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Brussel's new crush

The EU is making eyes at Central Asia. Is it a match made in diplomacy?

Nothing illustrates how the global order has so drastically changed more clearly than how international partnerships have evolved. And there is perhaps no better example than Europe's latest foreign policy: relations with Russia have been freefalling for a decade, reaching their lowest point with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Now there's a new twist: the future of the transatlantic relationship is being called into question for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In this new era, Brussels seems keen to develop and strengthen partnerships with new global players, such as India, and emerging middle powers, such as Central Asia.

Russia's war against Ukraine has monopolised the EU's attention for three years. Yet, there are two other events that suggest Europe is shifting the focus of its foreign policy more towards Central Asia. The first EU-Central Asia Summit is being held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on 3 and 4 April 2025, attended by the EU Commission President and European and Central Asian Heads of State and Government. In the run-up to this event, the 20th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting took place on 27 March — for the first time in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat.

A changing approach

The EU and Central Asia have grown closer over the last three years, especially Germany is forming more of a strategic partnership with the region. Today, the EU is Central Asia's second-largest trading partner and its largest investor, with a share of over 40 per cent. Closer engagement with Central Asia provides an opportunity for the EU to position itself as a key regional player alongside Russia, China and the US, advancing cooperation, peace and security within the region and with others outside of it. Central Asia has long been seen to be of very little relevance to EU external relations, even though there have been cooperation agreements with states in the region since the 1990s. But Brussels' political priorities lay elsewhere. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has been viewed through the lens of domestic political problems, recurring social conflicts and border disputes. With

the launch of the operation in Western Afghanistan, the region gained geopolitical importance as a supportive transit platform.

This was one of the reasons why the EU adopted the first Central Asian political strategy in 2007 — other factors being the growing political and security issues in the wake of EU expansion, as well as energy security following the Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis in 2006. On top of good governance, democratisation and human rights, the strategy focused on diversifying energy supplies and gas and oil imports from the region. But poor communication and differing expectations made collaboration more difficult. The countries of Central Asia did not feel as if they were perceived and treated as equal partners. The relationship was lacking in dynamism and creativity.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has indirectly improved cooperation among countries within Central Asia.

But now the situation has changed and cooperation has been stepped up. Both sides have a growing interest in building up their strategic autonomy in the midst of global power shifts. With oil and gas supplies from Russia being disrupted, Central Asia is becoming a vital energy supplier for Europe. The desire for closer economic cooperation offers both sides the chance to make political waves. Central Asia wants to develop alternative long-term partnerships, diversify trade routes and attract investment, especially for transport and energy infrastructure. On top of that, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has indirectly improved cooperation within the region: in 2023, the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was finally agreed and in 2024, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan settled a decades-long border conflict in March 2025. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which have been competing for regional dominance for decades, signed an alliance agreement in 2022. Together, these developments have secured the region a place as a player in its own right on the international stage.

A new opportunity

The EU now wants to support this process, as demonstrated by the dialogue established in 2022 between the heads of state of Central Asia and the President of the European Council, promoting political

exchange. Moreover, the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia was adopted, which sets out cooperation on energy, climate, rare earths and connectivity. This can be seen as a precursor to a new EU-Central Asia strategy. The EU is also expanding its cooperation with Turkmenistan. The traditionally isolated country is the only one in the region without a current partnership agreement with Brussels but is considered a potentially crucial gas supplier for Europe. The Union is planning further political meetings in Ashgabat as part of the EU for a Green Turkmenistan: Policy Dialogue and Climate Action 2024-2028 initiative.

Central to this cooperation is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or the 'Middle Corridor'. This multimodal land and sea route runs from China via Kazakhstan, partly through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, via the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. The EU is actively pushing to expand the corridor and pledged to invest €10 billion in 2024 under the Global Gateway initiative, designed to boost capacity and efficiency by modernising ports, railway lines and logistics facilities. The aim is to reduce dependence on the Northern Corridor through Russia and on the Southern Corridor via the Suez Canal. The Central Asia countries involved are expecting to gain more modern infrastructure, economic growth and more political leeway with Russia and China. The project is a win-win for both the EU and Central Asia, with the latter emerging as a global infrastructure hub. However, it does come with its challenges, including inadequate transport and port infrastructure, as well as bureaucratic obstacles between countries. For the EU, the project requires close coordination with Washington since USAID is involved. However, given the tense transatlantic relationship, it is not certain whether this cooperation can continue. On top of that, the EU's sanctions policy stands in the way of this cooperation, with several companies from Kazakhstan featuring in the latest EU sanctions package against Russia.

A strategic partnership with Central Asia could give Brussels the potential to improve stability and promote a model of peaceful geopolitical competition.

Despite these hurdles, the Middle Corridor offers an opportunity to strengthen the EU's presence in Eurasia and serve as a model for peaceful geopolitical competition. Neither Russia nor China currently views EU involvement in infrastructure projects as a threat. China actually supported the Middle Corridor at the Belt and Road Forum in October 2023. Russia could connect the corridor to the planned International North–South Transport Corridor, which would open up Russian trade to the Indian

Ocean. Central Asia therefore not only provides the EU with the prospect of diversifying energy partnerships and transport routes. A strategic partnership with the region also gives Brussels the potential to improve stability and promote a model of peaceful geopolitical competition. As the President of the European Council, António Costa, said ahead of the EU-Central Asia Summit, setting the direction for the European strategy: 'We are living in a world of disorder and fragmentation where the only viable solution for the EU is to build stronger partnerships to advance peace and prosperity.'



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