American re-engagement in the Asia-Pacific region as defined by Peking University Professor Wang Jisi.

<sup>27</sup> Yun Sun. (2013, January 31). March West: China’s Response to the U.S. Rebalancing, *Brookings*. Retrieved from: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/01/31-china-us-sun>.

the area.<sup>28</sup> Historically, “Russia’s engagement in Central Asia is multifaceted yet hierarchical”<sup>29</sup>, but the energy sector remained the only one where Moscow maintained a powerful presence through its political leverage and its National Oil Companies (NOCs).<sup>30</sup>

The constant increase in the consumption of resources, by all the global economic powers, has led energy to become “the most important geo-strategic and geo-economic challenge of our time”.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the great abundance of energy resources in the area represents the most important element in the Heartland. “Central Asia today represents one of the world’s last great frontiers for geological survey and analysis, offering opportunities for the discovery, production, transportation, and refining of enormous quantities of oil and gas and other energy resources”.<sup>32</sup> In particular, it is worth mentioning the example of Kazakhstan, which figures amongst the twenty largest oil producers with 2% of global production and the world’s ninth largest proven reserves.<sup>33</sup> While, for natural gas, Turkmenistan is placed sixth in the world with large amount reserves estimated at close to 265 trillion cubic feet.<sup>34</sup>

As a great energy importer, it became fundamental for the EU to diversify its suppliers. In particular, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, the European Member States understood the necessity to decrease the strong dependence on Russia and started to look for different suppliers.

From a global security perspective, Central Asia represents a strategic hub, which is also fundamental for international stability, as confirmed by Dr Stephen Blank: “European and Eurasian Security are indivisible”.<sup>35</sup> Situated along the borders of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, the five republics constantly face security menaces around or along their frontiers due to drug trafficking and organized crime.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the conclusion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission<sup>37</sup> and the Pakistani Zarb-e-Azb operation<sup>38</sup>, are just a few examples that underline the rising tensions in the area.<sup>39</sup> Any increased risk or factor of instability in Central Asia would lead to a

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<sup>28</sup> Nixey, J. (2012 June). The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, *Chatman House*. Retrieved from: [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0612bp\\_nixey.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0612bp_nixey.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Laruelle, M. (2014, September). Russia and Central Asia, *EUCAM Policy Brief*, N.17, p.1. Retrieved from: [http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_icticontent/National-PB17-RU.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/National-PB17-RU.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Oliphant, C. (2013, October). Russia’s Role and Interests in Central Asia, *Saferworld*. p.11.

<sup>31</sup> Friedman, T. (2006, April 30). Gas Pump Geopolitics, pag.7, *The International Herald Tribune*.

<sup>32</sup> Dorian, J.P. (2006). Central Asia: A major emerging energy player in the 21st century, *Energy Policy*, N.34, p. 544.

<sup>33</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhshtan in Switzerland, *Energy Sector*. Retrieved from: [http://www.kazakhstan-bern.ch/en/?page\\_id=370](http://www.kazakhstan-bern.ch/en/?page_id=370).

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA. (2015, July) Retrieved from: <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.cfm?iso=TKM>.

<sup>35</sup> Blank, S. (2014) *European Geostrategy in Central Asia* presentation delivered on 3 December at the 9th lecture of the IES Autumn Lecture Series in Brussels: The Future of European Geostrategy. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npNqksExFH0>.

<sup>36</sup> Boonstra, J. (2009). The EU Strategy for Central Asia says ‘security’ does this include Security Sector Reform? *EUCAM Policy Brief*, N.10, p.1. Retrieved from: [http://fride.org/download/EUCAM\\_PB10\\_UE\\_SRR\\_ENG\\_nov09.pdf](http://fride.org/download/EUCAM_PB10_UE_SRR_ENG_nov09.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Established by the UN in 2001 and concluded in 2014 with the ultimate aim to support Afghan governments and train the troops.

<sup>38</sup> Pakistan offensive (2014-2016) against several militants groups such as: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and al-Qaeda.

<sup>39</sup> Mori S., Taccetti L. (2016). Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia, *EIAS Briefing Paper*, Retrieved from:

dramatic escalation that might ultimately contribute to create an easy breeding ground for Islamic terrorists.<sup>40</sup>

Driven by these strategic interests, the major international actors are positioning themselves in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, leading several scholars to believe that once again Central Asia has become the theatre of a "New Great Game".<sup>41</sup> Central Asia represents a unique scenario where political and economic interests are colliding in a complex chessboard composed of powerful external actors.<sup>42</sup> In particular, the Chinese "One Belt One Road" initiative and the revival of the ancient Silk Road that once traversed Central Asia represent the exceptional chance for a new economic and social prosperity of all regions along the path.<sup>43</sup> The maritime and the land connection - which will be created through investments and infrastructure projects - will unify two of the largest markets in the world.<sup>44</sup>

The current political and economic landscape in Central Asia embodies a unique win-win opportunity for all the actors involved. Indeed, as Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister has stated, the Eurasian continent has entered a new era during which, far from again being the scenario of a New Great Game, it will be a Great Gain for all stakeholders if cooperation prevails over competition.<sup>45</sup>

Within this complex framework, the European Union must strengthen its engagement in this key region, demonstrating once and for all the effectiveness of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), thereby presenting itself as a proactive actor in the international scenario.

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[http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_2016\\_Mori\\_Taccetti\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS_Briefing_Paper_2016_Mori_Taccetti_Central_Asia.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Blank, S. (2014, November 13). Why Central Asian security challenges are relevant to Europe, *European Geostrategy*. Retrieved from: <http://www.europeangeostrategy.org/2014/11/central-asian-security-challenges-relevant-europe/>.

<sup>41</sup> Kleveman, L. *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*.

<sup>42</sup> Makarenko, T. (2009). Central Asia: Where Power, Politics and Economics Collide, *NATO Review*. Retrieved from: [http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2009/asia/central\\_asian\\_geopolitics/en/index.htm](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2009/asia/central_asian_geopolitics/en/index.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Borgoltz, P. A. (2015, December 21). A New Era Heralded Across the Eurasian Continent: an Opportunity for Europe. *EU Logos*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Idrissov E. (2015, November 13). The Great Gain Not the Great Game: How Kazakhstan is Charting its Own Course in the World. *Diplomatic Courier*. Retrieved from: <http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/the-great-gain-not-the-great-game-how-kazakhstan-is-charting-its-own-course-in-the-world/>.

### 3 The EU's Engagement in Central Asia

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"What happens in this region of the world is extremely important for the European Union".<sup>46</sup> With these words the High Representative Federica Mogherini underlined the importance of Central Asia for the EU's external relations. The signing of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) – between the European Union and Kazakhstan – is just another example that shows a new perception of the European institutions towards the region of Central Asia, characterised by a more attentive, thoughtful and strategic approach. A trend reinforced also with the appointment of the new EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia, Peter Burian,<sup>47</sup> and also observed by members of the European Parliament: "Central Asia represents a significant potential in many crucial areas such as security, economic and trade development of the region, good governance and democracy, protection of human rights and the rule of law".<sup>48</sup>

Since the early 1990s, the EU promoted trade and investment in Central Asia throughout the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI).<sup>49</sup> Supporting the transition from post-communist economies, the EU promoted the development of market economy structures. In particular, the Commission launched the program "Central Asia Invest" to support the integration of the five republics' markets encouraging the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).<sup>50</sup> In addition, by investing also in the fields of infrastructure and transportation, the EU supported the *Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia* (TRACECA), aimed to improve regional connectivity and reduce poverty. Through to these particular tools created for developing countries, the EU supported the economic diversification and the regional economic integration of the Central Asian countries, by financing different sectors.

In 2007, the EU created the *Strategy for a New Partnership in Central Asia*.<sup>51</sup> Established with the purpose to create new partnerships and forms of collaboration, this initiative represents the pillar of the European engagement in the "Heartland".<sup>52</sup> In particular, this detailed document indicates the key areas where the EU could share its knowledge and expertise, such as democratisation, education, the rule of law, human rights, energy and trade.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Putz C. (2015). Central Asia 'Extremely Important' to the European Union. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/central-asia-extremely-important-to-the-european-union/>.

<sup>47</sup> Council of the European Union. (2015, April 15). *New EU Special Representative for Central Asia appointed*. Retrieved from:

[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2015/4/40802195251\\_en\\_635883007200000000.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2015/4/40802195251_en_635883007200000000.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Vitkauskaite B. J. (2015, March 22). Central Asia – opportunities, challenges and perspectives: understanding the value of the region. *New Europe*. Retrieved from: <http://neurope.eu/article/central-asia-opportunities-challenges-and-perspectives-understanding-value-region/>.

<sup>49</sup> Boonstra J. and Tsertsvadze, T. (2013, July). Mapping EU Development aid to Central Asia. *EUCAM Factsheet*, n.1. Retrieved from: [http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_ictcontent/EUCAM-FS-1-EN.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/EUCAM-FS-1-EN.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> European Commission. (2015). Central Asia Invest. Retrieved from:

[https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/brochure-central-asia-invest-2015\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/brochure-central-asia-invest-2015_en.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Council of the European Union. (2007, October). *European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*. Retrieved from

[http://eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/2007\\_eu\\_strategy\\_new\\_partnership\\_centralasia\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2007_eu_strategy_new_partnership_centralasia_en.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Melvin, N., Boonstra, J. (2008, October). The EU Strategy in Central Asia @ Year One, *EUCAM Policy Brief*, N.1. Retrieved from: [http://fride.org/download/OP\\_The\\_EU\\_Strategy\\_ENG\\_oct08.pdf](http://fride.org/download/OP_The_EU_Strategy_ENG_oct08.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> European Council. (2007, May). *The European Union and Central Asia: New Partnership in Action*, p.3. Retrieved from: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2010113%202007%20INIT>.

Although that document has already been reviewed four times in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015, the EU top priorities for the area remain constant.<sup>54</sup> Focusing its programs in the region on “*democratic reforms, a modest security portfolio as well as energy interests, not yet crystallized*”,<sup>55</sup> the strategy wants to improve the cooperation between the five republics and the EU. Paying more attention to the clusters with greater potential - such as energy, transport, security, water resources, youth and education - Brussels wants to strengthen its cooperation with Central Asia.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, in 2009, the European Council indicated a list of specific initiatives in order to obtain a stronger visibility in the region:

- “*Establishing a regular political dialogue regionally at ministerial level;*
- *Creating a European Education Initiative and supporting Central Asian countries in the development of an e-silk-highway;*
- *Constituting an EU Rule of Law Initiative;*
- *Establishing a regular, result-oriented Human Rights Dialogue with each of the Central Asian countries;*
- *Instituting a regular energy dialogue with the Central Asian republics*”.<sup>57</sup>

The EU’s deep engagement was also possible owing to the signed of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCA) with all the countries of the region, with the only exception of Turkmenistan.<sup>58</sup> These diplomatic agreements spurred an increase in FDI, a modernisation wave in the abovementioned countries and an improvement of the overall trade turnover with the EU.<sup>59</sup> By promoting the economic development throughout these assistance programs and also several flagship initiatives, the EU became the leading donor in the region, despite the strong presence of Chinese and Russian investments. In particular, the *Multiannual Indicative Program* estimated an overall assistance of over €1 billion for the years 2014-2020.<sup>60</sup> (Table 2).

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<sup>54</sup> Koçak, A.K. (2015, July). EU-Central Asia Dialogue High Level Security Dialogue. *European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing Paper*. Retrieved from:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/565875/EPRS\\_ATA\(2015\)565875\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/565875/EPRS_ATA(2015)565875_EN.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Romanowski M, *The EU in Central Asia: Regional Context*, p.4.

<sup>56</sup> Sabathil, G. (2015, May 20). *New Impulse for the Relations between Europe and Central Asia*. Presentation delivered on 28 August 2014 at the conference Prospects of European Union-Central Asia Relations in Almaty. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ieri.be/sites/default/files/filefield/news/G.%20Sabathil%20New%20Impulse%20in%20EU%20CA%20relations%20final%2021%20mai%20.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> European Council. (2009, June). *The European Union and Central Asia: New Partnership in Action*, p. 11. Retrieved from: [http://eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/2010\\_strategy\\_eu\\_centralasia\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> European Commission External Relations. *EU’s relations with Central Asia - Partnership & Cooperation Agreements*. Retrieved from: [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/central\\_asia/pca/](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/central_asia/pca/).

<sup>59</sup> Sabathil G, *New Impulse for the Relations between Europe and Central Asia*.

<sup>60</sup> European Commission Directorate General for Development and Cooperation. *Multiannual Indicative Programme 2014-2020*. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/mip-2014-2020-central-asia-regional-20140812-en.pdf>.

As one of the world's richest regions in hydrocarbons and natural gas, energy represents a key motivation for the EU's strategic engagement in Central Asia. In particular, the five republics could become strategic partners to fulfill the EU's energy needs. Diversifying the energy suppliers has become a high priority for all the Member States, in order to decrease the dependence on Russia after the 2006 and 2009 gas crises in Ukraine.<sup>61</sup>

Table 2  
Indicative allocations for the Central Asia Regional indicative Programme 2014-2020:

Sector	Amount in million EUR	% (indicative)
Sustainable Regional Development	170	69.4
Regional Security for Development	37.5	15.3
Multi-country Technical Assistance Facility	35	14.3
Support measures	2.5	1
<b>Total Regional CA RIP</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>p.m. ERASMUS +</b>	<b>115</b>	

Source: EU Multiannual Indicative Programme Regional Central Asia

Although the main regional energy producers are keen to collaborate with the EU to attract foreign investors, gaining access to Central Asia's natural resources remains a big obstacle.<sup>62</sup> In this respect, the Baku Initiative, launched in 2004, created the initial multilateral framework to establish a first collaboration between the EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>63</sup> However, despite the strong mutual interests shared by the actors involved, only a few initiatives and projects were concretely developed and transcended the mere policy dialogue.<sup>64</sup> As the failure of the Nabucco and the Transcaspian gas pipelines showed, creating a stable energy collaboration requires, first of all, stronger investments within the infrastructure and transport sectors.

Despite the establishment of this institutionalized structure, the effects of the EU's involvement in the region were limited to a soft policy dimension.<sup>65</sup> In 2012, during the foreign affairs Council meeting, for the first time the Ministers of the Member States focused their declaration on security issues.<sup>66</sup> In particular, the document states that a "close cooperation of Central Asian states with Afghanistan is an important element in promoting security as well as encouraging cross-border trade and people-to-people contacts".<sup>67</sup> The Council's decision set the basis for a different strategy within the five republics, leading the EU to consider the adoption of a more realistic approach.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Wood, S. (2009). Energy Security, Normative Dilemmas, and Institutional Camouflage: Europe's Pragmatism. *Politics and Policy*, N.37(3), p. 619.

<sup>62</sup> Shao, Y. (2008). The EU's Central Asia policy and its implications for China. *Social Science Open Access Repository*, pag.11. Retrieved from: [http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/36870/ssoar-2008-shao-The\\_EUs\\_Central\\_Asia\\_policy.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/36870/ssoar-2008-shao-The_EUs_Central_Asia_policy.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>63</sup> Boonstra, J. (2011, January). The EU's Interests in Central Asia: Integrating Energy, Security and Values Into Coherent Policy. *European Development Co-Operation to 2020*. Working Paper N.9. Retrieved from: [http://www.edc2020.eu/fileadmin/publications/EDC\\_2020\\_Working\\_paper\\_No\\_9\\_The\\_EU%E2%80%99s\\_Interests\\_in\\_Central\\_Asia\\_v2.pdf](http://www.edc2020.eu/fileadmin/publications/EDC_2020_Working_paper_No_9_The_EU%E2%80%99s_Interests_in_Central_Asia_v2.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Gast, A. S. (2014, April 30). A Shift in the EU Strategy for Central Asia. *Carnegie*. Retrieved from: <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=55483>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Council of the European Union. (2012, June 25). *Council Conclusions on Central Asia - 3179th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting*. Retrieved from: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Gast, A Shift in the EU Strategy for Central Asia.

Following this different trend, in 2013, the *EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue* (HLSD) was established to address security issues and shared menaces such as drug trafficking, border control and extremism.<sup>69</sup> This specific dialogue platform became even more important due to the rising extremist and radical movements gradually growing in Central Asia.<sup>70</sup> In particular, the HLSD allowed the establishment of a proactive exchange of views between the EU and the five republics, regarding the increasing menaces and the growing threats to security and stability in the region.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, these summits also had direct effects on the improvement of several initiatives such as the *Joint Plant Action For the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia*<sup>72</sup>, the *Central Asia Border Management* (BOMCA) and the *Central Asia Drug Action Programme* (CADAP).<sup>73</sup>

The renewed European interest in regional security, and the intention to increase the new types of cooperation within the Silk Road has also been remarked by the *EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meetings*. Thanks to these annual conferences, the EU's Member States were able to achieve a more active engagement in the region combining a bilateral approach that manifests the specifics of the five Central Asian republics with a multilateral dimension.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the recent involvement in security issues, the EU's engagement maintains a strong emphasis on democratisation, with the ultimate aim to stimulate the development of Central Asia. An important objective for the Union as underlined by the High Representative Federica Mogherini during her recent visit in Kazakhstan: "...the respect for human rights and the rule of law are also fundamentally important for the socio-economic development and also for the business climate, for the investment climate and [...] strong civil society is also an important element for a successful economy and also for a secure environment".<sup>75</sup>

Within the human rights dimension, the Union collaborates closely with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The organisation is very proactive in Central Asia with several initiatives, as elaborated upon by Ambassador Natalia Zarudna, Head of OSCE Programme Office in Astana: "The OSCE, with an established field presence in all five countries of the region, offers a unique platform not only for further fruitful cooperation between the missions and our host countries, but between the field missions themselves, as we work jointly to strengthen security for the region".<sup>76</sup>

Despite the several initiatives in place and the adoption of a reviewed strategy for Central Asia, several experts believe that the EU must raise its visibility within the five republics due to the

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<sup>69</sup> Koçak, *EU-Central Asia Dialogue High Level Security Dialogue*, pag.1

<sup>70</sup> Mori, S. Taccetti L., *Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia*, pag.5.

<sup>71</sup> European External Action Service. (2015, March 11). *Press Release EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue takes place in Dushanbe*. Retrieved from: [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150311\\_01\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150311_01_en.htm).

<sup>72</sup> United Nations. (2011, November) *Joint Plant Action For the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia*, Retrieved from: [http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/final\\_joint\\_action\\_plan\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/final_joint_action_plan_en.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, International Cooperation and Development, *Central Asia Border Management*, Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia_en).

<sup>74</sup> European External Action Service. (2015, December 21). *Joint Press Release European Union - Central Asia Ministerial Meeting*. Retrieved from: [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/151221\\_01\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/151221_01_en.htm).

<sup>75</sup> Putz C, *Central Asia 'Extremely Important' to the European Union*.

<sup>76</sup> OSCE Press Release (2015, September 16). OSCE Central Asia roundtable features at Parliamentary Assembly Autumn Meeting. Retrieved from: <http://www.osce.org/pa/182456>.

geostrategic importance of the area.<sup>77</sup> In this evolving regional framework, the EU should consider the need to change the its local perception, which portrays Europe more as a donor rather than an active actor such as China and Russia.

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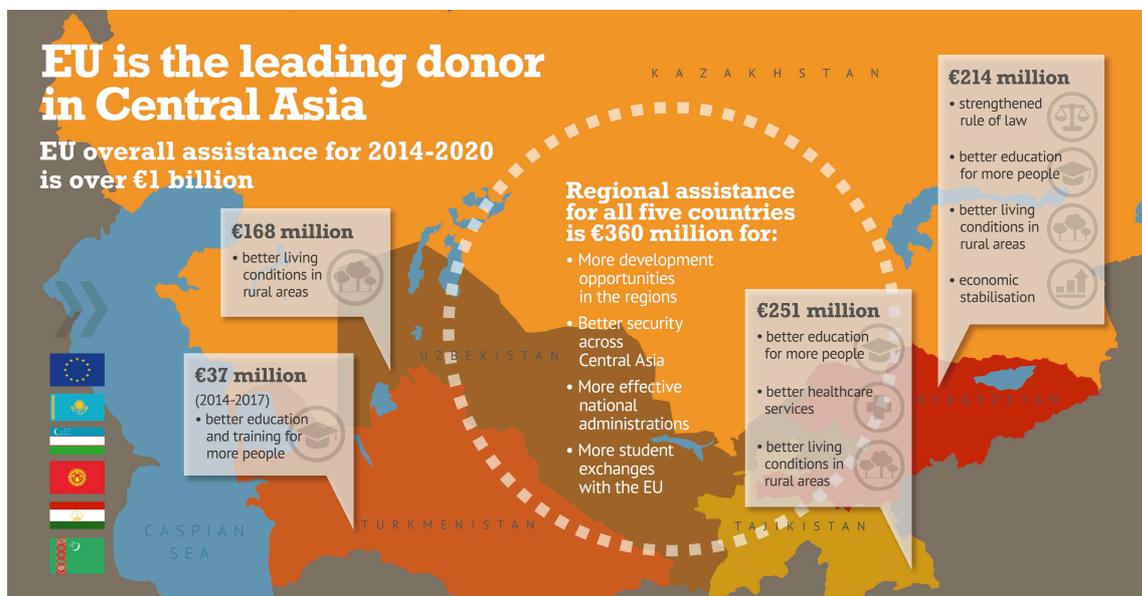
<sup>77</sup> Shao Y, *The EU's Central Asia policy and its implications for China*, pag.9.

## 4 The EU's Engagement through the eyes of the Five Republics

Despite the strong investments from Europe into the region, the five republics still have an unclear perception of the EU's interests, compared with the other international actors involved in the Heartland, in particular China and Russia.

For instance, by trying to rediscover its "near abroad", Russia still plays a strong role in Central Asia despite the arrival of new players.<sup>78</sup> In spite of Russia's willingness to regain certain predominance in the former soviet area, the governments of the region understood that Moscow could no longer provide them with long-term economic support.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, the need for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), united with the launch of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, led the five republics to strongly welcome the Chinese strategy "March West". In particular, Beijing invested in the energy sector, financing infrastructures such as the *Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline* and acquiring the majority of Kazakh energy companies such as *Aktobemunaigaz*.



Source: European External Action Services

With the gradual withdrawal of the mission, the United States does not have a strong presence in the region<sup>80</sup>. Nonetheless, during the first official visit in each of the five republics, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry underlined the importance of maintaining and nurturing diplomatic relations with all the Central Asian republics, and established a new dialogue platform, C5+1.<sup>81</sup> Despite these official visits and statements, the US is still revising its strategy and approach for the Heartland.

<sup>78</sup> Laruelle, M. (2010). Russia and Central Asia. In E. Kavalski (Eds.), *The New Central Asia, the Regional Impact of International Actors*, p. 157. Singapore: World Scientific.

<sup>79</sup> Kazantsev, A. (2010, July). Russian policy in Central Asia in 1991-2010: a disappearing power? *European University Institute Working Papers*. RSCAS 2010/59, p.15.

<sup>80</sup> Aubert, *The European's Union Policy towards Central Asia and South Caucasus: a Coherent Strategy?* p.10.

<sup>81</sup> Putz C. (2015, October 28). US Secretary of State to Visit All Five Central Asian States. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/us-secretary-of-state-to-visit-all-five-central-asian-states/>.

Even if “*the majority’s elites welcomed a unified European approach*”<sup>82</sup>, the tardive development of a strategy for this complex “chessboard”, together with the geographical remoteness, strongly disadvantaged the EU’s involvement in Central Asia. Furthermore, the Soviet heritage created a political context, which has proven far from ideal for multilateral entities such as the European Union. In particular, the leaders of the five republics initially revealing to establish bilateral diplomatic relationships with single Member States, revealing at the beginning a low interest towards engaging the EU bodies.<sup>83</sup>

Due to the political frameworks, gathering information on the public opinion in all the five nations represents a difficult task. Despite the several flagship initiatives and programs supported by Brussels, the common perception is still that the EU lacks a single voice in Central Asia remains prevalent. For the five republics, the strong and concrete nature of Chinese and Russian interests was more attractive than the unclear EU narrative.<sup>84</sup> In particular, Beijing and Moscow have not set strong preconditions for their support, preferring the current status quo guaranteed by the stable five regimes.

While Central Asia’s authoritarian regimes share a certain political affinity with Russia and China, recalling their close friendship at least in official statements. However, in that respect, the same cannot be said of Americans and Europeans, who do not share the same political affinity.<sup>85</sup> Traditionally, these post-soviet countries see the western World as having a single rhetoric, which pursues the so-called “civilising mission” pushing for the liberalization of the economy and democratization.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Central Asian elites and several academics are doubtful about at the rule of law initiatives supported by Brussels, Washington and also OSCE.<sup>87</sup>

A trend also underlined by Professor Rico Isaacs, explains that “*Central Asia governments dislike the idea of western organizations, looking at the EU with suspicion*”.<sup>88</sup> In particular, according to several academics, the Union’s “contradiction” regarding the energy sector caused these frictions. While in the official narratives such as the Strategy for Central Asia, energy collaboration is mentioned just after many other priorities – including human rights, security and education – the local communities seem to be completely aware that the EU’s priority are gas and oil.<sup>89</sup>

Even if the Union allocated €360 million for regional assistance to all the five republics,<sup>90</sup> the difficulty to access EU funding and the excessive bureaucracy represents the major obstacles for local communities and governments. Unfortunately, these perceptions are shared by mostly all of the political elites of the five republics, with some exceptions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where there is a better understanding of the EU and its institutions.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Peyrouse, S. (2014, June). How does Central Asia view the EU? *EUCAM Working Paper*, No. 18, pag.5. Retrieved from: [http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_icticontent/EUCAM-WP18-How-does-Central-Asia-view-the-EU-1\\_01.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-WP18-How-does-Central-Asia-view-the-EU-1_01.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Zhao, L. (2006 March). *Central Asia Political development after the Colour Revolution*, International Social Science Journal.

<sup>86</sup> Mullerson, R. (2007). *Central Asia: A chessboard and Player in the New Great Game*, pag.279. London: Kegan Paul Limited.

<sup>87</sup> Peyrouse, S., *How does Central Asia view the EU?*, pag.6.

<sup>88</sup> Information obtained through interview with Dr. Rico Isaacs of Brookes University.

<sup>89</sup> Peyrouse, S., *How does Central Asia view the EU?* pag.6.

<sup>90</sup> European External Action Service. (2015, December 22). *11th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in Astana*. Retrieved from: [http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2015/211215\\_eu-central\\_asia\\_ministerial\\_meeting\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/211215_eu-central_asia_ministerial_meeting_en.htm).

<sup>91</sup> Peyrouse, S., *How does Central Asia view the EU?* pag.12.

Despite the fragmented picture and confused understanding of the EU in Central Asia, the reappointment of the EU Special Representative (EUSR), Peter Burian, in 2015, opened an opportunity for the Union to renovate its visibility and establish new personalized diplomatic relationships with the five republics. The remarkable increase of budget available, together with the last review of the Strategy for Central Asia have been greatly welcomed by the countries of the region<sup>92</sup> according to the EUSR. Only a strong renewed commitment embraced by Brussels towards the Heartland will create new opportunities and hopes for the EU to be a stronger player in the “New Great Game” in the long-term.

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<sup>92</sup> EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Platform. (2016, February 15). *H.E. Ambassador Peter Burian, Emphasises EU's Engagement on Rule of Law and Human Rights in Central Asia*. Retrieved from: <http://ruleoflaw.eu/interviews/h-e-ambassador-peter-burian-eu-special-representative-for-central-asia-emphasises-eus-engagement-on-rule-of-law-and-human-rights-in-central-asia/>.

## 5 A New Window of Opportunity for the EU's Common and Foreign Security Policy?

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Although Brussels has been engaged with the five republics since their independence and further taken several steps in creating a crucial momentum for strengthening cooperation,<sup>93</sup> there is still room for closer ties, deeper collaboration and the establishment of long-term objectives.<sup>94</sup>

The geostrategic importance of the Heartland pushed Brussels to reconsider its engagement in the area, also because according to several experts, such as Professor Isaacs, "*the European Union lost several opportunities in Central Asia and now has to face stronger competitors*". In particular, experts agreed that two specific moments could have allowed the EU to gain a stronger role in the region. First of all in 2010, during Kazakhstan's Chairmanship of OSCE,<sup>95</sup> when President Nazarbayev created different initiatives such as the "Path to Europe",<sup>96</sup> that could have established a stable dialogue platform, but instead received little feedback from the European counterparts. Secondly, even in the energy sector, according to Professor Isaacs, the EU - with the failure of the Trans Caspian and the eventual establishment of the "Southern Corridor" - missed a unique opportunity to break its energy ties with Russia.<sup>97</sup> According to several academics, these two historical times led to an erosion of trust towards Brussels's institutions, resulting in a lost opportunity to gain a strengthened position within the Heartland.

Despite the past mistakes, the EU can still play a greater role in Central Asia, due to several elements. First of all, due to the particular nature and the uniqueness of the flagship initiatives undertaken, Europe can actively contribute in enabling the essential socio-economic reforms in the five republics. Especially thanks to the implementation of the Strategy, which according to Toivo Klaar, Head of the Central Asian Division of the European External Action Service (EEAS), "...*put a greater stress on the individual approach to each country, considering different needs*".<sup>98</sup> Indeed, while the first versions were more oriented towards the whole region of Central Asia, this last document allows the EU to have a more "ad hoc" approach for each country and establish stronger ties with each one of them.

Another factor to consider in the EU's "New Great Game" engagement is the different and exclusive approach that Brussels can bring to the chessboard as a mediator actor, while Russia and China remain primarily focused on the infrastructure and energy sectors to enable a stable and safer neighborhood in their "vital corridor", thus paying less attention to other areas.<sup>99</sup>

While all the five republics initially welcomed the Chinese "March to the West" - pushed by the intention to reduce the Russian leverage - in the last years the situation has slightly changed. In particular, the systematic sale of strategic national assets to China created a tense public debate. In

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Boonstra, J., *The EU Strategy for Central Asia says 'security' does this include Security Sector Reform?*

<sup>95</sup> OSCE Press Release. (2010, January 1). *Kazakhstan takes over OSCE Chair, seeks to strengthen Organization and advance dialogue on future European security architecture*. Retrieved from: <http://www.osce.org/cio/51810>.

<sup>96</sup> *State Programme The Path of Europe*. (2008). Retrieved from: [http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_ictcontent/path\\_to\\_Europe\\_01.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/path_to_Europe_01.pdf).

<sup>97</sup> Information obtained during interview with Professor Rico Isaacs.

<sup>98</sup> Orazgaliyeva, M. (2015, March 29). EU Planning New Roadmap for Central Asian Strategy. *The Astana Times*. Retrieved from: <http://astanatimes.com/2015/03/eu-planning-new-roadmap-for-central-asian-strategy/>.

<sup>99</sup> Gast, *A Shift in the EU Strategy for Central Asia?*

Kazakhstan, for example, part of the political elite started to look at Beijing as a “*growing threat to economic sovereignty and autonomous development prospects*”.<sup>100</sup>

The local businesses benefit just marginally from the massive investments driven by Chinese national energy companies.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, the original pro-China impetus has been substituted by a “Sinophobic” trend that has been clearly underlined by a former Kazakh ambassador in China: “*We ought not to listen to what Chinese politicians tell us. As a historian, I can tell you that the China of the nineteenth century, that of the twentieth century, and that of the twenty-first century are three different Chinas. But what unites them is the will to expand their territories*”.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, energy issues with Russia also created friction, in particular in 2009, when an explosion along a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Russia halted the flow of gas. According to numerous scholars, - such as the director of the Peace Research Institute (PRIO), Pavel Baev - the explosion was not an accident and “*it was used as a pretext to put a complete stop to all Turkmen gas imports*”<sup>103</sup>, forcing Ashgabat to lower the gas prices.

Viewing Central Asia through the geostrategic prism of the “New Great Game”, Europe has a long way to go in catching up with Russia and China in respect of its long-term visibility and reach of power. Nonetheless, the implications derived from the two giants’ strategy in the “Heartland” may have potentially created another window of opportunity for the EU. Indeed, the frictions with Russia on energy issues and the economic effects of the Chinese “One Belt One Road” Initiative, could lead the five republics to turn with a renewed interest to the “zapad” (West in Russian).

Despite the strong critique directed to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), this policy represents the necessary step to demonstrate once and for all the Union’s effectiveness within the international arena. Since the development of the EU’s foreign policy, it has always been the target of harsh critiques by Eurosceptics and realists.<sup>104</sup> Due to its geostrategic value, Central Asia could represent the perfect theatre where the EU is involved, to affirm the “one single voice” of the EU.

While Russia, China and the United States still seem to be trapped in a neo-colonial great game mentality - often not paying enough attention to all the differences among the Central Asia countries - the EU shows a more thoughtful attitude, attempting to bring an innovative approach through the diplomatic tools and the outlook of the CFSP itself. Fully aware of its multicultural nature, the EU can emerge as a mediator in this complex chessboard, increasing the value of this historical momentum and leading to a mutual gain for all the actors involved, in particular the five republics.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Rousseau R. (2013). Kazakhstan: Continuous Improvement or Stalemate in its Relations with China? *Strategic Analysis*, 37(1), January–February, pag.42.

<sup>101</sup> Peyrouse S. (2016, January). Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7(1), pp.14-23. Retrieved from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366515000251>.

<sup>102</sup> Auezov M. as quoted in Bedesky, Swanstrom N. (2012). *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?* p.102. Oxon.

<sup>103</sup> Baev P. (2009, December 17). China trumps Gazprom. *Moscow Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/china-trumps-gazprom/396292.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Wright N. (2011). The European Union: What Kind of International Actor? *Political Perspective*, 5(2). Retrieved from: [http://www.politicalperspectives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/PPVolume5-Issue2-2011-Wright-1\\_final.pdf](http://www.politicalperspectives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/PPVolume5-Issue2-2011-Wright-1_final.pdf).

<sup>105</sup> Borgoltz, *A New Era Heralded Across the Eurasian Continent: an Opportunity for Europe*.

## 6 Conclusions

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Analysing the last review of Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, it appears clear that EU bodies have reconsidered the significance of Central Asia. It is particularly evident when revisiting EU engagement throughout a more bilateral approach that can lead to a strong interdependence among the Member States and the five republics.

The outstanding geostrategic value of the Heartland, combined with the massive convergence of international actors in the region represent a unique opportunity but also a great challenge for Europe's engagement. Learning from its mistakes, the EU understood that keeping a high image and strong credibility with all the five republics is essential in this ever-developing environment. Despite the difficulty in dealing with some of the Central Asian autocratic regimes, Brussels seems to have identified the specific areas to establish a more fruitful and long-term cooperation. Compared to the other international players, the EU demonstrates awareness on the importance of investing, not only in infrastructure and energy, but also in human capital and rule of law. Even if this approach will not have immediate results in the short-term, supporting the socio-economic development of these younger countries - through the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCIs) - can lead the Union to become a stronger player in the long-term.

Although the implementation of the Strategy focuses less on the regional approach and adopts more ad-hoc initiatives for each of the five republics, further improvements are necessary, particularly because not all the nations of the region are keen to collaborate with some of their neighbours, due to historical frictions and border disputes. Accordingly, before supporting the creation of joint initiatives, the EU needs to create a stable and efficient engagement, throughout a bilateral dialogue platform with each of the "Stans". Once successful projects are concluded and mutual trust is established, the EU will acquire a stronger credibility and a "new wave" of collaboration will spread throughout Central Asia.

The Mediterranean, North Africa and Middle Eastern areas will, owing to rising tensions and volatility within, continue to remain a top priority for the CFSP. However a global actor such as the EU must not underestimate the strategic importance of Central Asia. By mixing soft and hard policies, Brussels can support the political and economic development of the five republics, leading the old path of the Silk Road to flourish once again.

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