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**Mirzokhid Rakhimov**

IN **L'EUROPE EN FORMATION 2015/1 n° 375**, PAGES 140 TO 154

PUBLISHER **CENTRE INTERNATIONAL DE FORMATION EUROPÉENNE**

ISSN 0014-2808

ISBN 9782855051970

DOI 10.3917/eufor.375.0140

Uploaded: 09/25/2015

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-140?!lang=en>



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# Central Asia in the Context of Western and Russian Interests

Mirzokhid Rakhimov

*Dr. Mirzokhid Rakhimov is head of the department for 'Contemporary history and international relations' of the Institute of History of the Academy of Science Uzbekistan and Professor at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent. He is author of numerous publications, contributed chapters to diverse monographs, and is editor of several books, including Sunatillo Jonboboev, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and Reimund Seidelmann (eds), Central Asia today: Countries, Neighbors, and the Region, Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2014. Dr. Rakhimov acknowledges the support of the Directeurs d'études associés mobility program of the Fondation maison des sciences de l'homme, France, for his research in Paris in March 2015, and a Rumsfeld Fellowship to visit the Central Asia and Caucasus Studies Institute of SAIS University of Hopkins, and to meet experts and officials in the USA in April and May 2015.*

## New Geopolitics in Central Asia

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new stage of geopolitical transformation has been taking place in Central Asia. Some experts say that Central Asia is returning to the Great Game of 19<sup>th</sup> century—only with new players. Historically, Central Asia has been in the focus of different empires and states, and one could say that the region has been more or less in a Great Game situation during all periods of its history.<sup>1</sup> There are many factors that make modern Central Asia an important region in the world. Among them are: firstly, the availability of rich energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian region; secondly, the geopolitical location being surrounded by powers such as Russia, China, India, and Iran; and, thirdly, the issue of Afghanistan. As a result, regional and global actors increasingly compete with each other in contemporary Central Asia, encouraged by geopolitical interests and competition for the significant reserves of mineral resources. In this regard, one of the main challenges for providing regional security and stability in Central Asia is the maintenance of a geopolitical balance, especially between Russia, the United States and the EU, as well as the creation

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1. Sadridin Rahimov and Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Multilateral Relations in Central Asia: Status, Challenges, and Prospects," in: Sunatillo Jonboboev, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and Reimund Seidelmann, eds., *Central Asia today: Countries, Neighbors, and the Region*, (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2014), 303-322, here 304-305.

of a multilevel system of partnerships with different countries and international organisations.

The countries of Central Asia have identified their foreign policy priorities in the context of the complex geopolitical and geostrategic realities. They repeatedly expressed their interest in developing relations with Russia, China, the United States, Germany, Japan, and India. They have created a more or less efficient system of checks and balances, in which none of the external actors is in a dominant position that would allow him to shape the countries' fates. Today, all Central Asian states are active subjects, as well as objects of international policy, and are perfectly capable of successfully shaping the interactions of the great powers and foreign institutions appropriate to their politics.<sup>2</sup>

However, although much has been achieved, there have been shortcomings and problems in the development of bilateral and multilateral relations. The tragic events in Ukraine and a serious economic confrontation between Russia and the West since 2014 have an effect on international politics in general and on the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in particular.

### Central Asia and Russia

All the countries of Central Asia define Russia as a major foreign policy priority and recognise its interest in Central Asia. The Russian Federation, in turn, also expresses the importance of developing relations with the countries of the region. However, due to a number of objective and subjective factors, the relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics faces some difficulties. Nonetheless, the Central Asia-Russia relationship, despite some differences in their positions and assessments, is quite pragmatic and covers political, economic, military, educational, and cultural cooperation.

In 2012, after the (re-)election of President Vladimir Putin, Russia introduced some adjustments to its foreign policy priorities. It approved a *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* in 2013 in which the active support of the Eurasian economic integration was defined as the main task of Russian foreign policy: by transforming the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) together with Belarus and Kazakhstan; by contributing to the engagement of other EEC member states in this process; by taking steps to further developing and improving the mechanisms and the legal and regulatory framework of the customs union and the common economic space; and by helping to strengthen the Eurasian Economic Commission

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2. See Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The new Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Central Asia and major powers: complex geopolitics," in: Sunatillo Jonboboev, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and Reimund Seidelmann, eds., *Central Asia. Issues, Problems, and Perspectives*, (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2015), 103-120.

as a common standing regulatory body of the customs union and the common economic space.<sup>3</sup>

Putin uses every opportunity to proclaim his intent of re-establishing Russia as a great power, and he is impressively quiet about the complex and carefully integrated tactics to achieve it.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Armenia and the Kyrgyz Republic joined the Eurasian Economic Union's founders, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. During the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory of the *Great Patriotic War*, Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin signed a partnership agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese initiative *Silk Road Economic Belt* in May 2015. In the document, the two sides vowed to discuss the docking of the two entities, starting with the set-up of a dialogue mechanism for integration.<sup>5</sup> Russia's policy towards Central Asia also faces a number of problems. In particular, it is lacking a clear strategy for Central Asia as a whole as well as for the individual countries. As a consequence, Russia is reacting to external policies and developments rather than acting on the basis of a clear vision.

With 7,591 km—the longest land boundary in the world—Russia only borders Kazakhstan in the Central Asian region. However, it is the leading trade partner of all Central Asian republics. The foreign trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Russia amounted to 23.8 billion US dollars in 2011, with 7.5 billion US dollars exports from Kazakhstan and 16.3 billion US dollars imports from Russia.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, mutual trade between Uzbekistan and Russia was more than 7 billion US dollars, with 5.17 billion US dollars exports from Uzbekistan and 2.45 billion US dollars imports from Russia.<sup>7</sup> Russia has also been an important trade and economic partner of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for many years. Furthermore, Russia has provided considerable economic and military-technical assistance. For example in 2013, Russia supplied arms to Kyrgyzstan totalling about 1 billion US dollars. An aspect that should not be forgotten is the Russian military presence in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz city of Kant hosts a Russian airbase with a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) mandate. Another Russian military base is in Tajikistan.

3. *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013*, unofficial translation, accessed December 20, 2014, [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D).

4. S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Introduction," in: S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and its Discontents, Silk Road Papers and Monographs*, Washington/Stockholm 2014, 9.

5. Tian Shaohui, ed., "China, Russia agree to integrate Belt initiative with EAEU construction," accessed 9 May 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/09/c\\_134222936.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/09/c_134222936.htm).

6. For more details, see website of the Kazakh foreign affairs ministry, accessed September 2, 2013, [http://mfa.gov.kz/ru/#!/foreignpolicy/sotrudnichestvo\\_kazahstana/sotrudnichestvo\\_so\\_stranami\\_sng/sotrudnichestvo\\_republiki\\_kazahstan\\_s\\_rossiyskoy\\_federatsiy/](http://mfa.gov.kz/ru/#!/foreignpolicy/sotrudnichestvo_kazahstana/sotrudnichestvo_so_stranami_sng/sotrudnichestvo_republiki_kazahstan_s_rossiyskoy_federatsiy/).

7. Statistic committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent 2013.

Migration is another important factor in the relations of Central Asia and Russia. According to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service, the natural population in Russia declined by approximately 12.7 million people between 1992 and 2010. At the same time, just 6.5 million people migrated to Russia,<sup>8</sup> which shows the necessity of labour migration to Russia. Corresponding to figures of the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS), in January 2015 the number of Central Asian migrants in Russia was more than 4 million people,<sup>9</sup> of which the largest numbers were migrants from Uzbekistan (2,215,780), Tajikistan (999,132), Kazakhstan (597,559), and Kyrgyzstan (544,956). The Central Bank of Russia estimates that remittances from Russia to Central Asia totalled more than 5 billion US dollars in 2012,<sup>10</sup> with a decreasing tendency in 2013–2014 due to the economic difficulties in Russia caused by international sanctions (mainly of the United States and the EU), the escalation of the situation in Ukraine and other reasons.

The sanctions also had an effect on the further devaluation not only of the Russian rouble, but also of Central Asian currencies, in particular the Kazakh Tenge and the Tajik Somoni. Moreover, the trade relations between the Central Asian republics and Ukraine suffered from the ongoing conflict in the latter; for example, the trade turnover of Uzbekistan and Ukraine fell tenfold since 2014 when it was more than 1 billion US dollars. It should be noted that the foreign ministries of all Central Asian republics are in favour of solving the Ukraine crisis by peaceful means and within the framework of international law.

There are different opinions and views on the Russian approach to Central Asia—varying from considering them as normal interstate relations to characterising them as imperial ambitions. Recent events in Ukraine and especially in Crimea have caused concerns in Central Asia, for instance with regard to the future of Kazakhstan's multi-vectored foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> However, according to Russian experts, Uzbekistan manoeuvring between Russia and Western countries constitutes a consistent course, which allows a maximum freedom of action and decision-making.<sup>12</sup> Relations also have become increasingly stressed over the role of the millions of Russian citizens living as ethnic minorities in the Central Asian republics. In several publications and speeches, discrimination of the Russian lan-

8. Federal State Statistics Service, *Population change by forecast options*, accessed 13 September 2013, [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/demo/progn1.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/progn1.htm).

9. Federal Migration Service, Statistical information on foreign nationals in the territory of the Russian Federation, accessed 26 January 2015, <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/>.

10. *Interesi Rossii v Sentralnoy Azii: sodержanie, perspektivi, ogranichiteli*. Institut vostokovedeniya RAN i Sovet po mejdunarodnim delam, Moskva, 2013, 17.

11. S. Frederick Starr, Bulat Sultanov et al., "Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States," *Silk Road Paper*, September 2014, 10.

12. *Interesi Rossii v Sentralnoy Azii: sodержanie*, 12.

guage in the region is mentioned, despite the fact that Russian remains the most common language in Central Asia. On the other hand, we see a quite complex attitude of the countries of Central Asia towards Russia, which leads to frequent perturbations in the political and economic relations.

Russia's policy in Central Asia is a very important factor, taken into consideration by the US, Chinese and EU policy towards the region. Equally important for the aforementioned countries is the Russian position on Central Asian water and energy issues. Leading Russian scholars and experts regard the "construction [of...] medium hydropower plants on the Naryn River, which will create work places for citizens of Kyrgyzstan" "promising and realistic"<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that other countries in the region—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as a number of leading countries like United States and the EU—are also in favour of the construction of medium and small hydropower plants.

Despite such frictions, there is a whole range of common challenges that pose a serious threat to regional and international security. For example, terrorism and illegal drug trafficking are highly relevant for the countries of Central Asia 'and' Russia, both being used as transit zone of Afghan heroin to Europe. In perspective, Russia needs to develop a clear, open and long-term strategy towards Central Asia, which contains political dialogue as well as cultural aspects and public diplomacy.

### **Central Asia and the USA**

For the Central Asian republics, relations with the United States are important in the context of cooperation with the developed countries of the West, for carrying out democratic and economic reforms in the region. The United States was one of the first Western countries to recognise the Central Asian states' independence and to establish diplomatic relations with all of them. The US strategy towards the Central Asian countries is mainly based on geopolitical reasons. It is a pragmatic approach, which takes into account strategic priorities and interests of the US.

In the early 1990s, US involvement in solving the problems of Central Asia was limited, due to the perception that the region was too remote to be of strategic importance.<sup>14</sup> However, the US Congress passed the law *On Freedom Support* in October 1992, which laid the foundations for a multifaceted assistance to the Central Asian republics, focusing on democratisation and transition to market

13. Ibid, 58.

14. Henry Clarke, "An American view of Uzbekistan," in: *Central Asia Survey*, Vol. 18, 1999: 373-383, here 374.

economies. In parallel, NATO established political and military ties with the Central Asian countries in the framework of the *Partnership for Peace* programme.

In the second half of the 1990s, the US interest in Central Asia increased and relations between the USA and Central Asian republics intensified, mainly with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. At the same time, the countries in the region reconsidered their foreign policies aiming at expanding the partnership with the United States and other leading countries. In 1997, former adviser to the US National Security Council, Zbigniew Brzezinski, urged the American political elites to consolidate and maintain geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia in order to form a future joint Eurasian security system.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in March 1999, the US Congress passed the *Silk Road Law* to support the economic and political independence of the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. This initiative aimed at providing assistance in border protection, maintaining the ban on drugs trade, strengthening non-proliferation, and suppressing transnational criminals, as well as providing humanitarian assistance and supporting the development of free markets and a regional infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> Security and anti-terrorism have become important aspects of the relations of the Central Asian countries and the United States. In April 2000, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced the *Central Asian Border Security Initiative* (CABSI). In September of the same year, the US State Department added the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan to its list of foreign terrorist organisations.<sup>17</sup>

After the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001, the Central Asian countries expressed their support for the United States. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan made their military infrastructure available for military actions of the coalition forces in Afghanistan. In turn, the United States significantly increased their assistance to the countries of Central Asia.

The US policy towards Central Asia is part of a broader strategy which is organically related with Afghanistan, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, the European Union, South Asia, and Middle East. Russia and China certainly play an important role in that *mélange*. It is well known that the promotion of possible new pipeline routes, including the trans-Caspian and trans-Afghan gas pipelines, and the transport corridors would enable the Central Asian countries to get access to international markets and to diversify Western supply of hydrocarbons. However, with the active countering of Russia, the trans-Caspian gas pipeline and the *Nabucco* pipeline for the transport of Turkmen gas through Azerbaijan, Georgia,

15. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "A Geostategy for Eurasia," in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, 1997: 50-64.

16. *Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999*, 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 1-5, accessed 1 June 2015, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/106/hr1152>.

17. *U.S. policy in Central Asia, Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives*, 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, First Session, 6 June 2001, Serial No. 107-121, 10, accessed 1 June 2015, <http://commdocs.house.gov/committees>.

and Turkey to Europe, have not yet been built. Some Chinese analysts argue that the main purpose of United States' activities in Central Asia is the control of Caspian oil, and therefore constitutes a threat to China, Iran, and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

Additional motives for the US policy in Central Asia have been brought by the Obama administration. In summer 2011, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled the *New Silk Road* concept, which involves the creation of infrastructure linking Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan, and trade liberalisation between the two regions. In the framework of the *New Silk Road* initiative, certain results in the construction of highways, bridges, power lines, and railways have been achieved. The United States support the construction of the gas pipeline *Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India* (TAPI), which will transport gas from Turkmenistan and other countries to meet the growing energy needs of South Asia. In 2013, India and Kazakhstan discussed the prospects of the latter's participation in TAPI. Additionally, Uzbekistan could also use the TAPI pipeline for its export. Certainly, energy and transport corridors linking Eurasia and South Asia through Afghanistan will play an important role in the economic future of Afghanistan and in the trans-regional cooperation.

The improvement of the India-Pakistan relations and Afghanistan's stabilisation would be a crucial input into linking South and Central Asia. An active collaboration of Russia, China, the United States, and Iran in this process is necessary. The cooperation of India, Russia, and China in Central Asia is a further undeniable aspect of regional dialogue.<sup>19</sup> Another suggestion of intra-regional cooperation is that India, China, and Iran "*need to evolve multiple strategies for security and economic cooperation in Central Asia, including trilateral framework involving the three*".<sup>20</sup> In this context, the US *New Silk Road* concept can be interpreted as an attempt by the United States to shift the Central Asian region away from the Chinese and Russian orbit and to bring it closer to South Asian countries.

Last but not least, the U.S. backs the *Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation* (CAREC), a programme initiated in 1997 and mainly implemented by the Asian Development Bank. In the period of 1997–2012, in the framework of CAREC, more than 100 projects in the region were funded that resulted in the creation of infrastructure and attracting investments worth more than 20 billion US dollars. In addition, the US supports the accession of Central Asian countries to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are already WTO members, while Kazakhstan has completed the negotiations of its acces-

18. Mark Burles, *Chinese policy toward Russia and the Central Asian republics*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999), 61.

19. People's Daily, "China, India, Russia hold First Trilateral Summit," 18 July 2006, accessed 1 June 2015 [http://english.people.com.cn/200607/18/eng20060718\\_284028.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200607/18/eng20060718_284028.html).

20. Ajay Patnaik, "Central Asia's Security: the Asian Dimension," in: R. R. Sharma, ed., *India and Emerging Asia*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 206-231, here 228.

sion package recently, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan expressed their desire to join. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev stated that WTO accession is “*one of the nation’s foreign trade priorities*” in January 2014. But according to experts Kazakhstan’s WTO accession has been complicated by the questions arising from its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, raised by the EU and the United States.<sup>21</sup>

However, US-Central Asian relations face some difficulties, too. In particular, the Congress and the US State Department have been critical to the socio-economic development of the Central Asian countries. In turn, these have expressed concerns about a double standard approach of the US with regards to human rights issues. Furthermore, neither private US organisations nor the US government are investing enough to stem the economic and political challenges of the region, and the new Silk Road initiative is just of symbolic value, since the funding for it is not sufficient.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the *Afghan factor* in the US policy on Central Asia cannot be denied. Afghanistan is a strategically important country in terms of its geographical location between large countries whose interests are very different and sometimes conflicting with those of the United States. Moreover, as already mentioned, Afghanistan is crucial for the development of relations between Central and South Asia. In this regard, the withdrawal of most of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan since 2014, leaving only 12,000 soldiers, might further deteriorate the security situation in Afghanistan and have a negative impact on Central Asia. It can be assumed that the Central Asian countries will continue their cooperation with the United States and NATO in the framework of various projects and programs. Due to their foreign policy concepts, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan will not host foreign military contingents. However, in the case of the expansion of extremists’ forces from Afghanistan to Central Asia, the republics will be forced to strengthen their military capabilities and extend their military partnership with major powers.

With regard to China’s role in the region, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken pointed out that “[...] *today, we have three important objectives for our engagement with each of the Central Asian states: strengthening partnerships to advance mutual security; forging closer economic ties; and advancing and advocating for improved governance and human rights [...]. China looms large in the region with its ambitious plans to advance Asian connectivity through overland and maritime routes. It committed tens of billions of dollars to building roads and rails to better connect its factories and markets in Asia and Europe. And we support these*

21. Starr, Sultanov et al., “Looking Forward,” 31-34.

22. Stephen Blank, “Introduction,” in: Stephen Blank, ed., *Central Asia after 2014, Carlisle: The US Army War* (College Press, 2013), 1-12, here 7.

*efforts to connect the region, but we also urge that they advance trade in all directions and adhere to international norms. We don't see China's involvement in Central Asia in zero-sum terms. Its development of infrastructure in Central Asia can be fully complementary to our own efforts. And in particular, we see an important role for China in supporting the transition in Afghanistan and advancing its own integration into the broader Asia region".*<sup>23</sup>

The United States has developed an individual approach to each country. However, there have been shortcomings. In this regard, it is advisable to examine the causes of success and failure in US relations with the countries of the region individually. In general, according to its own statements, the United States is more interested in the stability of the Central Asian republics than in their destabilisation. However, the United States is the only major external actor in Central Asia without a regular consultative multilateral mechanism. The United States and Central Asian states should, together with other partners, cooperate in various fields, including fighting terrorism and religious extremism, and developing political and economic reforms in Central Asia. The relationship between the cooperating parties should be based on mutual understanding and benefit.

## **Central Asia and the EU**

The EU's main instrument in its strategy towards the CIS region has been the *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (PCA). The European Union signed PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 1995/96, which became fully operational after ratification by all EU member states and the European Parliament in 1999. The bilateral trade relations between the EU and Tajikistan were based on an interim agreement on trade and trade-related matters, as the PCA was pending a long time. Finally, it has been signed in 2004 and ratified in 2010. The PCA signed with Turkmenistan in 1998 has been ratified by the EU only in 2009.

All five Central Asian countries are beneficiaries of the EU's General System of Preferences (GSP). These agreements do not offer any prospect for accession to the EU but serve the mutual interest in trade relations. Another important instrument of EU policy in the region was the *Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States* (TACIS) programme, which since 1992 has aimed at supporting the implementation of economic reforms and the establishment and maintenance of political ties between the partner countries. But there emerged difficulties in the EU, as a unified strategy towards the region was missing, and the economic and political interests of the larger European states in Central Asia

23. Antony J. Blinken, *An enduring vision for Central Asia*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 31 March 2015), accessed 10 April 2015, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2015/240013.htm>.

differed. This is related to the internal peculiarities of European politics and the general geopolitical situation, including the relations of the EU with the United States and Russia. The dominant subjects of Central Asian-European relations have always been problems of regional security as well as the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. The EU countries are a main consumer of Afghan illegal drugs.

During its Council Presidency, Germany initiated a new strategy to strengthen political and economic partnership with Central Asia in 2007. It was adopted as the *EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (2007–2013). The strategy was appreciated by the Central Asian republics.<sup>24</sup> The new interest of the EU in Central Asia was partly reasoning in the increasing European role in international processes.<sup>25</sup> Following the agreement on the latest Multiannual Financial Framework, in 2014 the new Development Cooperation Instrument regulation was adopted and for the period 2015–2020 the same volume of funding, as in the previous period, (about 1 billion euro) assigned for Central Asia. In June 2015, the Council of the European Union adopted new conclusions on the EU Central Asia strategy.<sup>26</sup> At present, along with Russia and China, the EU is a main trading partner of the Central Asian region with a mutual trade turnover of more than 20 billion euro.

There is also a growing interest of the EU in Central Asia in the field of energy cooperation. In the coming decades the European Union will face a growing dependency on external energy supplies.<sup>27</sup> The current events in Ukraine and the tensions between the EU and Russia could be an additional incentive for the intensification of the EU's interest in Central Asian and the Caspian region's energy deposits. At the same time, the Central Asian countries are also trying to diversify the transport corridors for their energy resources.

Economic relations could be one of the key aspects of mutual cooperation in the coming years. In the context of INOGATE and TRACECA the EU already promotes the development and expansion of the regional infrastructure in the sphere of transport, energy, and trade in order to make better use of the economic potential of the region. In the framework of TRACECA, highways and railways are under construction or modernisation. Being an important trade corridor between Europe, East and South Asia, Central Asia will benefit from an

24. Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, accessed 1 June 2015, [http://eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/2010\\_strategy\\_eu\\_centralasia\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf).

25. Reimund Seidelmann, "Globalization, Regionalization and the Nations state and their effect on EU – Asian relations," in: *EU-Asian relations: state of affairs, problems, and perspectives*, NESCA series number 1, Macau: NESCA series, 80.

26. Council of the European Union, *Relations with Central Asia – Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia*, doc. 10191/15.

27. *BP Energy Outlook 2035*, January 2014.

increase in trade turnover.<sup>28</sup> However, a prerequisite for the successful realisation of this project is to formulate a common policy with the states through which the routes pass, which involves the positions of various allied countries, including the United States and Russia.

The EU's driving force in the development of cooperation with Central Asia and the region's main European trading partner is Germany due to its industrial power. In the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are Germany's first and second largest trading partners. Together with leading German companies, investment projects totalling several billion Euros were implemented in Central Asia, covering diverse areas from industry and transport services to the production of medical products, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products. Last but not least, Germany uses the airport of Termez, Uzbekistan, in order to organise its activities in the framework of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Another area of European-Central Asian cooperation is education. Representatives of universities and research institutes of Central Asian countries participated in EU programs and projects, such as Erasmus+. Additionally, some EU countries have been active in Central Asia on the national level as well; for example, German and French organisations, foundations and universities have been establishing cooperation projects with Central Asian universities and research centres.

To sum up, it has to be stated that the EU-Central Asia relations went through several transformations. Still, there are some shortcomings in the relations that are expressed openly by both sides. The EU is continuously criticising the poor official reflection on the processes of democratisation in the Central Asian republics, as well as a slowdown of economic reforms. In turn, the Central Asian countries have criticised the EU for its lack of a clear strategy, for its ignorance of regional and local conditions, and blamed the EU for using a double-standard approach with regards to democratisation and human rights issues. At the same time, Central Asia needs to develop a more consistent regional approach in its European policy, too.

### **Central Asia's Relations with Partners in Asia**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can observe new co-operations between Central Asian countries and Asian partners, including India, South Korea, and Japan, which were mainly welcomed in the region.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Central Asian states and Japan established diplomatic relations, and in 1997 Japan formulated the *Silk*

28. Council of the European Union, *Central Asia strategy*, 2007, 10.

*Road diplomacy* concept for its relations with Central Asia. The Japanese government recognised the growing strategic importance of Central Asia in the context of international security and sought to play a more active role in Eurasia.

During two decades Central Asian countries' and Japan's bilateral relations began to increase steadily. Japan is one of the largest providers of assistance for structural reforms in Central Asia, and contributed substantial investments in the region's economy, transport and communication sectors. There are several fields of interest for Japan in Central Asia, including cooperation in education, regional economic development, political reforms, as well as energy resources. An important instrument for cooperation is Japan's ODA (Official Development Assistance) programme for major investments and social programmes in Central Asia. Over the last years, soft loans and commercial credits totalling more than 3.5 billion US dollars were allotted to Central Asia, which were available for the development of telecommunication networks, for renovation of the repair-and-construction plants, and for the modernisation of airports and railways.

In August 2006, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Central Asian republics Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for the first time. The visits were part of Japan's efforts to redesign its foreign policy towards this resource-rich and strategically important region. During Koizumi's visit to Kazakhstan a memorandum on cooperation in peaceful exploitation of nuclear energy and uranium mining was signed. In Uzbekistan, in addition to talks and agreements on economic and energy-related cooperation, both partners committed themselves to launch a broad partnership including education and cultural projects.

The relations between Central Asia and Japan were not only developed in a bilateral way but also in a multilateral format. The *Central Asia plus Japan* dialogue was established in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2004. The main intentions of this interregional platform were proclaimed as follows: respect for different opinions, coordination and consistency of acts, and cooperation on the basis of transparency. Proposed by Japan and supported by the countries in the region, *Central Asia plus Japan* represents a new format for regional and interregional cooperation. However, the cooperation still has deficits in the full implementation of agreements and decisions, as well as in the scope of cooperation of the participating countries.

At the same time there are some challenges and problems in the relations between Central Asia and Japan. According to a survey of 2010, among Central Asian experts a majority (80%) considered the relations of their country with Japan being clear of obstacles, but 20% of the respondents mentioned some problems, including the language problem, a low level of political cooperation compared to economic relations, an overall moderate level of economic coopera-

tion, weak contacts, and a lack of experience of Japan in Central Asian business.<sup>29</sup> However, there is much potential for developing the multilateral relations further. On the international level, the Central Asian republics continuously and consistently expressed their support for Japan's permanent membership in the Security Council of the United Nations.

Another leading Asian economy—the Republic of Korea—has become an important partner of Central Asian countries, especially for Uzbekistan. In 2006, South Korea and Uzbekistan signed a mutual declaration on a strategic partnership. Since then, at least 13 high level meetings between the Uzbek and South Korean Presidents took place. During President Park Geun-hye's visit to Tashkent in 2014, a joint declaration between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Korea on the further development and deepening of the strategic partnership was signed. The Republic of Korea is one of the biggest investment partners of Uzbekistan, with an accumulated total volume of Korean investments in Uzbekistan of more than 5 billion US dollars. Seoul takes a leading position among Uzbekistan's trading partners in Asia. According to information of Uzbekistan's state committee of statistics, the turnover between both countries was more than 2 billion US dollars in 2013. Among others, South Korea and its companies are very active in the free economic zone *Navoi*, an international intermodal centre of logistics at Navoi airport, as well as in the free industrial zone *Angren*.

In 2007, the annual multilateral forum *Republic of Korea-Central Asia* has been established, which aims at strengthening and extending the cooperation in economy, information and communication technologies, construction, transport, as well as in the spheres of science, culture, and tourism. Meetings were held in Korea as well as in countries of Central Asia. During the 6<sup>th</sup> forum in Seoul in July 2012, the Republic of Korea announced its readiness to contribute to the development of the region through an extension of technological and professional exchange, and cooperation on issues of economic development. The Central Asian countries regard the Korean initiative positively as it aims at industrial diversification. Some experts consider the forum to be important as an opportunity for identifying projects of practical cooperation between the Republic of Korea and Central Asia.

The Central Asian republics understand that cooperation with China, India, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries is strategically important and will contribute to closer trade ties, economic development, and investment relations between Eurasia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Asian-Pacific region.

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29. Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Central Asia and Japan bilateral and multilateral relations," in: *Journal of Eurasian studies*, January 2014: 79-80.

## **Conclusion**

Central Asia's regional importance in the world is mainly substantiated in its geopolitical location, its rich energy and natural resources, and its significant geo-economic potential. The main external actors—Russia, the United States, the EU, and China—declared their support for peace and stability and regional cooperation in Central Asia—declarations which, of course, are highly welcomed in the region. But there are also some frictions between these actors. Russia traditionally views the Central Asian states as being within its sphere of influence and neither wants the United States nor the EU to become deeply involved there; China expresses its understanding of Russia's strong role in the region, and prefers Russian military presence in the region against US presence, because it considers the latter as endangering the safety of its own North-Western region. The United States support the Central Asian states to pursue a multi-vector foreign and economic policy. The EU plays an economic role in the region, but economic and political interests of the larger European states in Central Asia differ and diverge. The escalation of the situation in Ukraine generates geopolitical confrontation of the West with Russia what might have an impact on Central Asia.

From a Central Asian perspective, strong and mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral relations to all of these partners would be appreciated. The Central Asian republics already established relations with these major powers and with different regional and international organisations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Though interests are diverse and partly contradicting, coordination in bilateral as well as multilateral formats on security, economic, and transport projects is crucial for the region. At the same time, the political stabilisation and economic restoration of Afghanistan remains a key objective for all actors involved. However, the different actors in Central Asia and Afghanistan face many problems because of their different approaches and understanding of the situation in Afghanistan.

Last but not least, the Central Asian republics voiced their interest in developing mutually beneficial relations with different Asian countries, such as Japan, India, and the Republic of Korea. Despite some challenges there is a certain potential for cooperation with countries from South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia. Leading Asian partners like China, India, Korea, and Japan have experience in economic and political transformation that is also relevant for the Central Asian countries. Central Asia's partnership with Asian countries and regional organisations could strengthen the regional stability in the wider Asian context.

**Abstract**

Central Asia is an important region in the world due to its geopolitical location and rich energy resources. The geopolitical situation in Central Asia has changed considerably and the republics in the region repeatedly expressed their interest in developing relations with Russia, China, the USA, the EU, Germany, Japan and others. Central Asians created a more or less efficient system of checks and balances, in which none of the external actors receives advantages or bigger room for manoeuvre to shape the region's development. However, there are some contradictions between the main external actors active in the region. The tragic events in Ukraine and a serious confrontation between Russia and the West since 2014 have an effect on the international affairs in general and on the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in particular. Among others, Central Asian republics voiced their interest in developing stronger relations with different leading Asian countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea, which may strengthen the stability in the wider Asian context.

**Résumé**

L'Asie centrale est une région importante dans le monde en raison de sa situation géopolitique et de ses riches ressources énergétiques. Sa situation géopolitique a considérablement changé, et les Républiques de la région ont exprimé à plusieurs reprises leur intérêt pour le développement des relations avec la Russie, la Chine, les États-Unis, l'UE, l'Allemagne, le Japon entre autres. L'Asie centrale a créé un système plus ou moins efficace d'équilibre du pouvoir, dans lequel aucun des acteurs externes ne reçoit d'avantages ou de marge de manœuvre pour façonner le développement de la région. Cependant, il existe quelques contradictions entre les principaux acteurs externes actifs dans la région. Les événements tragiques en Ukraine et la sérieuse confrontation entre la Russie et l'Occident depuis 2014 ont un effet sur les affaires internationales en général, et sur les pays de la Communauté des États indépendants (CEI) en particulier. Entre autres, les Républiques d'Asie centrale ont exprimé leur intérêt à développer des relations plus étroites avec différents pays asiatiques éminents comme le Japon et la République de Corée, ce qui peut renforcer la stabilité dans le contexte asiatique plus large.