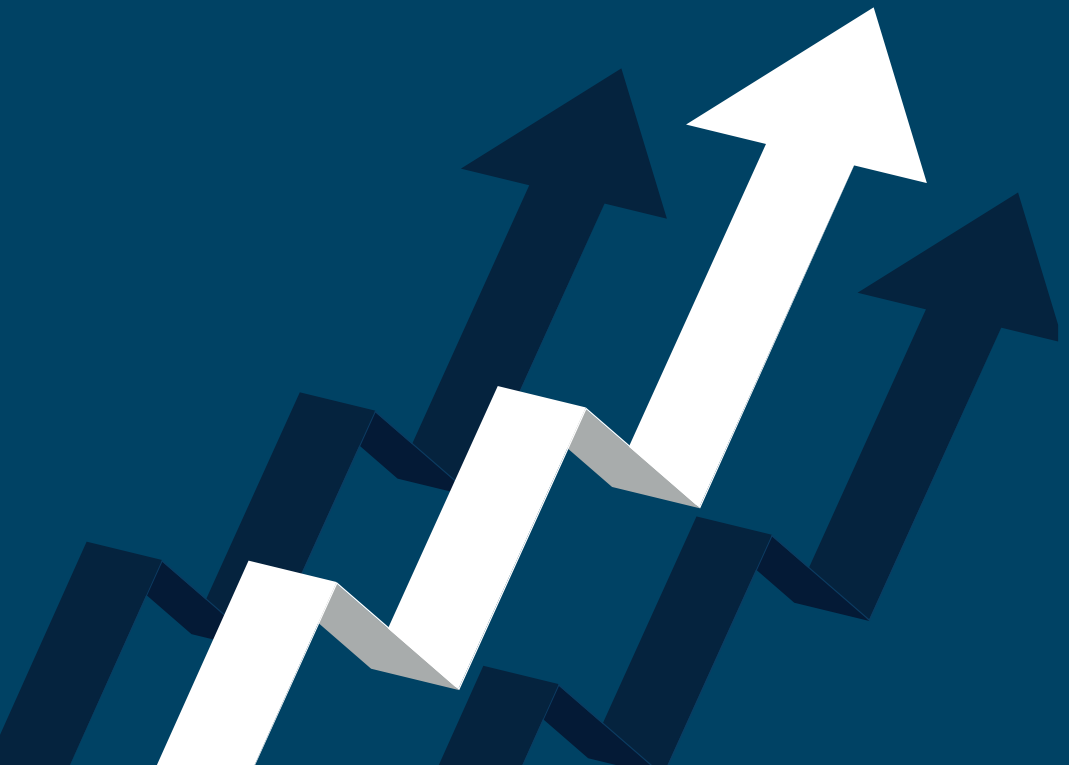




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STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FOR CENTRAL ASIA:

Drawing inspiration and support
from the European Union



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Abstract

At the 2022 EU-Central Asia Connectivity Summit in Samarkand, EU High Representative Josep Borrell noted that Europe and Central Asia see the need to advance their strategic autonomy and could pursue this goal by enhancing connectivity with each other in various spheres, including energy trade, digital infrastructure, security architecture, food supplies, and access to critical raw materials. While strategic autonomy has been a guiding concept for EU policymakers over the past ten years, it is new for Central Asia. Given the obvious and fundamental differences between the regions, the European definition of strategic autonomy as the capacity “to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future” cannot be directly applied to Central Asia. However, the challenges and solutions that the concept implies are relevant. It would be desirable for Central Asian countries to avoid excessive and harmful dependencies on other actors, and they can do it by fostering regional cooperation and integration, particularly around the water-energy-climate change nexus. This policy memo explores the concept’s potential for Central Asia, outlines the trajectory and the current state of Central Asian regionalism, proposes the creation of a Central Asian Water and Energy Community inspired by the European Coal and Steel Community, and discusses how the EU and Central Asia could support each other in their pursuit of strategic autonomy. It argues that stronger EU support and an economic corridor to Europe would help the region maintain its balancing act, and the EU, in its turn, would receive a belt of strategic partners extending from its borders to the heart of Asia.

Like our partners in Central Asia, we too in Europe see the need to advance our strategic autonomy.

Josep Borrell, 18.11.2022 (Opening remarks in Samarkand)

Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has rendered a major blow to the European security architecture and the Eurasian political order. Military aggression in the middle of Europe is bringing death and destruction on a scale not seen since the Yugoslav wars. The current situation could not be further from the high hopes and expectations of the early 1990s when the Cold War divisions seemed to have disappeared, giving place to a "Europe whole and free." The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) saw its mandate revised accordingly, shifting from preventing armed conflicts to dealing with threats to comprehensive security such as terrorism and drug trafficking. Now even the return to the organization's original purpose as a platform for dialogue and negotiations between the West and East seems a distant and vague prospect.

The Eurasian political order that emerged in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR has also been shattered. Russia's land grab in Ukraine violates that order's cornerstone: the inviolability of territorial integrity and existing borders – a principle enshrined in the 1991 Almaty declaration adopted by the Commonwealth of Independent States' founders in December 1991 and reaffirmed in other bilateral friendship and cooperation treaties.¹ In reality, Moscow's respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the "near abroad" countries over the past three decades can be described as half-hearted at best. Russia has provided

¹ CIS Internet-portal, "Almatinskaya deklaratsiya (21 dekabrya 1991 goda)" [Almaty Declaration (21 December 1991)], <https://e-cis.info/page/3373/79406/>.

support to separatist forces in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. While the Central Asian countries have not faced such threats and looked up to Russia as the regional security provider, some of them, especially Kazakhstan, with its long Russian border, could never fully relax.

The 2022 invasion, accompanied by the rhetorical negation of Ukraine's sovereignty, created a new reality. It cast a dark shadow over Belarus and instilled fear in other post-Soviet states. Central Asian governments are trying to understand how to manage relations with increasingly assertive, angry, and isolated Russia. They face a difficult question: Is Russia a reliable regional security provider, an unreliable regional security provider, or a potential threat to security? Predicting Moscow's next moves has become harder. In the meantime, Central Asian governments have assumed a position of neutrality. Despite their official strategic alliances and partnerships with Russia and overall high levels of vulnerability, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan tend to abstain from votes condemning Russia at the UN General Assembly; neutral Turkmenistan does not vote at all.

Geoeconomic ruptures and decoupling efforts accompany growing geopolitical rivalries. Not only have the countries of the political West imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia; the Russian economy has become toxic for many foreign companies and even domestic investors. Amid the weaponization of trade and finance, Central Asia is caught in the middle. In 2022 the export of Kazakhstan's oil via the Russian port of Novorossiysk was interrupted four times under various pretexts, including the sudden discovery of unexploded World War II bombs.² Central Asia-based companies are in danger of falling under secondary sanctions for helping Russia bypass sanctions. Full compliance with

² Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakh oil exports across Russia interrupted for fourth time this year," Eurasianet, 23 August 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakh-oil-exports-across-russia-interrupted-for-fourth-time-this-year>.

sanctions is particularly challenging for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

As a result of these upheavals, both Europeans and Central Asians are facing an extremely serious challenge. They need to rethink ways to ensure their security and well-being, find a new mode of living with Russia, and adjust their relations with other actors. The obvious policy to pursue is diversification and decoupling to lessen dependencies on an unpredictable and dangerous country.

EU policymakers are framing current efforts to diversify and decouple from Russia as the continuation of the Union's search for strategic autonomy. Russia is not the only power from which the EU has been trying to develop more autonomy. The list also includes the United States and China, the strategic ally and the systemic rival of the EU. Thus, these efforts are not just a reaction to the war but part of the process of the European Union emerging as a global geopolitical player.

EU policymakers increasingly view Central Asia as a region that can contribute to European strategic autonomy. Their hope is to “tap into the vast potential it has to offer, in terms of energy supplies, critical raw materials and news transport corridors that do not depend on Russia.”³ Central Asian governments, particularly those of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, put a lot of energy into deepening ties with Europe and pushing for the development of the Middle Corridor trade route across the Caspian Sea, avoiding Russia, to provide a better physical connection between the regions.

³ Josep Borrell, “Central Asian’s growing importance globally and for the EU,” EEAS Website, 20 November 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/central-asia-s-growing-importance-globally-and-eu_en.

While European policymakers have been using the concept of connectivity since 2018 when the EU Connectivity Strategy (“Connecting Europe and Asia: Building Blocks for an EU Strategy”) was introduced and then integrated into the Union’s Strategy for Central Asia in 2019, the current split with Russia and growing systemic rivalry with China is making the push genuinely strategic.

At the EU-Central Asia Connectivity summit in Samarkand in 2022, EU High Representative Josep Borrell said: “Like our partners in Central Asia, we too in Europe see the need to advance our strategic autonomy.”⁴ The remark implies a shared direction of movement and the existence of a window of opportunity to deepen relations. It also elevates Central Asia to the position of mature region, like Europe, willing and able to pursue its own strategic interests.

While the concept of strategic autonomy has been used in EU discourses and documents for ten years (the expression was used for the first time in the European Council Conclusions in 2013), it is new for Central Asia. For Europeans, it means the EU’s capacity “to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future.”⁵ Given the obvious and fundamental differences between the regions, the definition cannot be directly applied to Central Asia. Nevertheless, the challenges and solutions that the concept implies are relevant. It would be desirable for Central Asian countries to avoid excessive and harmful dependencies on other actors, and they can do it by being smart and strategic, diversifying their trade, drawing on multilateral institutions, etc.

⁴ Josep Borell, “Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell at the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference: Global Gateway,” EEAS Website, 18 November 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/422725_fr.

⁵ European Council, “Conclusions,” 19/20 December 2013, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>; European Council, “A New Strategic Agenda for the EU 2019-2024,” 21 June 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>.

This paper draws inspiration from Borrell's remarks on strategic autonomy and explores the concept's potential for Central Asia (particularly vis-à-vis Russia and China). I give a brief overview of the EU debate and then outline the trajectory and the current state of Central Asian regionalization efforts. I argue that strategic autonomy could serve as a guiding concept for policymakers in the region and that now, in times of upheaval and with the status quo broken, there is a window of opportunity to pursue this path. Finally, I propose ways forward and discuss how Central Asian states and the EU can help each other in their pursuit of strategic autonomy.

The EU strategic autonomy debate

The concept of strategic autonomy is not new. In fact, if we look for earlier articulations of an ideal state as strong, confident, and self-sufficient, we can go back millennia. Ancient Greek historian Thucydides, extolling the virtues of the city-state of Athens, wrote about successive generations of citizens who "strengthened the empire in most respects so that it is sufficient for itself both in peace and in war."⁶ This combination of power projection and self-reliance is at the core of the EU notion of strategic autonomy. The assumption is that "Europe is an entity capable of taking its own decisions and determining the future."⁷

This aspiration has driven the European integration project since its beginning. A series of milestone treaties made the Union more cohesive

⁶ Thucydides, "History of the Peloponnesian War, Books I and II," with an English translation by Charles Forster Smith, London: William Heineman LTD and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935, p.321.

⁷ Mario Damen, "EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023. From concept to capacity," European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589).

and powerful vis-à-vis other international players in economic, political, security, and defense matters. The 1965 Merger Treaty created the single administrative and executive arms of the European Communities. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty made provisions for shared European citizenship, set rules for the single currency, and launched the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty added security and defense to the EU's competencies, creating the possibility of a European defense union in the future. And it was the perceived need for a "European defense technological and industrial base" that can "enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners" that resulted in the first introduction of the expression "strategic autonomy" in an EU official document – The European Council's Conclusions on EU common security and defense policy – adopted in December 2013.⁸

This aspiration has grown over the past decade, with the EU trying to assert itself in the changing and increasingly challenging geopolitical and geoeconomic environment. Europeans had to face increasing instability on Europe's periphery (the outbreak of political, military, and humanitarian crises in the Sahel region, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and Russia's annexation of Crimea and small-scale armed conflict in eastern Ukraine). At the same time, the United States under the Obama administration was gradually pivoting away from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. Trump's presidency and his crude attacks on the transatlantic alliance heightened both the fear of American disengagement and desire to have more political space vis-à-vis the US.

By the end of the decade, Europeans felt that their efforts to foster a common security and defense policy were not keeping pace with realities on the ground, making them lose relevance. In 2020, Josep Borrell lamented

⁸ Ibid.

the ongoing “Astanization” of regional conflicts, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya, and Syria, “which leads to the exclusion of Europe from the settlement of regional conflicts in favor of Russia and Turkey.”⁹ The situation was particularly frustrating for champions of European strategic autonomy, most notably France under Emmanuel Macron, which has pushed for more ambitious security and defense reforms.¹⁰ Some member-states, however, remained less enthusiastic about developing defense capabilities separate from NATO.

The anxiety peaked with the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. On the one hand, Russia’s full-scale invasion constituted an unprecedented threat, forcing Europeans to become more serious about their defense capabilities and pump-up military expenditures. On the other, the way the Western response unfolded removed any doubts about American leadership and the primacy of the transatlantic alliance in the provision of European security. As noted in the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defense adopted in March 2022, “a stronger and more capable EU in the field of security and defense will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defense for its members.”¹¹ However, this relative clarity might be temporary. Europeans are worriedly watching the American political scene, fearful of another “Trumpian” turn during the 2024 presidential elections. The next administration might prove to be less Europe-friendly and reliable.

⁹ Josep Borrell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters,” EEAS Website, 3 December 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Macron, “Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text. English version,” Ouest France, 27 September 2017, <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

¹¹ European Council, “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense – For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security,” 21 March 2022, p.10, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

European policymakers are also uncomfortable with Washington's increasingly confrontational approach toward Beijing.¹² Tellingly, President Macron, during his return from China in April, said that Europe must "avoid getting dragged into a confrontation between China and the US over Taiwan," and build its own strategic autonomy by reducing dependence on the United States.¹³ While his remarks were widely criticized for being "tone-deaf" and damaging for the EU-US alliance, they do reflect shared concerns on the continent.¹⁴ Thus, the EU partnership with the US, its prime ally, is riddled with the fear of both abandonment and entrapment.

The EU's search for strategic autonomy has also expanded into economics, an area where the Union feels more confident, being the world's largest unified market and a global regulatory power. However, a series of developments, such as the 2014 Russia-Ukraine-EU gas crisis, the unfolding of China's global Belt and Road Initiative and the inroads that Beijing has made into Europe since 2013, and supply chain disruptions during the Covid-2019 pandemic, have set nerves jangling in Brussels. The economy is also where the drive for autonomy clashes with the commitment to open competition and global trade.

The war in Ukraine ended the two-decade-old debate on whether massive oil and gas imports from Russia foster healthy interdependence or unhealthy dependence. Instances of Putin's Russia using energy for

¹² Philippe Le Corre, "Europe's China challenge: The narrow path for France, Germany, and the EU," Asia Society Policy Institute, April 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/europes-china-challenge-narrow-path-france-germany-and-eu>.

¹³ Jamil Anderlini and Clea Calcutt, "Europe must resist pressure to become 'America's followers', says Macron," Politico, 9 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-china-america-pressure-interview/#>.

¹⁴ Luke McGee, "Analysis: 'Tone death' Macron faces backlash over Taiwan remarks," CNN, 14 April 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/13/europe/macron-taiwan-comments-transatlantic-relationship-intl-cmd/index.html>.

political ends, including cutting off gas to Ukraine in 2006, 2009, and 2014, alarmed Europeans. However, despite waves of efforts to diversify supplies, the partnership with Russian Gazprom continued and even flourished with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Only with the outbreak of war in 2022 did Germany freeze the project and the EU push for decoupling from Russian oil and gas – a painful and costly process, long resisted but now deemed necessary.

While the decision on Russia has been made, the approach to China is under construction. Europeans value access to the country's vast market and its investments. However, they have been increasingly unhappy with what they see as unfair competition from Chinese companies benefiting from government subsidies and rents enjoying the openness of European markets, while China's market remains protected. There are concerns the transfer of dual-use technologies to China feeds its military might and fears of Beijing's weaponization of European dependencies. For example, the EU countries are almost fully dependent on China for critical raw materials indispensable for such highly strategic sectors as the green energy, the digital economy, aerospace, and defense.

Europeans have also been upset with Beijing's policies on the continent, cultivating relations with certain countries at the expense of European unity. In 2012 China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries formed the 16+1 platform to promote economic cooperation. Under this umbrella, China has invested billions in various sectors, including energy, transport, information and communication technology (ICT), manufacturing, and real estate. Most investments were made in non-EU member states. Brussels saw this platform as an attempt to divide Europe and create dependencies. In 2016, the European Commission adopted the Joint Communication on Elements

for a new EU Strategy on China, which insisted that “the EU must project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to China,” and any bilateral relations with China, including in-group settings such as the 16+1 forum, should be coordinated with the European Commission, the European External Action Service and other member states.¹⁵

The EU also worries about China’s global expansion and efforts to revise norms and standards. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, is China’s vehicle to position itself at the center of the global economic system. In response, the European Commission announced the Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy in 2018 and the Global Gateway initiative in 2021. These efforts reflect the acceptance of the challenge posed by China and a readiness to invest in infrastructure around the world, using and spreading European standards and norms. The focus is on building physical infrastructure, such as fiber optic cables, clean transport corridors, and clean power transmission lines, and on “enabling environment to make sure projects deliver, by offering attractive investment and business-friendly trading conditions, regulatory convergence, standardization, supply chain integration, and financial services.”¹⁶

There is little doubt that the EU has the capacity to protect its economic interests and project power. The debate focuses on better ways of reaching these goals and finding a proper balance of openness and protective measures, efficiency, and security. The term “open strategic autonomy” captures the ideal but does not provide clear

¹⁵ European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. Elements for a new EU strategy on China,” 22 June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_-_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf.

¹⁶ EUR-LEX, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. The Global Gateway,” 1 December 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021JC0030>.

guidelines on how to strike a balance. One emerging approach is to build EU resilience by strengthening links with like-minded partners, the so-called “friend-shoring”; another is fostering cooperation with neighboring countries – “near-shoring.”

While the EU and the United States see each other as like-minded partners, there are differences and tensions as well. The most significant divergence is emerging in their attitudes and policies toward China. While in the US, there is a strong push for decoupling from China, Europeans do not see this as a viable and desirable option. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, on the eve of her April trip to Beijing, gave a speech outlining the approach: not decoupling but “de-risking.” One pillar of the economic de-risking strategy is making the European economy and industry more competitive and resilient, particularly in the health, digital, and clean-tech sectors. The aim is to remain frontrunners and be able to produce at least 40 percent of the clean tech needed for the green transition, which would require major efforts to diversify Europe’s rare earths supply, since 98 percent currently comes from China.¹⁷ This creates opportunities for other countries with rare earths deposits.

Two other pillars are regulatory in nature: to better use existing trade instruments to counter economic distortions, deter economic coercion and prevent leakage of emerging and sensitive technologies, and to develop new tools for critical sectors like microelectronics, quantum computing, robotics, artificial intelligence, and biotech. The fourth pillar is to align with partners on making and modernizing free trade agreements, and through the Global Gate initiative to invest in clean tech and digital infrastructure in different parts of the world to strengthen Europe’s supply chain resilience.

¹⁷ European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre,” 30 March 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

The trajectory of Central Asian Regionalism

Central Asia is a relatively new region that appeared on the political map some three decades ago due to the dissolution of the USSR. The five republics inherited poorly defined borders (during the Soviet times they were treated as administrative boundaries) and shared infrastructure (joint water management, energy, and transport systems being the most important). This legacy created both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies: to pull together to solve shared problems and bolster regional autonomy, and decrease dependencies on each other to foster national autonomy. The centrifugal tendencies have been stronger so far.

It is worth noting that centripetal trends seem to strengthen in times of existential fear and acute geopolitical uncertainty. This included the first years of independence, when vulnerable and confused Central Asian states undertook their first attempt at fostering regional strategic autonomy. Russia, driven by the desire to quickly rejoin Europe, was trying to “shed” the region, seeing it as politically backward and an economic burden. In response, in January 1994, the leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty on the creation of a single economic space, envisioning the free movement of goods, services, labor, and capital, and coordinated credit and settlement, budget, taxation, price, customs, and currency policies. Kyrgyzstan joined later that year. This ambitious Central Asian integration plan expanded into the military dimension. In December 1995, the members agreed to establish a joint Council of Defense Ministers and form a Central Asian peacekeeping battalion (Centrasbat) under the aegis of the United Nations. With assistance from the US and NATO, Centrasbat

conducted its first military exercise in September 1997.¹⁸ Tajikistan joined the group in 1998, as soon as its civil war ended.

Despite these positive developments, during the second half of the 1990s the integration trend was in decline. There were tensions and disagreements between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The former was involved in economic integration projects with Russia (in 1995, it became a founding member of a customs union with Belarus and Russia), and the latter had contentious relations with Tajikistan (Uzbekistan mined sections of its border with Tajikistan to prevent militants from entering). In the early 2000s, the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, pushed for reasserting Moscow's influence in Central Asia. As a result, in 2004, Russia joined the Organization for Central Asian Cooperation (which had institutionalized under this name in 2002), and in 2005, the OCAC merged with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).

While Turkmenistan remained consistently aloof to all integration efforts, it joined two regional platforms: the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), created in 1993 to attract funds for Aral Sea-related projects to foster the rational use, protection, and control of transboundary waters, and Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ), launched by a treaty signed by the heads of all five states in 2006.

In 2005, the year the regional integration project was absorbed into a wider post-Soviet body, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev tasked his government with developing a Central Asian Union concept. In April 2007, he put forward the initiative, arguing that such a union would increase regional security, economic growth, political stability, and prosperity in the region. Nazarbayev noted that the region of

¹⁸ RFE/RL, "Central Asia: Joint Military Exercise Deemed a Success," 9 September 1997, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1086503.html>.

55 million people could fully provide itself with food and energy.¹⁹ Earlier that year, he proposed creating a complex system of energy grids, a council on energy security, and an energy stock exchange in Central Asia.²⁰ The initiative was enthusiastically welcomed in Bishkek but received a cold reception in Tashkent, where President Islam Karimov called such a union premature given the differences in economic and social development among the countries.

Ten years later, the tide changed again in favor of regional cooperation. The new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, prioritized good relations with neighbors and regional cooperation in pursuit of stability and sustainable development. At the 2017 UN General Assembly, he emphasized Uzbekistan's readiness to make "reasonable compromises with the countries of Central Asia on all issues without exception" and proposed to hold regular consultation meetings at the highest level.²¹ Drawing on this initiative, the first consultative meeting of all five Central Asian presidents took place in 2018 in Astana. It was followed by meetings in Tashkent (2019), Ashgabat (2021), and Cholpon-Ata (2022).

At the Cholpon-Ata meeting, the five presidents signed several promising agreements, including a Roadmap for the Development

¹⁹ FerghanaNews, "Nursultan Nazarbayev predlozhit sozdat' edinyi soyuz tsentralnoaziatskih gosudarstv" [Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed to create a single union of Central Asian states], Newsru.com, 11 April 2007, <https://www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=5714>.

²⁰ Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Poslaniye prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan Nursultana Nazarbayeva narodu Kazakhstana. 28 fevralya 2007" [Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to the People of Kazakhstan. February 28, 2007], 28 February 2007, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-28-fevralya-2007-g.

²¹ The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, "Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72," 19 September 2017, https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72.

of Regional Cooperation 2022-2024 and the Regional Green Agenda Program for Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan also signed a treaty of friendship, good neighborliness, and cooperation. To this, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan did not accede, pledging to do so in the future.²² The treaty envisions deepening regional cooperation and coordination across the board (political, security, economic, space, scientific, healthcare, and other areas). Article 5 commits the parties to “render each other all-round support and mutual assistance in the prevention of threats to their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.”²³

These developments show that the centripetal trend, while growing stronger or weaker with time, has never disappeared, but is a product of particular circumstances. The Covid-19 pandemic made governments more aware of the vulnerability of long-distance supply chains, strengthening the arguments of those pushing to localize trade. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 gave this force an even stronger boost by scaring Central Asians and, to some degree, resurrecting the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty of the early 1990s.

The speeches made by Central Asian leaders in Cholpon-Ata expressed these concerns and aspirations, demonstrating both shared common ground and also differences in points of interest. The Kazakh and Uzbek presidents outlined the most comprehensive and detailed

²² News Central Asia, “Fourth Consultative Summit of the Leaders of Central Asian States Laid Out a Joint Vision and Multiple Initiatives on Better Regional Aligning Against External Shocks,” 22 July 2022, <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2022/07/22/fourth-consultative-summit-of-the-leaders-of-central-asian-states-in-kyrgyzstan-laid-out-a-joint-vision-and-multiple-initiatives-on-better-regional-aligning-against-external-shocks>.

²³ Adilet. Legal-information system of the Regulatory legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “On Draft of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Signing the Treaty between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan on Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation,’” 20 July 2022, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000507>.

agendas for regional cooperation, spanning security and diplomacy; trade, investments, and transport corridors; water management and climate change; and education and cultural cooperation.²⁴ The Kyrgyz leader emphasized security (particularly the situation in Afghanistan and border delimitation issues), food security, and water-energy cooperation. His speech featured fewer initiatives but was similar in spirit to the ones by his Kazakh and Uzbek counterparts.²⁵ The heads of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan emphasized security cooperation.²⁶

Different priorities constitute one obstacle on the path of fostering regional cooperation. Others (more formidable) include existing disputes over borders and water, low trust, and weak institutions. There is also the factor of competing regionalization projects. The Russia-centered Eurasian economic integration includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is worth noting that Russia joined the Organization

²⁴ Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Vystupleniye Prezidenta K.K. Tokayeva na IV konsultativnoi vstreche glav gosudarstv Tsentralnoi Azii [Speech by President K.K. Tokayev at the IV consultative meeting of heads of Central Asian states], 21 July 2022, <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/vystuplenie-na-iv-konsultativnoy-vstreche-glav-gosudarstv-centralnoy-azii-2163148>; Yangi Uzbekiston, “Vystupleniye Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Mirziyoyeva na chetvertoi konsultativnoi vstreche glav gosudarstv Tsentralnoi Azii” [Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the fourth Consultative meeting of the heads of Central Asian states], 21 July 2022, <https://www.yuz.uz/ru/news/ozbekiston-respublikasi-prezidenti-shavkat-mirziyoevning-markaziy-osiyo-davlatlari-rahbarlarining-tortinchi-maslahat-uchrashuvidagi-nutqi>.

²⁵ Website of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Prezident Sadyr Zhaparov: V nyneshnih krizisnyh usloviyah mezhdunarodnyh otnosheniy strany CA budut eshe bolee tesno sotrudnichat chtoby prodvigat obshie interesy regiona na mirovoi arene” [President Sadyr Zhaparov: Under current crisis conditions of international relations the countries of CA will tighten cooperation in order to promote shared interests of the region in the global arena], 21 July 2022, https://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/vystupleniya_obrascheniya/22976_prezident_sadir_ghaparov_v_nineshnih_krizisnih_usloviyah_meghdunarodnih_otnosheniy_strani_ca_budut_eshe_bolee_tesno_sotrudnichat_chtobi_prodvigat_obshie_interesi_regiona_na_mirovoy_arene.

²⁶ The official full texts of the speeches by Tajik and Turkmen presidents were not published. A summary of President Rahmon's speech can be found on the website of the Tajik embassy in Russia: <https://mfa.tj/ru/moscow/view/10728/uchastie-v-chetvertoi-konsultativnoi-vstreche-glav-gosudarstv-tsentralnoi-azii>. The video of President Berdymukhamedov's address can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=573824000949766>.

of Central Asian Cooperation in 2004, and the consequent merger of the organization with the Eurasian Economic Community in 2005 ended the first attempt at Central Asian regional integration. The Turkey-led Organization of Turkic states covers most of the region but excludes Tajikistan. The China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization is inclusive, but it is not underpinned by a logic of regional affinity, and its boundaries expand far beyond.

However, there are also new opportunities that have opened. As the Cholpon-Ata speeches indicate, the Ukraine crisis gives a new sense of purpose. The rising alignment of Astana and Tashkent is less brittle than under the former leaders. Central Asian polities and economies are significantly different from what they were two or three decades ago. As a result of three decades of independence, they are more consolidated and closer to the equilibrium of self-sufficiency and interdependence. As argued by Alexander Libman, over the years, intra-regional investment-led and informal trade was developing in Central Asia against the background of lackluster “ink on paper” formal regional integration projects.²⁷ Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can now serve as locomotives of investment and trade regionalization. It is also important that heavyweight external actors are actively supporting regional cooperation in Central Asia, among the most prominent including the European Union, the United States, and the Asian Development Bank.

²⁷ Alexander Libman, “Regional Integration in Central Asia: A Firm-centered View,” “Emerging Market Economies in Central Asia: The Role of Institutional Complementarities in Reform Process” project, funded by the VolkswagenStiftung, April 2008.

Strategic autonomy for Central Asia

Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev described the Cholpon-Ata treaty as a "historic document marking a new milestone in our five-way strategic partnership." Can this regional cooperation push constitute a search for strategic autonomy? I would argue that given the goals of such cooperation are strengthening resilience and mitigating excessive external dependencies, it could be considered the initial phase of such a search, still undefined and inarticulate but pointing in the right direction.

Obviously, Central Asia is not Europe. Its global political and economic weight is much smaller. Its policymakers cannot project power and shape agendas. Rather their agency can be expressed through choosing and aligning with other actors' agendas. The region's vulnerabilities are significant, and its countries face challenges that have the potential to transform into existential threats. They look outside for assistance, both financial support and technical expertise. The sense of shared Central Asian identity is considerably weaker than the European one. It is an emerging region rather than a well-formed one. However, this should not disqualify Central Asia from the pursuit of strategic autonomy but make it more meaningful and consequential.

European integration started as a daring political project – the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), driven by a determination to prevent future wars in Europe and solve the challenge of a rising West Germany. Visionary and skillful French policymaker Jean Monnet developed the idea of creating a common market for coal and steel that would eliminate rivalries between France and Germany for access to these two important commodities. Thanks to American support

and shaped by bargaining and compromises among various European bureaucracies and industrial groups, the ECSC came to life in 1953.²⁸

The ECSC was regulated by the supranational High Authority that made binding decisions and recommendations for coal and steel enterprises. Its competencies included securing and verifying necessary information, setting tax policies, regulating investment, and determining domestic and export price levels. It could also issue opinions for guiding governments and enterprises. The nine members of the Higher Authority were appointed by the governments of member-states, but they pledged not to represent the national interests but defend the general interests of the Community.²⁹ The Authority was supported in its work by the Consultative Council representing producers, workers, consumers, and dealers. Other ECSC institutions included the Special Council of Ministers, which preserved the state powers, and the Court of Justice and the Common Assembly to serve as safeguards against the abuse of power by the supranational body.³⁰

Central Asia's circumstances are different. Fortunately, full-fledged self-destructive inter-state wars have not scarred the region, and there are no strong animosities to overcome. However, the potential for conflict is present and might grow given the existence of border disputes, rising nationalism, and shrinking water resources. It is not hard to imagine a future ridden with armed violence and humanitarian crises. Hypothetical future conflicts cannot have the same psychological effect as the real

²⁸ Raymond Vernon, "The Schuman Plan: Sovereign Powers of the European Coal and Steel Community," *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol.47, No.2, Apr. 1953, pp.183-202.

²⁹ Two were from each of France, Germany and Italy; and one from each of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

³⁰ Gerhard Bebr, "The European Coal and Steel Community: A Legal and Political Innovation," *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 63, No.1 (Nov., 1953), pp.1-43.

wars of the recent past, but it is useful to keep the possibility of such a scenario in mind for a clearer sense of purpose.

A less dramatic negative scenario would be the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies and simmering distrust, and occasional small-scale conflicts. Such a fragmented region would become even more susceptible to pressures and manipulations from outside. Russia might be interested in fostering disunity and has significant capacity (unrivaled by any other actor) to do so. Such a condition would be the opposite of strategic autonomy. The countries of the region will remain weak on their own and even weaker collectively. Thus, the clear-headed pursuit of security, resilience, and autonomy would make regional community building a political project in Central Asia.

Similar to the Coal and Steel Community that jumpstarted European integration, a Central Asian community project would need a nucleus. It seems apparent that the Central Asian core duo should be energy and water since the water-energy nexus has the greatest potential both to divide and unite the region. First, water is unevenly distributed and growing scarce due to climate change; the rivalry over access can trigger conflicts among the states of the region. Second, water provides electricity in upstream countries and feeds agricultural fields in downstream countries. Well-coordinated water management is crucial for Central Asia's energy and food security. Third, the ongoing energy transition would greatly benefit from a regional framing and pulling together resources. Hydropower and natural gas can serve to balance the scaled-up intermittent energy sources, such as solar and wind. Fourth, investments are badly needed to develop energy systems, and it would be easier to attract them to a secure and well-functioning region.

If we continue to be inspired by the ECSC, we can tentatively call the scheme the Central Asian Water and Energy Community (CAWEC). Designing the structures for the CAWEC would call for creative and smart solutions embedded in a good understanding of realities on the ground. One could envision two core bodies: the Council of Ministers and the Commission. The Council would serve as a political umbrella of the project and a platform for aligning national and regional interests. It would also guide and oversee the activities of the Commission. The Commission, composed of highly skilled and experienced professionals with regional interests at heart, would do the heavy lifting. The list of its functions will presumably evolve over time and could include collecting and aggregating data on water management, energy systems, and climate change; developing and promoting a regional policy for modernization and better interconnection of the member states' energy and water infrastructure; developing a regional regulatory framework and commercial dispute resolution mechanisms; developing a regional risk-assessment and crisis management mechanism; spearheading and facilitating the planning and deployment of transboundary energy projects, including storage; and facilitating investments in any agreed energy/water projects by certifying their compliance with international standards.

The development of the CAWEC can draw on the experience of the existing mechanisms, such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and its Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia (ICWCCA), the Coordination Electrical Power Council of Central Asia (CPC), and the Central Dispatch Center (CDC), and the work of such projects as USAID Power Central Asia.

This deep integration in a particular sector approach could substantially quicken other regional cooperation schemes but would not depend on them. Under the circumstances, aiming for any regional security alliance

or economic integration scheme is highly premature. At the same time, keeping the current pace and modus operandi does not promise substantial results while the clock is ticking and new climate change-related challenges are looming.

If all or most states of Central Asia are successful in creating such a water and energy community, driven by the desire for more strategic autonomy for the region in pursuit of enlightened selfish policies, similar to what the six European founders of the ECSC did in the early 1950s, the most positive scenario becomes possible. They can effectively pool their resources to ensure energy security, food security, and political security; reduce conflict potential and vulnerabilities to external pressures and manipulations; jointly mitigate climate change and firmly embark on a sustainable development path; make Central Asian economies attractive for foreign investments; export electricity to generate revenues; become a region respected internationally and inspire other regions around the world.

Can Europe and Central Asia help each other in their pursuit of strategic autonomy?

As Josep Borrell's remarks in Samarkand indicate, Europeans see Central Asia as a promising partner that can contribute to their search for strategic autonomy. The most tangible aspect is cooperation in the energy sector. Central Asian oil, gas, uranium, and critical minerals can support Europe's energy security and energy transition.³¹ If good relations

³¹ Aida Kadyrzhanova, "Kazakhstan offers Europe chance to kick its Russian uranium habit," BNE Intellinews, 26 September 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/kazakhstan-offers-europe-chance-to-kick-its-russian-uranium-habit-257334/>.

and transport corridors connecting the two regions are maintained and enhanced, the supplies from Central Asia can fall under the rubrics of “friend-shoring” and “near-shoring.” Thus, it is not surprising that the EU funded an EBRD study on sustainable transport connections between Central Asia and Europe, aiming to identify the most sustainable transport connections between the economies of the region and the extended Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T).³²

For Central Asian countries, links with Europe are of greater, bordering on existential importance. Disconnecting from Europe would leave them in a very troubled situation, nearly entirely dependent on Russia, China, and the Gulf states for investments, markets, and aid. The multi-vector foreign policy underpinning the autonomy (no matter how limited) of Central Asian states will collapse. And negative consequences for domestic political development are easy to predict.

Another feature that makes the EU an especially attractive partner is its support for Central Asian regional cooperation. Brussels has always been a champion of such processes. It has funded a plethora of region-wide projects, including multi-year projects on water management and transborder security and cooperation. At the Samarkand EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference, Team Europe (the EU, the EU member-states and their implementing agencies and public development banks, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Investment Bank) launched two new EU Global Gateway initiatives on water, energy, and climate, and on digital connectivity.³³

³² Anton Usov, “EBRD researches sustainable transport connections between Central Asia and Europe,” EBRD website, 7 November 2022, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/ebrd-researches-sustainable-transport-connections-between-central-asia-and-europe.html>.

³³ European Commission, “Global Gateway: Team Europe launches two initiatives in Central Asia on energy and on digital connectivity,” 18 November 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6963.

The water, energy, and climate initiative supports the EU Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia (SECCA) project, also launched in Samarkand.³⁴ Thus, if there is a strong push in Central Asia for strategic autonomy, the EU can be expected to wholeheartedly support it.

While the attention and intentions are there, what still seems to be missing is the vision of what the strategic partnership between the EU and Central Asian countries could aspire to. What is Central Asia's role in EU regionalization efforts in Eurasia and its consolidation as a global power? Could this partnership expand beyond the assistance to the “neighbors of neighbors” and the transactional minerals-for-investments scheme?

Central Asia and the European Union can offer each other more. The former is an in-between region that gravitates toward bigger regions but does not want to be subsumed by any of them. It is a compact and peaceful region allowing for a more significant impact with fewer resources than more massive regions and subregions in other parts of the world. Stronger EU support and an economic corridor to Europe would help the region maintain its balancing act, and the EU, in its turn, would receive a belt of strategic partners extending from its borders to the heart of Asia. The fact that Central Asian states have multiple strategic partnerships and do not aspire to join the EU is an advantage under the circumstances since it helps to mitigate tensions that arise when intentions are clearly for integration.

³⁴ European External Action Service, “European Union's new project to boost sustainable energy in Central Asia,” 17 November 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/european-union-s-new-project-boost-sustainable-energy-central-asia_en?s=222.

Conclusion

Dramatic developments in Eurasia and the deep and consequential crisis in Russia and Ukraine are creating both dangers and opportunities for Central Asia. Geopolitically, the countries of the region need to deal with Russia's considerable embeddedness and leverage that could damage their interests and learn to manage the increased clout of China, which is benefiting from its northern neighbor's weakening. The European vector is of crucial importance, as the EU is the only pole in Central Asia's neighborhood with enough gravitas and capacity to counterbalance China and Russia.

Central Asian states need to rethink their positioning and balancing acts. The notion of strategic autonomy for the region can guide this undertaking. They can use the current momentum to embark on a better trajectory of development by pooling their resources and adopting a forward-looking approach. Upgrading regional cooperation efforts to the level of a political project aimed at the empowerment of Central Asia could be a game-changer.

I propose to consider a regional integration project around the water-energy nexus that can shepherd the region's development. Drawing inspiration from the European Coal and Steel Community, Central Asians could consider creating the Central Asian Water and Energy Community. If the countries of the region take advantage of their complementary energy sources (first of all, hydropower and natural gas) and create a favorable setting for investments to make regional systems capable of integrating large volumes of intermittent renewable energy, they can satisfy their own growing energy needs and export electricity abroad. Jointly they can better mitigate and adapt to the adverse effects of climate change. Central Asia

will be a resilient and well-to-do region, a champion of the energy transition among emerging economies, and an example to follow.

To make this shiny scenario come true would require a great amount of vision, political will, and skill. The challenges of negotiating a regional integration mechanism, dealing with domestic and external pressures, and overcoming narrow interests are enormous. The importance of selecting the right people (highly capable and region-minded) to spearhead the enterprise cannot be overemphasized.

As an exercise in strategic autonomy, the project should not be donor-driven but led by the region's governments. Partnership with the EU and other donors with decades of experience working in the regional water management and energy cooperation sectors would be extremely valuable.

The EU and Central Asia can help each other in their pursuit of strategic autonomy. Their heightened need for what the other can offer provides a window of opportunity for deepening the connections between the two regions. The strategic partnership between the EU and Central Asian countries can help the former strengthen its position as a Eurasian power and global actor and help the latter consolidate. The key challenge for the EU is to find a way of integrating Central Asia into its geostrategic vision, moving beyond seeing "neighbors of neighbors" with valuable minerals to extract.

