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EU POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

AN EXTERNALLY CONSTRUCTED REGIONALISM

ABSTRACT Geography and a preference for regional approaches have an impact on EU foreign policy. From the EU perspective, the countries of Central Asia are classified as “neighbors of EU neighbors.” The EU’s policies assume the existence of strong centripetal forces in the Eurasian heartland, whereas in fact the regionalization is still in the initial stages there. Consequently, EU foreign policy in Central Asia pursues both structural and relational objectives. The specific goals and performance of EU member states add a two-tier dimension to this process. In parallel with other external actors such as Japan, the United States, South Korea, and India, the European Union conducts its dialogue and cooperation with the Central Asian states in a 5+1 format. Compared to the policies of China, Turkey, or Russia, the EU has much more limited influence. It primarily aims to support the independent development of the Central Asian countries, for which some degree of regionalization appears to be a prerequisite.

Keywords: EU, foreign policy, regionalism, Central Asia, regional approaches

INTRODUCTION

Every major theoretical school of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) pays special attention to the European Union's external policies. Realism and neo-realism are omnipresent in the field and inform the mainstream of research. Geopolitical explanations also manifest themselves, albeit more rarely. Geography is accepted, explicitly or tacitly, as a factor in the European Union's external interests and activities.

The approaches of Constructivism, widely applied in European studies, are often applicable to EU FPA as well. As a constructivist analytical tool, Walter Carlsnaes¹ suggests scrutinizing the foreign policy act by an actor (a state or other entity) as the building block of international relations. This method implies a three-fold analysis of the preparatory intentional phase of the act, the identity pre-disposition of the actor, and the reaction of the structure (the international system) that boomerangs back to the agency and influences it.

In this vein, Elisabetta Brighi and Christopher Hill argue that foreign policy decisions are best understood through such a strategic-relational model.² This model traces the loops that connect, and blur together ends and means in foreign policy, and sheds light on the agency-structure interdependence.

In an ideational sense, the EU's predicament is to change the international system profoundly, not least through replicating its internal nature and through normative "takeover" of the entire structure of international relations. The strategic-relational model allows us to examine the role of the European Union in Central Asia through surveying priorities and actions that mirror processes within the Union itself. It surmounts the black-and-white dilemma, interests-based versus values-based policies, highlighting the in-betweens, the mixed results from the attempts by the European Union to construe a reality and then to bring it into existence.

Accordingly, the rest of this paper will proceed by attempting to apply the methods of the constructivist school towards the elaboration of a strategic-relational model of EU foreign policy towards Central Asia. To this end, the subsequent sections are structured according to the parts of the three-fold analysis outlined above, viz. an examination of the intentions and identity predisposition of the EU as an actor, and of the reactions towards its foreign policy. Several examples of bilateral and multilateral foreign policy acts will be considered in order to elucidate the principles underlying EU Central Asia policy, which shall be summarized in the conclusion.

¹ W. Carlsnaes, "Actors, Structures, and Foreign Policy Analysis", in S. Smith, A. Hadfield and T. Dunne (eds.) *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, Oxford 2012, p. 127.

² E. Brighi, Ch. Hill, "Implementation and Behaviour", in S. Smith, A. Hadfield and T. Dunne (eds.) *Foreign Policy...*, pp. 147-167.

THE INTENTIONAL PHASE OF EU FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

The behavior of the European Union as an external actor in Central Asia derives from the same principles that the Union declares and pursues in its foreign policy in general.

Most scholars define EU foreign policy as multifaceted or multidimensional.³ It comprises of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), external actions, and the external dimensions of internal policies. All these four components are intricately intertwined. When applied in a particular region, the ratio among the four dimensions may vary according to the local conditions. In Central Asia, there is no CSDP mission, although an intervention was contemplated in 2005 as a response to the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. However, the absence of a CSDP operation does not mean lack of attention to threats and challenges emanating from the region. The security measures migrate to and permeate other policies.

The Global Strategy for the European Union Foreign and Security Policy spells out a comprehensive reference framework. The security of the Union implies external policies to address terrorism, hybrid threats, economic volatility, climate change, and energy insecurity. Every component of this wide-ranging paradigm is applicable to Central Asia, albeit in various degrees of intensity and timelines.

The EU security concerns about the region include nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, prevention of terrorism and drug trafficking, border control, and (during the 2010s) ensuring logistical support to the International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan. The EU seldom acts directly in these areas. It prefers to rely on OSCE and UN mechanisms to react to tensions in and among the five Central Asian countries. For instance, the EU funds the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, based in Ashgabat, as a tool for conflict prevention.

The EU, itself a regional entity, has a natural preference to promote cooperative regional solutions. The Union knows from its own experience of peace and development that regional cooperation makes it easier to manage security concerns and reap economic gains.

Thus, primarily economic interests underpin the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia in the field of trade, energy, and transport connectivity. European companies such as Eni, Shell, and Total are involved in large-scale oil and gas projects in the region. Kazakhstan is the third (non-OPEC) energy supplier to the EU, after Russia and Norway.

Current expectations in Brussels envisage that the economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis will usher rapidly increasing digitalization, transition to a green economy, and more sustainable use of natural resources through a circular economy. It is precisely these pathways to economic reform that the Union encourages and supports in Central Asia. In a sense, the Union reproduces its internal development paradigm in its foreign policy priorities.

³ S. Keukeleire, T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Basingstoke 2014, p. 4.

The EU foreign policy acts also serve certain of its own internal needs. Driven by solidarity, Member States may acquiesce to EU common positions despite their doubts on specific issues, provided said common positions do not touch on their immediate and substantive interests.

The vast array of EU foreign policy objectives spelled out in Article 21 of the Lisbon Treaty finds manifestations in Central Asia, with no specific prioritization arising from the Treaty provisions. Each policy is implemented through its own set of instruments and budgets, that in turn produce hierarchies of priorities of their own. Moreover, in practice some objectives might not be compatible, giving birth to dilemmas, such as choices between maintaining reliable access to energy supplies or supporting the cause of human rights.

Commentators on the EU foreign policy architecture often point out that an overarching single institutional framework exists only on paper. In practice, the powers and responsibilities of the EU's foreign policy actors are determined in interaction through various policy-making methods. Consistency and cohesiveness are sometimes quite difficult to attain. The same problem holds for FPA, as the multifarious and heterogeneous factors summarized above make it difficult to draw any parsimonious generalizations in the intentional aspect of the analysis of EU foreign policy. We must therefore proceed to the next part of our three-fold model.

IDENTITY PREDISPOSITIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS AN ACTOR IN CENTRAL ASIA

The complex, interrelated factors forming the intentions of EU foreign policy similarly influence the construction of its self-image and identity as a foreign policy actor. It is therefore necessary to consider these in turn. A good starting point is the 1973 Declaration on European Identity adopted by the European Council, which underlines the link between identity and foreign policy: *In their external relations, the Nine propose progressively to undertake the definition of their identity in relation to other countries or groups of countries.*⁴

EU foreign policy not only reflects identity content, but also stimulates its formation. As Karolewski observes, *to generate a collective identity, the EU reverts to various identity technologies including the promotion of self-images (such as the 'green Europe' or 'social Europe'), the generation of common symbols (such as the European anthem and the common currency), or the enhancement of common values (for instance, the Charter of Fundamental Rights).*⁵

⁴ CVCE, *Declaration on European Identity*, no. 12, December 1973, Bulletin of the European Communities, Luxembourg, Art. 22, pp. 118-122, at https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32/publishable_en.pdf, 22 October 2021.

⁵ I.P. Karolewski, "European Identity Making and Identity Transfer", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2011), pp. 935-955.

The link between European values and European integration was solidified in relation to the EU's Eastern enlargement at the start of the 21st century. The values of the Union informed the benchmarks for admission, known as the Copenhagen criteria: democratic institutions, market economy, and acceptance of the European *acquis*. When enlargement reached the Western Balkans, additional conditions for membership were set out in the Stabilization and Association process (SAP), mostly related to regional cooperation and good neighborly relations. European integration and regional cooperation became ever more closely intertwined. Emerging from deep conflict, countries of the region had to cooperate on sensitive issues, such as border disputes, refugees, and organized crime.

An example of a specific structure of the cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans is the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, established under the guidance of the South-East European Cooperation Process. The latter grouping emerged as a regional launchpad for the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the most advanced among its members.

The simultaneous deepening and widening of the European Union at the turn of the century gave birth to phenomena like “variable geometry” or “multi-speed” tracks towards accession, or Europe ‘à la carte.’ Enhanced cooperation appeared as an opportunity for newcomers, whereas a minimum of nine EU countries are allowed to establish more advanced integration in an area within EU structures but without the other EU countries being involved. The internal solutions were projected onto the external actions of the Union, and specifically on the various types of contractual arrangements with third countries, ranging from European Agreements to Partnership and Cooperation Agreements.

Geographical definitions of Europe came into play. The Lisbon Treaty texts state that classification as European is *subject to political assessment* by the Commission and more importantly by the European Council. Questions about the criteria of European classification linger concerning countries that are geographically part of Asia as well, such as Russia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan.

Specific frameworks for integration with third countries emerged, including most prominently the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). In May 2009, the Prague Summit launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) designed to bring the six Eastern European neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) closer to the European Union.

THE EU'S ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDENTITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

The term Central Asia, as established in the existing literature, encompasses the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The contours of the region may vary, but the five “stans” make up the core of it.

The framing of the regional context of Central Asia demonstrates a repetition of the same pattern informed by geography through which the European Union defined the vast space beyond the Caspian Sea as inhabited by “neighbors of our neighbors.”

The advent of political independence in Central Asia created a situation that Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch call *sovereignty after empire*, implying a universalization of the Westphalian state system, when hierarchy within an imperial order gives way to international anarchy.⁶ This type of analysis confirms that the construction of Central Asian affairs as a distinct subject matter takes place primarily through the lenses of Western-born concepts. Today, a “non-Western” International Relations theory practically does not exist, although it may be in the making.⁷ Therefore, the application of the Carlsnaes intention-identity-response model becomes even more pertinent to the task of FPA. The reaction of the regional structure to the external intervention may indicate differences in how the initial conditions were assessed locally and from abroad. This may feed in emerging “non-Western theories.”

The EU is an external agency that pronounces the Central Asian region into existence by articulating the boundaries of the region and positioning Central Asian countries into a particular category of states, arranged by geographical proximity to the European continent and eligibility for European vocation. In the words of Iver Neumann, *regions are spoken into existence*.⁸ That is to say, the self-formulation of the EU’s identity as a regional actor, by the very act of self-definition and elaboration of its own foreign policy, simultaneously gives rise to homologous regional identities, such as that of Central Asia. The regional identity thus created is externally constructed, rather than arising through a bottom-up process born of the regional states’ historical experience, in contrast to the EU’s genesis.

Despite similar internal conditions and “multi-vector” foreign policies in the 1990s, the five countries failed in their attempt to setup a regional organization, and more broadly, to embark on a meaningful regionalization of their development strategies. Some commentators explain the failure of the intended Central Asian integrative process by legacy of the Soviet era when the Central Asian republics were deliberately kept from being able to play complementary roles for each other.⁹ Other researchers insist that, for a variety of reasons, the deep divisions that plague the intra-regional relations are *effectively laying to rest for the foreseeable future prospects for the development of an inclusive Central Asian regional identity*.¹⁰

⁶ S. Cummings, R. Hinnebusch, “Introduction”, in S. Cummings, R. Hinnebusch (eds.) *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, Edinburgh 2012, p. 1.

⁷ A. Acharya, B. Buzan, “Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2007), pp. 287-312.

⁸ I. Neumann, “Regionalization and Democratic Consolidation”, in A. Pravda and J. Zielonka (eds.) *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2: *International and Transnational Factors*, Oxford 2001, pp. 56-72.

⁹ S. Blank, *Democratic Prospects in Central Asia*, “World Affairs”, vol. 166, no. 3 (2004), p. 139.

¹⁰ A. Bohr, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order”, *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 3 (2004), p. 492.

Whatever the ultimate underlying reasons, it is evident that the identities of the two regional actors thus arising from the EU-Central Asia policy interactions are fundamentally asymmetric in the degree of elaboration, development, and consequently, capacity for acting according to a unified foreign policy. In order to understand this asymmetry better, we shall now proceed to examine examples of bilateral and multilateral foreign policy acts, which can further elucidate our model of EU foreign policy in Central Asia.

AN EXAMPLE OF A BILATERAL ACT: THE EU-KAZAKHSTAN 2015 ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATION AGREEMENT

The official bilateral relations between the European Union and Kazakhstan began with the establishment of the first EU Delegation in Almaty in 1993 and became contractual in 1999 with the entry into force of a standard type of Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

Some Kazakh authors describe the 2000s as the decade of dominant European orientation in Kazakhstan's foreign policy.¹¹ The interest towards the Copenhagen criteria increased in the context of the Eastern enlargement. A specific strategic partnership crystalized in the four EU-Russia Common Spaces, covering economic issues, mobility, external security, and research and education. The EU launched a Strategy for a New Partnership with the countries of Central Asia.

In 2008 President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev announced three initiatives with relevance to the EU presence in Central Asia: the Special National Program "Road to Europe"; the candidature of Kazakhstan to be elected as OSCE Chairman-in Office in 2010; and the re-establishment of the Central Asian Union.

The decision for the "Road to Europe" strategy was a milestone development that implied structural reforms in the country with the support and encouragement of the European Union. The "Road to Europe" is the one and only reform program in Central Asia inspired externally and aiming to introduce European standards in the economy, science and research, education, and social affairs. Christopher Hill and Michael Smith underline the interdependence produced by the EU's foreign policy: *the EU generates a significant number of international relations with increasing impact on third parties...*¹²

A by-side effect of the European-style reform effort sets Kazakhstan apart from the other countries in the region. In November 2011, the EU embarked on negotiations for a new type, second generation agreement with a third country, namely an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). Kazakhstan became the first ever partner the EU engaged on terms simultaneously akin to an Association

¹¹ P.C. Курмангужин, *Республика Казахстан – Европейский Союз: казахстанские инициативы по сотрудничеству с Евросоюзом (2000-2010)*, Астана 2014, p. 25.

¹² C. Hill, M. Smith, S. Vanhoonacker, *International Relations and the European Union*, Oxford 2011, p. 459.

Agreement and to a Strategic Partnership, like the relationships with South Korea or with South Africa.

In parallel with the EU approach, France, Spain, the UK, and Hungary signed strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan. A kind of sector specialization of EU foreign policy priorities took place among the member states, with different states taking the lead on different agendas: the Netherlands on foreign direct investment, Italy on regional development, Germany on the “green economy,” etc.

The 29 chapters of EPCA were similar in titles and content to their counterparts in an Association Agreement, however with less stringent obligations for the partner country. EPCA essentially follows the complex and comprehensive nature of the reform agenda set out in the national strategic development document, the *Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy*. An examination of both documents suggests that in proposing the EPCA, the EU is not acting as an initiator of change in Kazakhstan, but as a guarantor of the realization of Kazakhstan’s own choice as described in its national strategy.

EPCA implies that Kazakhstan may internalize, albeit partially and selectively, European values. The cooperation extends to foreign policy and security, with a focus on regional stability, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, conflict prevention, and crisis management. The regulatory environment is to be improved in trade and services, business start-ups, capital flow, raw materials and energy, public procurement, and intellectual property.

The EPCA case illustrates the situation that Keohane and Nye term *asymmetric interdependence*.¹³ The negotiations revealed that the more openly a country declared its preference for the expected outcome, the greater its exposure to power influence by the counterpart.

However, there were examples of unusual results from recurrence to conditionality. In 2009, all Kazakh air carriers were blacklisted in the EU Air Safety List under a blanket ban, with the sole exception of Air Astana (owned by a British holding company), which was only partially restricted. In principle, the Air Safety List is a tool to enforce international safety standards in countries with standards less stringent than the EU ones. For updating the list, the Commission is assisted by the EU Air Safety Committee, composed of experts from all EU member states with the support of the European Aviation Safety Agency. All EU actors were involved in the decision taking and implementation.

For seven years, the Kazakh Civil Aviation Committee sought to demonstrate that it was “transparent” about its oversight obligations, and “willing to engage” to resolve safety issues. It had no choice but to solicit and accept European technical assistance. Finally, after improvements on the ground and intense lobbying in Brussels, all Kazakh air carriers were cleared. The Europeanization of the regulatory authority was imposed on it. This experience of the Kazakh aviation industry reveals again the fundamentally asymmetric nature of the EU’s bilateral relations with one of the Central Asian

¹³ R. Keohane, J. Nye Jr., “Power and Interdependence Revisited”, *International Organizations*, vol. 41, no. 4 (1987), p. 727.

states, wherein it uses its superior economic and regulatory position to exact concessions which would be more difficult to achieve if it were facing a regional actor as well-integrated as itself and with a similar level of foreign policy coherence.

Yet this asymmetry extends beyond the economic sphere to the EU's superior ability to project its soft power in a way to influence public opinion in the counterparty state. In 2015, a sociological survey, *Europe through the eyes of Kazakhstanis*, conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute, indicated the following attitudes towards EU-Kazakhstan relations: More than half of respondents (55.4%) evaluated the cooperation as mutually beneficial and fruitful, 15% found it difficult to assess, almost one in ten (11.6%) believed there is no cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan. According to the respondents, Kazakhstan should cooperate mostly with Russia, then with China; the European Union comes on the third place. The following EU member states were considered most important partners: Germany (58%), France (33.4%), and the UK (23.5%).¹⁴ Nearly 80 percent of respondents confirmed the importance of European values and culture. Perceptions about Europe ranged from "important trading partner" and "source of innovative development" to "cultural center." Participating government officials expected measurable benefits in many areas but showed no affinity to EU normative values.

The EPCA with Kazakhstan entered into force in May 2020. The format was replicated in relations with other Central Asian countries. The EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initiated in 2019 and is almost ready for signature. EPCA negotiations with Uzbekistan are nearing completion. The EU is preparing to engage in EPCA negotiations with Tajikistan. The new type of agreements became a gateway to a more modern and diversified bilateral partnerships with Central Asian states that promote cooperation and regulatory convergence. It should come as no surprise that bilateral EPCAs are a preferred foreign policy tool for the EU, as we have seen that the asymmetric interdependence created thereby allows it to extend its influence into the region with relative ease and at little cost. However, it must be noted that EU foreign policy is by no means limited to such bilateral avenues of influence. It is therefore necessary to also consider its multilateral acts, in which it seeks to engage and cooperate with Central Asia as a whole.

AN EXAMPLE OF A MULTILATERAL ACT: THE EU REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA

In the 1990s, the EU assistance to Central Asian beneficiaries was provided under the framework of the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) and channeled through bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs). No specific regional scheme was in place. Brussels treated the countries in the

¹⁴ As per data contained in a research pool commissioned by Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the European Delegation in Kazakhstan, 2015. See about the institute at: <https://opinions.kz/>.

heart of Eurasia on par with the rest of the post-Soviet states. Regional terminology did exist in the European Commission programming, but mainly for budgetary purposes.

The year 2007 marked a watershed. The German Presidency revived the get-up-and-go efforts that led to the Lisbon Treaty. In the general re-structuring, the Commission replaced TACIS with the Development Cooperation Instrument of a universal geographical applicability. The same German Presidency initiated the blueprint for “European Union–Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership.” That document signaled a noteworthy change.

The first EU Strategy for Central Asia comprised seven priority areas: good governance and democratization; youth and education; economic development, trade, and investment; energy and transport; environmental sustainability and water; common threats and challenges; and intercultural dialogue. While most of these areas have technical content, they predicate normative transformation on national and regional scale, and, therefore, invite structural EU policies.

The Strategy rested on three pillars, named platforms: Rule of Law; Education; and Water and Environment. Once again we see the familiar specialization or division of responsibility among member states: the Rule of Law Platform was run by France and Germany, while the Water and Environment Initiative was led by Italy and Romania.

The first major area in which the EU’s Central Asia Strategy sought a multilateral approach targeted at all countries of the region together was the question of water resources management and water security. In April 2008, the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier set up the Water Initiative for Central Asia, paving the way for a structural policy in water management. To date, the Kazakh-German University in Almaty remains focused on water resources management on a regional scale.

The Strategy’s water component was aligned with the 2008 Council Conclusions on “EU Water Diplomacy,” which prescribed integrated water resources management at cross-border level as a conflict preventing instrument. In parallel with the Strategy, the position of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia was established with a mandate to *monitor [...] the implementation process of the EU Strategy* and to *contribute [...] to conflict prevention and resolution*.¹⁵ Several EUSRs, like Pierre Morel (France), Patricia Flor (Germany), and (the incumbent) Peter Burian (Slovakia) served as custodians of the cohesiveness of EU actions.

However, not all multilateral policies have enjoyed the same success and reach as those concerning water resources. As an example of a sector in which the EU has struggled to achieve noteworthy impact in Central Asia, it is useful to consider its attempts at improving the security situation in the region. Normally, EU Special Representatives are appointed in troubled regions to play a role in consolidating peace, stability, and the rule of law. In 2007, the specific situation in Central Asia did not match the standard description of conflict-prone region where the European Union is expected to deploy

¹⁵ G. Grevi, “The EU Special Representative for Central Asia”, in G. Grevi (ed.) *Pioneering Foreign Policy: The EU Special Representatives*, Paris 2007, pp. 119-120, at www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06975.15, 22 September 2021.

a EUSR. Indeed, tragic events occurred in Kyrgyzstan and in Uzbekistan, while economic decline and popular resentment forebode further internal conflicts. However, the ruling elites appeared to hold firmly to power. Trade-offs were underway between stability and transformation. Domestic economic pressure increased the willingness of the Central Asian governments to enter into international agreements. Nevertheless, *the prospects for external good governance promotion in stable authoritarian environments proved to be limited.*¹⁶

The carefully calibrated EU reaction to the repressions by Uzbek security apparatus in Andijan turned out to be inefficient.¹⁷ The EU imposed “symbolic” sanctions: an arms embargo in the absence of trade in military equipment; suspension of the PCA while project implementation continued; visa ban lasting for a year. *The sanctions have turned into an instrument for the Uzbek government to play hardball with the Europeans*, shielded by its strategic importance for the NATO-led operations in Afghanistan.¹⁸

The EU Strategy revealed not only the multifaceted nature of the EU foreign policy but also the dual methods of decision making. The discrepancy became apparent between the Community technical programs and the CFSP foreign policy instruments, while both demonstrated limited ability to exert political pressure. The regional strategy proved to be a ‘living document’ that leaves room for adjustments and amendments, rather than a text set in stone. However, the region itself was also a reality in the making. Growing evidence showed the deepening differentiation among the five countries in terms of export-oriented growth, levels of national income, soft and hard power capabilities. The failure of the initial attempt at integration exacerbated differences and made the one-size-fits-all approach to the group irrelevant and even harmful. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and even Kyrgyzstan began using the regional label as a launching pad for their national foreign policy acts.

It is moreover worthwhile to consider the interesting intersection of the two foreign policy priority areas examined above, viz. water resource management and regional security, which has emerged in the last decade. The two most controversial water and energy projects in the region – The Rogun Hydropower Plant (HPP) and Kambar-Ata 1 Hydropower Plant – have continued to generate intense conflict pitting the countries from the upper (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) and the lower (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) reaches of the Amu Darya and Sar Darya rivers against each other. The fair distribution of transboundary waters remains at stake, but so does competition in energy production and exports.

¹⁶ K. Hoffmann, “The EU in Central Asia: Successful Good Governance Promotion?”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2010), p. 87.

¹⁷ A. Sharshenova, *The Costs and Benefits of the EU-Central Asian Political Cooperation*, UACES 43rd Annual Conference, Leeds, 2-4 September 2013, p. 5, at <http://events.myzen.co.uk/documents/papers/1301/sharshenova.pdf>, 22 October 2021.

¹⁸ A. Schmitz, “Whose Conditionality? The Failure of EU Sanctions on Uzbekistan”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 11 November 2009, at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11944-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-11-11-art-11944.html>, 22 October 2021.

A successful solution was found over the Kamar-Ata 1 HPP through a water management arrangement with the participation of the Russian Federation. In turn, other external actors, including the European Union, attempted mediation over the Rogun dispute. The EU sought to build on an image of an impartial mediator with no hidden agenda and extensive expertise accumulated from the Rhine and Danube International Commissions. The EU commissioned a World Bank Report on environmental safety and the socio-economic aspects of the Rogun project.

The findings of the study were presented to governments and civil society in July 2015, in Almaty. The purpose of the ensuing consultations was to prepare a legally binding water allocation agreement and to strengthen regional regulatory mechanisms through the works of the Intergovernmental Water Allocation Commission and the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). The latter, a residue from an EU project, is the only working regional mechanism involving all five Central Asian states.

These attempts in the area of water resource management have demonstrated and vindicated an approach that takes account of the development – security nexus. Both the Council-led CFSP nonproliferation objectives and the performance of the Commission's Instrument supporting Peace and Stability collided to mitigate the biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) risks in Central Asia. This was partially achieved through projects implemented by the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. ISTC itself is an international organization connecting scientists from several different countries, amongst which, significantly, the European Union is a major State Party.

In this capacity, the EU has tasked ISTC to help remediate the impact of the uranium tailings in Central Asia. The relevant projects include: Regional Water Monitoring System; Transboundary Water and Land Resources Monitoring in the Amu Darya Basin Using Earth Observation and others. Simultaneously, ISTC implements projects of the EU CBRN Center of Excellence in Central Asia, based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. That Center works in Central Asia, but also in Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

This example demonstrates again the EU's capacity and preference for using existing multilateral institutions in order to advance objectives and implement policies arising from its own variegated structure; moreover, it highlights yet another policy priority of its multilateral Central Asian Strategy, science and education. The latter two were the areas of the greatest achievements of the first EU Strategy. Central Asians received sufficient access to the relevant EU funds, (almost) on par with Eastern Europe. Kazakhstan became a member of the European Higher Education Area. All countries from the region benefited from the Erasmus Plus program in academic mobility, as well as from the Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. The EU funded the Internet Network for Research and Education Communities in Central Asia.

The Border Management Program witnessed in recent years a change of actors involved. The implementation of the program was transferred from UNDP to a group of EU Member States: Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Portugal. Similarly, the Central Asian Drugs Program was transferred to the German Development Agency. These

developments are signs that the EU Member States are prepared and willing to come on the front stage and share European experience firsthand, demonstrating further the EU's aptitude to replicate its multilateral experience and structure in the regions whose identity crystallizes as a result of its foreign policy acts.

In the 2010s, the "five plus one" format of cooperation was institutionalized on a ministerial level through the annual EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings and the regular High Level Political and Security Dialogue. The proliferation of this format, which shall be examined more thoroughly in subsequent sections, is further evidence of the influence of the EU's multilateral foreign policy strategy in constructing and consolidating the emerging identity of the Central Asian region. In the 2020s, more and more sectors of civil society across the region are becoming stakeholders in the partnership via the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, as is the private sector via the Central Asian Economic Forum.

In June 2019, the Council adopted the new, updated and amended Strategy for Central Asia. The novelty is the EU determination to forge a more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space.¹⁹ The assumption was that regionalism has yet to be introduced in Central Asia to make it malleable and eligible for 'union-to-union' partnership. Based on its own experience, the EU urged Central Asians *to move towards common rules and a more integrated regional market, to tackle common challenges such as environmental degradation and terrorism, and even to promote peace in Afghanistan*, a suggestion that resembles a neighborhood policy.

The two strategies for Central Asia display change and continuity in EU foreign policy. 'Resilience' became the code word, encompassing the reform processes; human rights and the rule of law promotion; environment protection; and renewable energy and energy efficiency. "Prosperity" was the other key message, describing economic diversification and private sector development, education, connectivity, and disaster response preparedness.

As at the initial steps of the EU approach to Central Asia, in January 2020, at a Conference in Berlin, the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas launched the 'Green Central Asia' initiative, contributing to regional cooperation between the five Central Asian countries and Afghanistan.²⁰ At the same forum, the High Representative Josep Borrell recalled the EU Climate Diplomacy and announced a new project supporting Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to address the security implications of climate change in the Fergana Valley. Such foreign policy initiatives demonstrate the EU's enduring commitment towards promoting the regionalization of Central Asia. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that this process is by no means one-sided or exogenous in its entirety. In order to fully appreciate the contributions of the Central Asian states

¹⁹ Council of The European Union, *Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia*, Doc. no. 10221/19, 17 June 2019, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf>, 22 October 2021.

²⁰ G. Gotev, "Germany Launches 'Green Central Asia' Initiative", *Euractiv*, 28 January 2020, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/germany-launches-green-central-asia-initiative>, 22 October 2021.

as foreign policy actors, as well as those of other third parties to the region, we now turn to an examination of the various responses to the EU's foreign policy, thus completing the third part of our threefold model.

THE REACTION FROM THE REGION

The reactions to the EU multilateral foreign policy acts oftentimes come from think-tanks and academia. Traditionally, the EU is perceived as a benevolent external actor that competes for ideational influence in the region through an open and straightforward agenda. However, the EU policy is assessed as less assertive, flexible, and pragmatic compared to the *Realpolitik* of Russia or China. In the opinion of some regional authors,²¹ the European Union is expected to engage with these two regional powers, and, even more importantly, with Central Asia itself, “one of the specific segments of Eurasia.” According to this logic, Central Asia could act as a bridge between the European Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where in the opinion of some analysts, EU should seek an observer status. The same bridging functions of Central Asia are applicable to the relations between the EU and India and in other contexts. Likewise, the EU should have an observer status in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, construed by Kazakhstan as an “umbrella organization” over the emerging Asian security system.

At the same time, the experts warn against overestimating the Central Asia integration process itself and against mechanical transfers of European experience to the region. The EU should be aware of the limits of its leverage and concentrate on areas of cooperation where it has comparative advantage: education, public health, and environment.²²

The EU Strategy in Central Asia is criticized for slow decision-making on project financing; for overstressing the scope of EU instruments; for insufficient needs assessment; and for vague indicators of efficiency. For example, in the eyes of the beneficiaries, the EU regional project on civil service reform had counterproductive impact by increasing bureaucratic procedures.

In addition to these expert evaluations, institutions have voiced their own opinions. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan submitted a list of priority preferences to which the EU may contribute: export capacity, accession to the World Trade Organization, high-tech technologies, re-direction of European investments from the extractive sector to manufacturing industries, transport infrastructure, etc. Special interest was demonstrated in interaction with the Agency for Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the European Union (FRONTEX), the EU Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), the European Cybercrime Center,

²¹ А.Е. Чеботарёв, М.Ш. Губайдуллина, *Стратегия Европейского Союза в Центральной Азии на 2007-2013 гг.: предварительные итоги*. Алматы 2013.

²² Ibid.

etc. To this end, MFA suggested to revitalize a structure from earlier times with Russian participation: the Central Regional Information and Coordination Center for Combating Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Their Precursors.

In his *Letter from Nur-Sultan*, Murat Laumulin²³ recommended that the Union should combine the regional format with a differentiated attitude, allowing for enhanced and accelerated cooperation with the countries that may wish to do more, sooner, and better than their neighbors could sustain. He also suggested that the EU may revisit the composition of the Eastern Partnership and allow Central Asian countries to join the group.

Experts from the region and Brussels-based think-tanks²⁴ reached independently similar or overlapping recommendations that in Central Asia, the Union should apply the formula the EU used during its own deepening and widening integration. The EU should seek optimal balance between the bilateral and the multilateral relations with Central Asia. The regional format should allow interested partners to move at different speeds and towards different goals than those outside the enhanced cooperation areas. Regional cooperation should also become more flexible in working with just a few Central Asian partners or adding neighboring countries to joint projects.

Analysts who followed the relationships between the Union and its Member States observed that at the renewal of the Strategy, they did not push for an overhaul of policy but aligned themselves with the Commission's interpretation of the Strategy as a useful catalogue of relations with the region.

Brexit will most likely not affect the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. The United Kingdom remains an important partner, as British companies and consultancies remain engaged with EU programs and projects.

Despite the allocation of over €1 billion in support of the EU Strategy, the overall leverage the Union commands in the region remains limited. This situation was recognized by the Council Conclusions of June 2015 where it was noted, *the depth of relations will also depend on the ambitions and needs of individual Central Asian countries to take forward our bilateral relationships*.²⁵

Although the reactions to the Strategy from the region did not contain explicit mention of any form of regional integration, in fact the most important impact is the external act turned out to be the momentum that renewed the consultative summits of Central Asian leaders. We can therefore conclude that in general, the regional system has reacted positively to the EU's Central Asia Strategy and has been influenced by it so as to further its way towards a more regionalized self-conception.

²³ M. Laumulin, "Letter from Nur-Sultan", *Carnegie Europa*, 3 December 2019, at <https://carnegieeuropa.eu/strategieurope/80470>, 22 October 2021.

²⁴ J. Boonstra, T. Tsertsvadze, *Implementation and Review of the European Union – Central Asia Strategy: Recommendations for EU Action*, AFET, European Parliament, 2016.

²⁵ Council of The European Union, *Council Conclusions...*

THE REACTION OF OTHER EXTERNAL ACTORS

Apart from the countries of the region, external actors form a reference group for the measurement of the efficiency and influence of the EU foreign policy acts in Central Asia. One telling indicator in this regard is the spread of the “five plus one” dialogue formula, that the European Union promoted.

The Council points out that the European Union maintains dialogue with other external actors in the region *with a view to seeking synergies between [our] respective policies and initiatives on such issues as security, inter-connectivity, transport, energy, and sustainable development [...]*²⁶ The United States, Russia, and China are the three most important ‘strategic partners’ or competitors of the EU in the region and globally.

The US perspective to Central Asia is consistently tied to Afghanistan and the US military presence there. Defining factors were not the intra-regional processes of Central Asia itself but US policies towards countries adjacent to the region: Russia, China, and the Muslim world. In 2005, US think-tanks developed the concept of “Greater Central Asia,” binding Central Asia and Afghanistan together. Commentators from the region noted²⁷ that the concept was a continuation of another geopolitical project, the Greater Middle East, the area that needed to be stabilized under US leadership. Similar assessment received the US New Silk Road Initiative for a transport corridor between Central and South Asia through Afghanistan.

For a time, the United States interacted intensely on military logistics with Uzbekistan. Former Uzbek president Islam Karimov might have felt encouraged by that interaction to propose his “6+3 Initiative” during the NATO/EAPC Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, aligning European, Russian and US interests with those of the Central Asian states (except Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) in addressing normalization in Afghanistan.

Gradually, the understanding prevailed in Washington about the usefulness of a cooperation framework for a long-term relation with and within the region. In November 2015, in Samarkand, Secretary of State John Kerry launched a new C5 + 1 format, confirming US interest in uniting the region as a single and independent entity. A US Strategy was elaborated in 2015, followed by a second, updated version titled United States Strategy for Central Asia (2019-2025): Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ M. Laumulin, “Central Asia – 2025: Forecasts for the Development of the Region and Individual States of Central Asia and Changes in the International and Geopolitical Situation by 2025”, *Central Asia's Affairs*, vol. 1 (2018), pp. 15-16, at <http://www.kisi.kz/uploads/33/files/ovSsoHVG.pdf>, 22 October 2021.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)*, 5 February 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>, 22 October 2021.

The policy objective the US pursues is to *strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian States, individually and as a region*. The US accepts the regionalization of Central Asia as a *geostrategic region important to United States national security interests, regardless of the level of United States involvement in Afghanistan*.

The evolution of the US position is consonant with the EU foreign policy approach and experience. The content of both the US and the EU strategic documents is very similar, at times almost identical in terminology, such as *prosperity and resilience of Central Asian states*. Like the European Union, the United States intends to emphasize cooperation in those areas where it has a comparative advantage: private-sector engagement; transparent government policies and regulations; etc. The world's dominant power declares readiness to *consult and coordinate with like-minded partners, including the European Union and others with C5+1 platform, to maximize cooperative efforts*.

Chronologically, Japan was the first external actor to use the “five plus one” diplomatic platform in Central Asia. In 1997, Prime Minister Ryūtarō Hashimoto launched the Eurasian Diplomacy initiative, addressed to the vast Eurasian space, including China, Russia, and the newly independent countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Silk Road Action Plan of Prime Minister Keizō Obuchi followed in 1998, offering the Central Asian countries targeted assistance in transport infrastructure and extractive industries.

In 2004, the Central Asia Plus Japan Regular Multilateral Dialogue was launched, comprising the framework of a multilateral dialogue in five areas: “political dialogue,” “development of intra-regional cooperation,” “business promotion,” “intellectual and cultural dialogue,” “communication and human exchange.” The intellectual “Tokyo Dialogue” was conceived as a Track-II diplomacy format.

The primary purpose of the “five plus one” regular multilateral dialogue was meant to channel the Japanese Official Development Assistance, and, ultimately, to serve as a soft power tool. Japan supported projects in such areas as water purification, agriculture, education, public health sector, transport and energy supply systems, etc.

Since 2015 when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Mongolia and Central Asia, the cooperative format acquired the overtones of countering China's Belt and Road Initiative and the operations of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. For that purpose, Japan pledged USD 25 billion investment in the energy sectors of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

Following in the footsteps of Japan, the Republic of Korea (RoK) introduced the “five plus one” format in 2007 through the establishment of the Central Asia-Republic of Korea Forum, the main multilateral consultative organ on cooperation between the RoK and Central Asia. While on a tour to Central Asia and Mongolia in 2011, President Lee Myung-bak placed the forum in the context of South Korea's New Asian Diplomacy, subsequently re-formulated as the New Northern Policy. The Korean scheme replicated the Japanese example to the extent that the focus areas of cooperation were the same: infrastructure projects and natural resources.

Some specific Korean features appeared after the regional tour in 2019 by President Moon Jae. The infrastructure of the cooperation process witnessed speedy

institutionalization, comprising the vice minister-level preparatory meetings, the High-Level Officials' Meetings, the standing Secretariat, the Korea-Central Asia Business Council, and the Foreign Ministerial-level Forum.

At its 13th meeting in November 2020, the Forum discussed a pressing topical agenda: the highly commended RoK's response to COVID-19; public healthcare, remote education, quarantine standardization, response to climate change, and water resources.²⁹

In the context of India's Look North Policy, shared security interests and energy supplies were a driving force behind the engagement with Central Asia. India sought options for connectivity with Central Asia through Iran via the International North-South Transport Corridor expanded to include the Central Asian states. India's growing interest in the region found expression in its 2012 Connect Central Asia Policy with a focus on strategic and security cooperation, including close consultations on Afghanistan, energy and natural resources, as well as connectivity. This strategy describes India's partners as "neighbors of our neighbors."³⁰ It was reinforced in 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian head of government to visit all five nations.

India engaged with the region on a multilateral basis at two levels. The first is through platforms for multilateral cooperation with both the Central Asian states and other external powers. In 2017, New Delhi negotiated a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In the same year, India joined as a full member the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the platform on which India remains connected with Central Asia, but also works collectively with other leading powers in Asia. The second, and more direct level, was set in motion in January 2019, when the first ever India-Central Asia Dialogue, at the Foreign Ministers' level, was convened in Samarkand. A new iteration of the "five plus one" format was chartered.

Pakistan's foreign policy mirrors the Indian encroachment in Central Asia, although backed by more limited resources and different cultural appeal – to Islamic solidarity. In 2015, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif paid official visits to all five countries, signaling the possibility of a "five plus one" dialogue format. In search of 'strategic depth' to restrict India, *chastened by its past failures, Pakistan now embraces more modest regional goals.*³¹

In terms of connectivity with Central Asia, Pakistan has geographically more advantageous position than India. The Gwadar port and related projects under

²⁹ Republic of Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *13th Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Takes Place*, 2 December 2020, at https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=321408, 22 October 2021.

³⁰ R. Menon, R. Sharanya, "Realizing India's Strategic Interests in Central Asia", *Carnegie India*, 1 December 2019, at <https://carnegieindia.org/2019/12/01/realizing-india-s-strategic-interests-in-central-asia-pub-80576>, 22 October 2021.

³¹ C.C. Fair, "Pakistan's Relations with Central Asia: Is Past Prologue?", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2008), pp. 201-227.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor may foster strong ties with the landlocked energy-rich Central Asian states. Despite the hindrance of continuing instability in Afghanistan, projects like the unified electric grid Central Asia-South Asia 1000 (CASA) or the gas pipeline for Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) progress incrementally with the support of external actors.

Pakistan joined SCO as a full member at the same time as India. However, Pakistan belongs to two other organizations that exclude India: the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, a partnership of 11 countries from Central Asia and the Caucasus plus Mongolia, led by China and the Asian Development Bank; and the Economic Cooperation Organization, a joint venture of Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, involving Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. In the unlikely event that Pakistan succeeds in establishing a “five plus one” dialogue with the Central Asians, that new structure may offer little value added outside a higher international prestige of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Turkey is another regional influencer. It faces challenges to match the size of Central Asia with the membership eligibility of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States. The international organization comprises Turkey, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and potentially Turkmenistan, with Hungary as an observer, but excludes Tajikistan for the lack of Turkic identity.

Other Muslim countries also showed a kind of acknowledgement for a blurred Central Asian regional setting when the League of Arab States invited the five countries and Azerbaijan for a “region-to-region” investment discussion in December 2015.

The year 2020 witnessed a breakthrough in the diplomatic regionalization of Central Asia when China and Russia adopted the “five plus one” model in their relations with the region.

On 16 July 2020, China initiated its first meeting, focused on post-COVID-19 recovery, with the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian countries in the “five plus one” format. Traditionally, China preferred bilateral relations with these countries. It also used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that included Russia or the larger in scope Belt and Road Initiative. Seen as relational policy, the Chinese move intended to thwart what Beijing perceived as US encroachment in Central Asia, including accusations related to the pandemic and to the treatment of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang province, culturally and linguistically close to the neighbors across the border.³² The turnaround bears relevance in the context of the “strategic partnership” between the European Union and China in Central Asia where they increasingly act as competing structural powers.

Equally, the EU and Russia perceived each other as direct competitors in what Russia called its ‘Near Abroad’ and the EU described as ‘European neighborhood.’ As Russia strived to achieve symmetric relationship with the EU, it also attempted to recover lost ground and avoid further chipping away at Russian influence in its

³² U. Hashimova, “China Launches 5+1 Format Meetings with Central Asia”, *The Diplomat*, 20 July 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-launches-51-format-meetings-with-central-asia/>, 22 October 2021.

immediate geographic vicinity. Various integrational formats ranging from the Common Security Treaty Organization to the Eurasian Economic Union (where several Central Asian states belong) provide evidence of the resumed assertiveness of the Russian Federation.

On 16 October 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held a meeting with the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian countries in the “five plus one” format. Implicitly, the message was that Russia formally accepts Central Asia as a single region.³³ Commentators noted that the new approach declared in the Joint Ministerial Declaration was reminiscent of the vision, whereas the five regarded Russia not so much as a counterpart but rather a member of the association.³⁴ The experience of the 2000s seems to be repeating itself: at the time, Russia was a member of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), but it did not prevent CACO from dissolution in 2005.³⁵

The spread of the “five plus one” diplomatic dialogue is an indicator of the reaction of the structure (of the international and regional system) to the foreign policy acts by the actors that launched the concept. The hegemon, the United States, endorsed the regionalization of Central Asia and its admissibility to the international arena. Emerging regional states like Japan, South Korea, and India either were among the initiators of the idea or embraced it with appreciation. The dominant regional powers in Asia, China and Russia, acquiescent the idea and introduced the formula in their own foreign policy practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The five Central Asian states conducted Presidential Consultative Meetings in Astana in March 2018 and in Tashkent in October 2019. The third meeting, expected to take place in Bishkek, was postponed because of the political turmoil following the 2020 parliamentary elections to which the partners of Kyrgyzstan reacted by a special declaration of solidarity and a call for reconciliation and rule of law. This suggests a normative approach that members of the community adopt autonomously, without external incentives. Central Asia should be structurally integral, but functionally open. This requires accelerated institutionalization that draws on the lore of other regional organizations, including, in certain aspects, European organizations.

³³ Дж. Оторбаев, *Координируются ли стратегии России и Китая по отношению к Центральной Азии?* 12 January 2021, at <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/koordiniruyutsya-li-strategii-rossii-i-kitaya/>, 22 October 2021.

³⁴ Е. Черненко, *Москва становится Центральной в Азии. Россия меняет подход к политике в регионе*. “Коммерсантъ”, no. 190, 16 October 2020, at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4531609>, 22 October 2021.

³⁵ F. Tolipov, “The Math of Geopolitics in Central Asia”, *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 12 January 2021, at <https://cabar.asia/en/5-1-the-math-of-geopolitics-in-central-asia>, 22 October 2021.

The EU foreign policy acts in Central Asia, bilateral or multilateral in format, reveal the role of the Union in the challenging environment of a dynamic regional system. Previously, the Central Asian integration mechanisms had no lasting presence in it. Integrational tendencies appeared periodically on the regional arena due to external incentives and pressures. In the early 2000s, it was Russia that delivered the impetus for the rise and fall of the Central Asia Cooperation Organization. Moreover, the Central Asians, struggling for survival, helped create the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and glue Russia and China into an uneasy coexistence in this framework. Later, SCO grew exponentially to include India, Pakistan, and potentially Iran, acquiring continental dimensions. Central Asians played connecting role, which they believe they can repeat in the scale of Eurasia by binding in a common space: EU-EEU/SCO-ASEAN.³⁶

In an attempt to balance both Russia and China, Japan and then South Korea introduced the “five plus one” formula of engagement. The idea was adopted by the European Union, which turned out to be an even better implementer inspired by its preference to act on a region-to-region basis. The breakthrough occurred when the US followed suit in applying the “C5+1” format in 2015. India announced its platform in 2019, while the Muslim world still remains unable to use the formula. Finally, in 2020 China and Russia were induced to espouse the “five plus one” as well.

In Central Asia, as elsewhere, the European Union seeks close cooperation with the independent states and a multitude of other external actors. As a result, a regional integration is gathering momentum. The EU proved its mission and ability to bring about change and reform of the international system regionally and globally, while preserving stability and continuity in the world order.

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³⁶ А. Нурша, *Путинская Россия: геополитический рывани или агрессивная оборона?*, Алматы 2018, p. 666.

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