



Recalibrating EU-Central Asia relations

by Eva Gross

The current reassessment of the EU's 2007 Central Asia strategy – in conjunction with the recent appointment, on 15 April, of an EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia – signals a renewed interest in a region that, although not central to EU foreign policy, increasingly hosts strategic challenges which also have implications for Europe. The EU remains Central Asia's most important trading partner, and the past eight years have seen a significant upgrading of the EU's political relations with the five Central Asian republics.

At the same time, a shifting geo-strategic environment – marked by growing Chinese and Russian engagement, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and concerns over the rise of Islamic extremism – has led to a realignment of regional influences and interests. For the EU and its member states, this requires not only (re) assessing bilateral and regional relationships, it also requires Brussels to take into account the changing geopolitical framework of which EU policy is a part.

The new geopolitical landscape

Until recently, Western engagement in Afghanistan and the risk of spill-over of

instability to Kabul's Central Asian neighbours tended to dominate strategic discussions on the region. Today, however, Chinese and Russian engagement in Central Asia is altering the focus of the debate. The Silk Road Economic Belt, as part of a broader Chinese strategic vision, makes Central Asia an integral part of Beijing's attempts to boost its economic ties with the West. By contrast, the recently launched Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is widely regarded as a means for Moscow to extend and project its (hitherto primarily economic) influence in the region.

Motivations differ. China's interests range from fostering stability, accessing resources and markets in Central Asia and expanding trade routes with Europe. Until now, Chinese engagement has focused mainly on economic aspects. But security considerations have increasingly become part of negotiations, mainly on account of the threat of unrest and rising extremism in China's far-flung western region of Xinjiang. As a result, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which both China and Russia are members, could therefore play a more active role in Central Asia in the future.



By contrast, Russia's policy towards the region appears to be driven predominantly by geopolitical considerations. In particular, this means the aim of preserving what Moscow perceives to be its privileged 'sphere of influence'. But while the EEU adds a cohesive framework for the region (Kazakhstan is already a member, Kyrgyzstan is about to join and Tajikistan also plans to do so in the near future) that may obstruct both Chinese and EU inroads into Central Asia, its success as a basis for economic development is doubtful given the backdrop of Western sanctions, fluctuating oil prices, and a struggling Russian economy. The latter is of particular concern for migrant workers from Central Asia, as it severely affects the level of much-needed remittances.

The recent deployment of 500 Russian troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to Tajikistan to take part in military drills (with soldiers from Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Belarus also taking part) – ostensibly in response to a surge in violence in neighbouring Afghanistan – also underlines Moscow's desire to act as a security guarantor once US troops leave the region.

The US is also currently reviewing its approach towards Central Asia so as to take into account the changing geopolitical conditions, as well as the implications of the military drawdown in Afghanistan. The American approach, symbolised by its own New Silk Road strategy, is centred on fostering security, stability and institutional reform, and encouraging the growth of civil society. This project will ensure that Washington continues to pay a moderate level of attention to the region, whilst the recent decision to maintain current troop levels well into 2016 indicates its enduring commitment to ensuring stability in Afghanistan – and, by extension, Central Asia.

Regional challenges

In both geographic and economic terms, Central Asia has significant potential to become

a key transit route and a major exporter of energy resources. While increasing connectivity provides many opportunities, authoritarian regimes, weak institutions, and the growing threat of extremism in an underdeveloped region represent a set of interconnected challenges with transnational dimensions.

These setbacks are being exacerbated by converging demographic trends: 15-64-year-olds account for 61%-67% of Central Asia's population, while a youth bulge means that those 14 or under make up some 25%-35%.

Although Central Asia is by no means a homogeneous region, all the region's countries are facing problematic political transitions and the rise of Islamic extremism. Political repression, also of Islamist movements, has contributed to radicalisation and the spread of jihadism beyond Central Asia – including to Afghanistan, where there are reports of rising numbers of Central Asian fighters, in particular Uzbeks. The 4,000 Central Asians estimated to have travelled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) further proves that tackling extremist interpretations of Islam is a distinctively cross-border challenge.

Ageing leaders and largely symbolic elections earlier this year in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – keeping the region's two longest-serving leaders in power – have highlighted the problem of managing successions while maintaining stability. Uzbekistan, a country with just over 30 million inhabitants (accounting for half of the region's population) and

Central Asia's most repressive regime, returned President Islam Karimov (now 77) to office on 29 March 2015.

Similarly, Kazakhstan – with 17 million inhabitants – held elections a year ahead of schedule on 26 April 2015 to forestall unrest in light of likely further economic decline. Somewhat unconvincingly, incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev won 97.7% of the votes cast. The existence of a large Russian minority – 22% of Kazakhs are ethnic Russians and the country shares a 4,250 km long border with Russia

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– further raises fears over a ‘Ukraine scenario’, in which Moscow intervenes in northern Kazakhstan supposedly to protect the Russian population in the event of widespread instability.

Perhaps as a consequence, although it has joined the EEU, Astana prefers for the organisation to remain an economic rather than political one. For Uzbekistan, relations with the Kremlin are less of a concern, and Tashkent pursues a Central Asian agenda even though the country relies heavily on remittances from migrants working in Russia. And, given Uzbekistan’s troubled relations with its neighbours, any future instability could also negatively affect Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan is set to hold elections in October. Since the 2005 Tulip revolution and the ousting of President Askar Akayev, the country has made modest progress with regard to democratisation. But the country’s interim government, established following the violent clashes in 2010 over the removal of President Kurmanbek, has still failed to effectively curb widespread corruption. Taking place during an economic downturn and with ethnic tensions simmering, particularly with ethnic Uzbeks, the upcoming elections will serve as a litmus test for the strength of civil society and the authoritarian structures in place.

With few exceptions, therefore, Central Asia is a difficult environment for democratisation efforts. This highlights the dilemma of striking a balance between security and human rights concerns, particularly in national contexts where civil society forces are weak and underdeveloped. And although causes of insecurity – and fragility – in Central Asia transcend borders, the absence of trust among the five Central Asian republics has so far hampered regional initiatives that would be capable of addressing common challenges.

Still, Central Asian leaders have met at the highest level, and there is some cooperation on water and energy. That said, the latter two issues are also a source conflict, given, for instance, the ongoing disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over hydroelectric power projects.

Revisiting the EU strategy

In this evolving regional security context, the EU faces a multitude of challenges. It not only

has to reconsider its own position, but also revisit its bilateral and regional initiatives with countries that are not necessarily willing to cooperate on all issues of concern to Brussels. In the context of the ongoing strategic reassessment of the EU’s overall foreign policy goals and instruments, as well as its approach to its neighbourhood, the Central Asia strategy presents an additional opportunity for the EU and its member states to reflect on their own interests and roles, on their collective visibility in Central Asia and, most importantly, on ways and formats in which future engagement can be operationalised in order to maximise its effect.

Conditions now are very different from those when the previous 2007 strategy was formulated. Back then, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the extension of its underlying approach towards Central Asia were largely uncontested. Russia’s regional knowledge of Central Asia also proved helpful for EU policymakers in the past, something which means that Brussels must now either consider new forms of cooperation with Moscow – or find alternatives.

China’s increasing engagement, finally, poses the question of whether or not the EU and its member states could pursue a cooperative approach with Beijing.

Whereas in 2007 the EU had but one regional delegation in Almaty, today Brussels has delegations in four out of the five republics, and is absent only from Turkmenistan. 20 member states maintain embassies in Kazakhstan, but only 10 do so in Uzbekistan – and only Britain, France and Germany have embassies in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This gives the Union a decent opportunity to represent, or assist, member states which lack embassies in Central Asia.

In terms of finance, EU assistance to Central Asia has increased to €1 billion for the 2014-2020 funding period, up from €750 million previously. This increase, combined with the region’s tricky political landscape, means that it is all the more vital that the EU and its member states coordinate and enhance their existing approach.

This is particularly the case given that both the focal areas and diplomatic formats created through the 2007 strategy have yet to be fully exploited.



From 2007 to 2015

The EU has, to date, developed three regional programmes led by individual member states: the rule of law; water and environment; and education. France and Germany take the lead on the rule of law and Italy and Romania on water and environment. Education, however, an area which is key to strengthening civil society and opening up economic opportunities, has yet to find a sponsoring member state.

The EU is also acting through its border management programme (BOMCA), which commands a budget of €5 million for the next three years. But not all Central Asian republics participate fully in border management projects within the region. In addition, border disputes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reflect intra-regional tensions, while the porous 'external' Tajik-Afghan border is plagued by unwillingness to reform border security.

Regarding political consultation mechanisms, the 2007 strategy created a number of platforms for exchange. The key initiative, namely the High-Level Security Dialogue, has not yet come into its own, perhaps, given that the meeting in April 2015 was only the second since the Dialogue began in June 2013. The latest session did show, however, that Central Asian countries are interested in cooperating on extremism and concerned about growing instability in Afghanistan, which bodes well for cooperation in future.

EU influence might therefore increase, although differing preconceptions about how to tackle these problems might yet render cooperation difficult.

Where next

Transferring EU practices to an area which lacks a regional identity remains problematic, particularly given the region's weak security architecture. Although this means that the EU can be flexible in its approaches, it also presupposes a careful calibration of EU and member state instruments, not least because these subjects are highly sensitive politically.

The EU's capacity to leverage its influence varies across different Central Asian countries: the enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Kazakhstan suggests that the EU's influence here can be extended; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain open to engagement, whereas

the EU still lacks leverage in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – although it can continue to engage in dialogues, including on democratic reform and human rights, and to assist with strengthening security along the border(s).

The recent appointment of Slovakian Peter Burian (a former secretary of state, who previously served as ambassador to NATO and the US) as an EUSR is meant to serve as a shot in the arm for the EU's political engagement. His task is to promote EU political coordination in Central Asia, monitor the implementation of the strategy, and support regional security in the region. The pyramidal power structure in Central Asia means that the post is useful and can act as a focal point, as well as lending the EU greater visibility and impact.

When it comes to programmatic aspects of Europe's engagement, however, the EU and its member states must decide which format – regional, bilateral or select groups of member states – is best suited to each particular subject area and commit the necessary resources.

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