

The Evolution of the EU's External Relations in a Changing Global Order

A Case Study of the EU's Reproachment with Central Asia

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“Europe is in a fight.” With these words, Ursula von der Leyen began her State of the Union address on 10 September 2025, framing the EU’s struggle as one for existence, peace, values, freedom, and independence. This statement illustrates the sense of urgency in the current geopolitical headwinds but also reflects the “uncomfortable” shift for many in the EU for a supranational entity that started out as a peace project. “Battlelines for a new world order based on power are being drawn right now,” she said. “So, yes, Europe must fight.” This characterization leads us to the deeper question of how the European Union defines and projects itself internationally.

The notion of “normative power” is frequently used by the EU’s proponents when defining the European Union—a concept that highlights its foundation on a set of values that shapes not only its internal governance but also its external relations (although it is useful to note that the Treaty of Rome (1957) makes no reference to “democracy,” “human rights,” and “European values”). Having no military, the EU traditionally aspired to lead by example, positioning itself as a promoter of broadly shared norms within the international system. As opposed to EU goals and aspirations, its ability to sustain such a normative role is increasingly

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challenged by political realities. Internal divisions and the EU's recurrent failure to act collectively often undermine its credibility, while uncertainties in Transatlantic relations add to the broader international environment, marked by ongoing wars and growing unpredictability, further exposes the gap between the EU's normative claims and its capacity to translate them into effective external relations action.

This IDD Analytical Policy Paper examines how global turbulence and shifting power dynamics are reshaping the European Union's international role, transforming its 'actorness' from primarily normative toward a more pragmatic and interest-driven one. This shift is illustrated through the case of its emerging partnership with the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) within the C5+EU framework.

The growing determination of the Central Asian states to reconsider and further diversify their foreign policies has legitimized the EU's ambition to strengthen its presence in the region. In recent years, the EU has intensified its engagement by institutionalizing regular high-level political dialogue, updating its strategy for cooperation, and launching new economic initiatives.

To address these developments, this paper will focus on two major dynamics shaping the EU's external relations. The first concerns how global geopolitical turbulence, the reconfiguration of the international order, and internal political developments are collectively pushing the EU to pursue greater strategic autonomy for meaningful global engagement. Building on this, the second part will argue that, under these external and internal pressures, the EU is gradually moving beyond its traditional identity as a normative power, adopting instead a more interest-driven and pragmatic approach in its foreign relations. The rapprochement between the European Union and the Central Asian states within the evolving C5+EU framework will serve as the case study through which these dynamics are explored.

Broad Geopolitical Instability

The decades-long debate on the European Union's global 'actorness' still has not found an answer to this question. The EU's hybrid nature, combining the characteristics of a sovereign state and an inter-state organization complicates the task of defining its international 'actorness' and ability to shape events. In his 2018 State of the Union address, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated that the EU needs to acquire and maintain *Weltpolitikfähigkeit*—the capacity to play a role in shaping global affairs. The question today is whether the EU has gained such a capacity. The answer cannot be stated as a simple affirmation or rejection; rather, it depends on recognizing the profound transformations in the conditions and the quality of global and internal European politics that have unfolded over the past decade.

Internally, the European Union is facing unprecedented internal discord and growing political fragmentation. The far-right has been gaining popularity through the democratic process, making gains in several EU countries within the 2024 European Parliament elections that resulted in increased number of right MEPs in the European Parliament. This trend is expanding to the European Council, where a number of governments include far-right parties. This results in right-wing political forces acquiring a growing influence over the EU's policy agenda, particularly in the domains of migration, climate governance, security, enlargement, and external relations. The reinforcing effect of the Trump Administration in the United States, which is seen as "normalizing and amplifying" similar political currents in the EU (consider, in this context, U.S. Vice-President JD Vance's speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference). These internal developments weaken cohesion and undermine the EU's credibility as a collective actor on the international stage.

Externally, the EU operates in an international environment characterized by complexity, instability, and systemic uncertainty. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the conflict between Israel and Hamas, escalating tensions between Israel and Iran, violent confrontations in regions such as the Middle East and Africa, and threats to global trade routes, illustrate this geopolitical turbulence. All these lead to the further weakening of multilateral institutions and the "rules-based liberal international order" upon which the EU's external identity has relied. These dynamics undermine the EU's capacity to respond effectively and highlight the urgency of adapting its 'actorness' in external relations.

Recent developments and shifts showcase that the EU appears to recognize this urgency and the problem it faces. The Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 introduced a new policy priority, titled "*A strong and secure Europe*," which integrates internal and external security concerns and underscores the importance of defense and resilience. In her 2025 State of the Union address, von der Leyen likewise stressed that the EU must assume greater responsibility for its own security and advance strategic autonomy in defense, energy, and technology. EU member states have also increased defense spending (triggered at Trump's urging) and devised economic security strategies. Yet these measures alone are unlikely to be sufficient to maintain the "rules-based" order, particularly in the face of America's declining readiness to maintain it. Ultimately, the EU must reinvent its 'actorness,' turning the current crisis into a demonstration of its strategic relevance.

Shift in EU External Relations: From Normative Power to Pragmatism

The turbulence of the international environment has accelerated a shift in the EU's external relations posture. Long regarded as a predominantly soft and normative power, the EU increasingly recognizes that it must adapt its role and capabilities in order to

remain influential in an era defined by hard power politics and systemic turbulence. As von der Leyen noted in her 2025 State of the Union address, the “new Europe” must be constructed to meet the challenges of “*imperial ambitions and imperial wars*.” This raises a central question: how can the EU ensure its continued relevance and influence in such a world? (It also raises another question, which will not be addressed here, put forward by the likes of Robert Cooper, about whether the EU is an example of “imperial liberalism” or “postmodern imperialism,” or “cooperative empire”).

The emerging answer lies in a gradual move away from a purely value-driven identity toward a more pragmatic and interest-based ‘actorship.’ This evolution has developed into the EU’s self-definition of *principled pragmatism*, understood as an external relations approach that blends realism, grounded in a self-assessment of strategic interests, with idealism, rooted in self-defined normative commitments.

In the current global context, the notion of principled pragmatism has evolved and blended into concept of *EU strategic autonomy*. While this concept embeds normative values, for example, through accession conditionality, the growing emphasis on interest-based bilateral relations has elevated economic and security considerations to a more prominent place in the EU’s external engagement.

The enlargement debate, for instance, is no longer framed solely as a moral duty to support democracies, but also as a strategic investment in stability. Similarly, initiatives in energy security, connectivity, and defense demonstrate that the EU increasingly aligns its external engagement with practical, age-old considerations of power and resilience, while still upholding its self-defined core values.

The turn towards pragmatism in the EU’s external relations is expressively illustrated in its evolving engagement with Central Asia, where the EU has moved from values-based assistance, recognizing its limited impact in the region, to strategic partnership, which meets the region’s geopolitical agenda.

Growing Engagement with Central Asia

In this transformative period of international relations, characterized by heightened global instability and polarization, the five Central Asian states have found themselves at the center of geopolitical contestation. The connectivity and energy potential of Central Asia, coupled with its geostrategic location, has drawn significant interest from various external players. Moreover, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Central Asia has enjoyed an increase of international attention, as changing geopolitical dynamics have paved the way for an increase in its importance in the eyes of major powers, near and far. The strategic interests of Russia, China, and the EU in Central Asia’s vast energy resources and critical transit routes have led to a rise in the region’s

political significance and have made the region a focal point of external competition over connectivity, energy security, and normative versus pragmatic engagement.

At the same time, the Central Asian states themselves increasingly recognize the urgent need to diversify both their individual and collective foreign policies with these same major powers as well as other foreign actors. Thus, the Central Asian states have increasingly positioned themselves not merely as passive recipients of external influence but as active players in their own right, advancing their own agendas. The case of Uzbekistan provides good example of this balancing act: it actively cooperates with China through the Belt and Road Initiative and receives substantial direct investments; deepens dialogue and trade exchange with the EU under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which lifts tariffs on a range of export goods in exchange for commitments to sustainable development and good governance; and simultaneously maintains robust security ties with Russia, adopting a military strategic partnership program extending until 2030. Another example is Kyrgyzstan. Despite constraints, including heavy financial, economic, and security (CSTO membership) dependency on Russia, it is also balancing between it and other powers. Leveraging Moscow's decreasing influence in the region amid its ongoing war in Ukraine, Bishkek has attracted large-scale investments from China (China has emerged as the principal investor in Kyrgyzstan in the last years, surpassing Russia) and EU member states (Germany is investing in the Kyrgyz energy sector), signing a new cooperation agreement with the EU in June 2024, and conducting the inaugural U.S.-Kyrgyz joint Ak Shumkar air force exercise. Kazakhstan, with its longstanding multivector foreign policy, and Turkmenistan, through its doctrine of neutrality and push to diversify gas export routes, similarly underscore the proactive strategies of Central Asian governments, while Tajikistan has increasingly sought to balance its reliance on Russia with growing Chinese security and economic engagement. These examples demonstrate how Central Asian states, even in conditions of regional geopolitical instability and major power rivalry, are each actively shaping their external alignments to enhance their respective autonomies and advance their national agendas.

All these developments are taking place against the backdrop of persistent regional challenges. Since gaining independence, the Central Asian states have faced a plethora of security issues, including intra-regional tensions over borders (Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan) and tensions over natural resources, particularly water resources, ethnic unrest and clashes, and the threat of extremism and terrorism threats, whether homegrown or emanating from Afghanistan. There have been disruptive domestic political disagreements and geopolitical competition across the wider region, and there have also been infrastructural shortcomings. At the same time, external initiatives such as Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership and China's Belt and Road Initiative have heightened the competition for influence, reinforcing the Central Asian states' incentive to pursue more diversified and balanced foreign policies.

Evolution of EU-Central Asia Relations: From Normative Engagement to Strategic Partnership

In view of the region's growing geostrategic importance, the European Union has stepped up its engagement with Central Asia in recent years. This evolution is evident in the EU's 2019 Strategy for Central Asia, which signaled a shift from the predominantly normative focus of its previous (2007) regional strategy document (it was centered on democracy promotion, human rights, the rule of law, and development assistance) toward a more pragmatic and interest-driven approach. Shaped by a turbulent geopolitical environment, the attraction of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the EU's own internal crises, the 2019 document reframed Central Asia as a strategic partner rather than a passive recipient of aid, prioritizing resilience, connectivity, energy cooperation, and economic diversification. In doing so, it reflected the EU's broader turn toward 'principled pragmatism,' aligning its external engagement more explicitly with strategic interests alongside values.

The first two meetings between the Central Asian heads of state and the President of the European Council in October 2022 and June 2023 resulted in a joint roadmap aimed at further deepening EU-Central Asia relations. This process culminated with the conduct of a first-ever high-level EU-Central Asia Summit (C5+EU), held in Samarkand in April 2025. This summit emphasized the EU's efforts to strengthen its position in the region, assert itself as a credible geopolitical actor, and pursue more interest-driven external relations that complement its normative agenda.

The outcomes of the summit made this shift tangible: the adoption of a joint declaration elevated the "partnership" to a "strategic" level and prioritized cooperation in critical raw materials (reinforced by a Declaration of Intent), transport, renewable energy, and satellite connectivity. To support these priorities, EU leaders announced a €12 billion investment package, while the European Investment Bank signed four memoranda with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan worth €365 million under the Global Gateway strategy to finance infrastructure and environmental projects.

All developments in C5+EU relations have been reinforced by complementary steps of individual EU member states, mainly Germany and France. Germany's strategic regional partnership with Central Asia, announced in 2023, has led to intensified bilateral relations and the formalization of the C5+Germany format, within which two summits have already been held. The agreements reached between the sides are leading to an inflow of German investments and technology as well as strengthening bilateral cooperation in raw material supplies. France has similarly deepened its outreach, reflecting a broader trend among EU member states to align national strategies with the EU's new regional agenda.

For the European Union, building viable transport routes across Central Asia is an essential component of its pursuit of strategic autonomy, particularly by diversifying supply chains. For Central Asian states, closer engagement with the EU offers

opportunities for economic development, greater international visibility, and a stronger “Western vector” within their multivector foreign policies. While Germany and other EU member states seek to secure alternative supplies of rare earth metals and energy resources as part of their broader diversification away from China and Russia, Central Asian states welcome these partnerships as instruments to attract investment, foster growth, and strengthen their autonomy in balancing relations with Russia, China, and the West.

In this sense, the current trajectory of EU-Central Asia relations is mutually beneficial: the EU consolidates its geopolitical presence and advances economic security goals, while the Central Asian states expand their room for maneuver and assert themselves as active agents in a multipolar international order.

EU Engagement in the Context of Major Power Competition

The EU’s growing engagement in Central Asia must also be understood in the broader context of major power competition in the region. Russia has long enjoyed an established position and influence in Central Asia. The Central Asian economies are all strongly dependent on trade with Russia and two (or three) are linked institutionally to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members, Uzbekistan is an observer). Investment projects and capital flows have also significantly involved Russia. Russia has served as a security guarantor in the region since collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russia-Ukraine war has deeply affected security and threat perceptions in the region, laying bare the risks of over-dependence and raising questions regarding the sustainability of the region’s autonomy.

China has consolidated its position as Central Asia’s principal economic and trade partner, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative and large-scale infrastructure investments, and is increasingly viewed as the leading candidate to fill the geopolitical and security vacuum created by Russia’s declining role.

As the established power dynamics in Central Asia shift, Central Asian states are increasingly pursuing multivector strategies that provide for new openings for other major powers. Both the intensity and character of engagement by the Gulf states, Türkiye, and the EU is being reshaped, reflecting the region’s strategic diversification and growing dynamics of power competition. The GCC countries, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have also expanded their presence in Central Asia in recent years. Both bilaterally and within the framework of C5+GCC, GCC engagement is driven by development aid and investment in energy, infrastructure, and finance. This emerging cooperation “within the Global South” complements the multivectoralism and foreign policy diversification strategies of the Central Asian states while expanding their geopolitical reach.

Unlike China, the GCC states, or even the EU, Türkiye's economic and strategic engagement with Central Asia is supported by deep historical, cultural, and linguistic connections to the region. Building on these, Ankara is steadily expanding its influence through the Organization of Turkic States, TURKSOY, TİKA, and the Yunus Emre Institute. This has led to growing trade ties as well as security and military cooperation. Leveraging the growing security gap that has resulted from Russia's declining role, Türkiye has supplied Kyrgyzstan with missile defense systems and established a missile training center there, while also expanding defense cooperation with Kazakhstan through the delivery of Turkish drones and joint military exercises. This is a significant development of Turkish engagement in Central Asia, for it moves beyond political cooperation into military engagement.

Compared to Russia, China, and Türkiye, the EU lacks hard power instruments in Central Asia (or anywhere else). Instead, Brussels seeks to distinguish itself by offering a model of partnership based on trade and other economic levers, connectivity initiatives, and know-how transfer. And yet, the EU simply cannot compete with the scale of Chinese investment and assistance—as even the EU's Global Gateway initiative funds are much, much smaller than those deployed under BRI, the extent of political, cultural, and financial influence of Russia, and the historical and cultural proximity of Türkiye.

The EU's engagement in Central Asia is further complicated by its geographical remoteness from, and limited amount of financial resources it is able to devote to, the region. Another complication is that Russia and China view the advancement of the EU's normative agenda as a direct threat, which means they are trying actively to oppose it (the Central Asian states are also not particularly supportive of the EU's normative agenda). As observers point out, the EU is not aiming to rival Moscow and Beijing across the board, but to carve out space in specific sectors such as raw materials and connectivity. These constraints limit the EU's pragmatic turn to the region: while Central Asian states value the EU as a balancing actor that reinforces Central Asia's multivector strategy, its influence will depend on its ability to deliver substantial results on the basis of terms that the Central Asian states themselves find attractive.