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The EU and Central Asia: New opportunities or ‘the same old song’?

By Elena Korosteleva and Fabienne Bossuyt

On 15 May 2019, the European Union published its long-awaited [new strategy towards Central Asia](#), which was endorsed by the Council of Foreign Affairs on 17 June. The new strategy is to replace [the 2007 EU partnership strategy](#) for the region, which—in the context of wider geopolitical developments at that time—prioritised security and stability associated with the protection of human rights, tackling security threats, and the promotion of EU good governance models. That vision, however, failed to develop traction with the intended recipients. After several attempts to revive the momentum, and in response to the fast-changing domestic politics in Central Asia (cf. Nazarbayev’s stepping down to give way to new leadership and wide-ranging reforms in Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev), the EU has finally come up with a new document after a long and wide consultation process painstakingly driven by EU Special Representative Peter Burian and his team. So, what is ‘new’ in the new strategy, and is it likely to be more appealing for the partners in Central Asia and beyond?

Besides some already well-rehearsed references to prosperity, connectivity, security, mobility, and good governance, the following three themes of the new strategy seem novel and intriguing: (i) a more [pragmatic partnership](#) “**based upon strong mutual interests**”; (ii) “**modern and non-exclusive**” relations to enable the region to become “**a sustainable... and closely interconnected economic and political space**”; and (iii) a more [resilient partnership](#) “**in anticipating and addressing the challenges**” of socio-economic goals and security of the wider region (all emphasis original). Let’s unpack these themes to find out if they are likely to make a difference for the EU relations with the Central Asian region.

A more pragmatic partnership?

Unlike the previous strategy, which tried to portray the EU partnership as being more in the interest of Central Asian countries to achieve stability and prosperity across the region, the new strategy openly acknowledges the equity of interests, and seeks to inject more pragmatism in the relationship, with an intention to unlock both intra- and inter-regional cooperation. Notably, there is a clear realisation that Central Asia is of increasing strategic relevance for the EU, given its “**geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, its share in EU energy imports and the market potential of seventy million inhabitants**, as well as the **EU’s interests in regional security**” (emphasis original). The strategy shows that it is emphatically in the interest of the EU to make the next-generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) work both ways, which, if anything, demonstrates growing maturity of the EU as a foreign policy actor.

On the other hand, while rhetoric may be compelling and innovative, the suggested pathways for its implementation seem less so, setting to “**mobilise the broad set of EU instruments... to guide the programming** of EU assistance and cooperation” (emphasis original), thus reverting back to a familiar ‘one-way’ EU governance mode, which hitherto failed to make an impact.

A non-exclusive partnership?

A second striking feature of the new strategy is the EU's aspiration to forge a “**modern and non-exclusive**” partnership with Central Asian countries. The EU seems very keen on this new element for two reasons: one is that it would allow the union to move beyond the 2007 framework of mainly bilateral relations, to better integrate the region into its multilateral fold of institutional and financial instruments. Multiple references to a raft of strategic region-related documents¹ in support of its composite strategy are particularly instructive. This also refers to developing synergies with the Eastern Partnership countries, and Afghanistan more specifically, thus potentially making the EU impact more coherent and widespread.

The other reason is even more salient. Being aware of the complex geopolitical balancing carried out by Central Asian countries, the EU realises the importance of facilitating a [more inclusive environment](#)—a single “interconnected **economic and political space**”, to be non-exclusive to Russia and China's interests—which in the current context, is a truly novel and ambitious path to follow.

However, while this new vision aligns well with the [EU Global Security Strategy](#) and its intentions to develop ‘cooperative orders’ across the region, = its implementation may be a trickier sailing. The EU, for instance, is still reluctant to formally engage with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan among its members. Its governing modus operandi also appears to be [starkly at odds](#) with how the other principal powers operate in the region. Another complication is that, admittedly, the EU is not ‘the only game in town’, presently offering many thinly spread opportunities, which are yet to win ‘the hearts and minds’ of the people.

A partnership for resilience?

This brings us to **resilience**—both a new element of the EU-Central Asia strategy, and a key concept of the EU foreign and security policy introduced by the EU Global Strategy in 2016. In particular, the strategy pledges to work in partnership with Central Asian countries to anticipate and address challenges of regional reforms, modernisation, and security, which may posit a real [shift in the governance paradigm](#) if the EU were to embrace ‘resilience’ as a way to enhance self-organisation and local ownership. Instead, however, the arresting promise of self-governance in the new strategy quickly turns into an old rehearsal of democracy promotion, human rights, rule of law, and good governance, which before struggled to strike a chord with the region. Even the prospect of working together on implementing the Paris climate commitments, curbing migration, and tackling trans-regional challenges looks more like EU agenda-setting than giving heed to the local and opening up to the needs and voices of the region.

So, is there a promise of a new partnership, or is it the same old song in a new way?

¹ The *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS)*, the *New European Consensus on Development*, the *EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia* and *EU Strategy on Afghanistans*, and the *United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

The 2019 strategy does seem have a more accurate understanding of the region, its complexity, and its aspirations. On this point, the EU explicitly states that it respects the national trajectories, aspirations, and interests of each of its Central Asian partners, and will seek to deepen its engagement and step up cooperation with interested parties to achieve shared goals. Interestingly, fears of compromising EU values under the guise of ‘principled pragmatism’ have not materialised. On the contrary, the EU seems to be seizing the recent wind of change across Central Asian countries—in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in particular—as an opportunity to uphold its commitment to promoting local people’s democracy and to develop shared rules of engagement.

What is now needed is to turn this vision into a real partnership with local communities and to support their aspirations for a better future, which invariably works in a reciprocal way.

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