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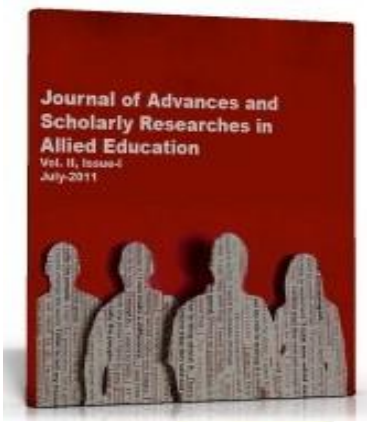
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES



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ABSTRACT:

In the 1990s, there seemed to be a complementarity between the needs of the newly independent Central Asian states, and the political and economic interests of the European Union. Yet the EU failed to establish traction in the region and its ability to exert leverage has remained low. One problem is a dissonance in mutual perceptions, reflecting negative images. This creates misunderstandings and resentments. The relationship between the EU and the Central Asian states must be re- calibrated to emphasise partnership not mentorship. Another problem is that EU projects are ambitious in scope but poorly resourced, and thus often fall short of expectations. A third problem is that the EU has been unable to establish itself as a unitary actor in the region. Bilateral links with individual EU member states are more effective. Unless the EU succeeds in overcoming its internal divisions it will be difficult to implement a coherent regional strategy.

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INTRODUCTION:

In the early 1990s there seemed to be a natural complementarity between the needs of the newly independent Central Asian states, and the hopes and aims of the newly formed European Union (EU).[1] The Central Asians looked to the EU for assistance and guidance as they embarked on the difficult process of post-Soviet transition. The EU was eager to help these young states build democratic societies and liberal, open economies. Yet the EU failed to establish traction in the region and its ability to exert leverage remained low. The Central Asian states, meanwhile, gained in confidence and became more assertive. They set about developing their own political and economic systems, drawing on international experience as well as on indigenous traditions and values. They have much in common with each other, but there are also significant differences in culture and outlook. Consequently, they are following divergent paths. All, however, recognise the value of learning from the experience of others, including the EU, but insist on defining their own priorities and needs. The consolidation of independence has been matched by an upsurge of national pride. The notion of foreign tutelage, whatever the form or source, is regarded as anathema. The Central Asians expect and demand to be treated as equals, not as "junior brothers".

This change of mood has resulted in a qualitative shift in the way Central Asians approach the relationship with the EU. There is scant understanding of this in the EU, where perceptions of the region continue to be characterised by tropes of under development and dysfunctionality, replete with warnings of impending danger. The insistence on this narrative of disaster and mismanagement reinforces the idea that the region will descend into chaos unless it receives external help. The gulf between these perceptions - from within and without the region - reflects a "cognitive dissonance" that hinders meaningful interaction. The contention in this paper is that unless this tension is resolved, it is unlikely that there will be a strong, durable relationship.

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FROM TACTIS TO STRATEGY PAPERS: EU-CA RELATIONS

Before considering the situation today, it is useful to review the evolution of EU engagement with the Central Asian states. The first stage dates back to the early 1990s, when a scattering of assistance and development projects were implemented under the EU-funded TACIS umbrella. Despite enthusiasm and good will on all sides, the results were disappointing. Most projects were poorly planned and of questionable relevance. Moreover, the lion's share of the funding was "recycled" back to the donors in the form of generous (some would say over-generous) fees and expenses paid to EU-based consultants and project managers.

The next stage, ushered in by the offer of EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, promised a more structured approach Negotiations commenced in the mid-1990s, and agreements were ratified with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan respectively in 1999. An agreement was signed with Turkmenistan in 1998, but the process stalled and currently ratification is still pending. Tajikistan signed in 2004, but ratification was postponed; the agreement finally entered into force on January 1, 2010. Initially, these documents were welcomed in Central Asia as a gauge of the serious intentions of the Europeans. However, optimism was soon replaced by disappointment and dissatisfaction over the uneven nature of the agreements. The benefits that they offered were heavily slanted towards the interests of EU partners, with few reciprocal advantages for the Central Asians. Moreover, although they became eligible for the preferential tariff rates of the EU's Generalised System of Preferences, in practice, the range and volume of their exports did not allow them to take advantage of the system. Not surprisingly, trade remained at a very low level, with Central Asian exports to the EU inordinately dominated by raw materials, especially hydrocarbons. Coincidentally, this mirrors the situation in the WTO: as the impasse in the Doha round of talks has

highlighted, agreements that supposedly create a level playing field for all, in fact tend to favour the richer, more powerful states, thereby severely harming weaker partners - as Kyrgyzstan, which joined WTO in 1993, has discovered to its cost.

The third stage in EU's relations with Central Asia was the launch of strategy papers. The first such document, the Strategy Paper 2002-2006, once again raised hopes for a more coherent, long-term programme of engagement. It confidently announced that the core objectives of the new strategy were "to promote the stability and security of the countries of Central Asia and to assist in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction". There was to be a three-track approach, focusing on security and conflict prevention; elimination of sources of political and social tension; and improvement of the climate for trade and investment. However, the budget for this grand concept was unrealistic (for 2002-2004, the total allocation for the entire region was €150 million) and the implementation "fragmented and project- driven, rather than strategic".

A much glossier document, the European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, appeared in 2007.[9] This was developed under the aegis of the German presidency and covered the period 2007- 2013. It was fleshed out by a somewhat more detailed Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia, and a programme-orientated Central Asia Indicative Programme for 2007-2010.[10] Bilateral relations between Germany and the Central Asian states were undoubtedly the most successful example of EU involvement in the region, thus there was an expectation that these initiatives would, at last, yield significant results. The Central Asian governments, eager to support the new Strategy, submitted carefully drafted proposals. Regrettably, this was only weakly reflected in the final document, which resembled a lazy student's attempt to re-hash an old text, in the hope that a little superficial titivation (re- shuffling of headings, multiple repetitions, slick formatting and numerous colour illustrations) would conceal the lack of new content - a vain stratagem. As

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before, it was marked by insensitivity to the Central Asian context, compounded by a poor grasp of the region's history, a dearth of substance and the absence of a genuine vision.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

The chief obstacle in the relationship between the EU and Central Asia is the lack of common understandings. In social psychology, the term "cognitive dissonance" refers to the discomfort caused by the clash between simultaneous but contradictory "cognitions" (beliefs, perceptions, attitudes etc.). The theory that is derived from this phenomenon posits the notion that those who experience this dissonance have a "motivational drive" to resolve it, either by justifying their beliefs and attitudes, or by changing them. Here the term is used to describe the contradictory cognitions that are held in Central Asia and the EU. This dissonance results in inadvertent friction and miscommunication. To resolve this situation, one or both the parties must modify their behaviour. This requires an understanding of the position of the other, as well as a judgement over "appropriateness" - who sets the norms, who makes the concessions. Below, these contrasting points of view are described.

Central Asian Perceptions

Central Asian attitudes can only be understood in the light of a traumatic recent history. Under Soviet rule, the region experienced a massive transformation. Modernisation and, through the prism of Russian culture, Europeanization, brought not merely new skills and knowledge, but a fundamental change in outlook. Traditional culture was largely relegated to the private sphere. One can dispute the details of this process, but it is undeniable that through it the Central Asians acquired a degree of human capital that compared favourably with that of developed nations. Moreover, Central Asians were well represented amongst the cultural and

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intellectual elite of the Soviet Union, producing scientists, mathematicians, ballet dancers, opera singers and other professionals of world standing. Then, without any psychological, political or economic preparation, the entire framework within which this development had taken place suddenly evaporated. It was a seismic shock. In scale, it resembled the French or Russian revolutions, but the speed with which events unfolded was infinitely greater. Virtually overnight, the political and economic foundations of these societies were swept away. Even notions of identity and belonging were undermined. The very survival of the Central Asian republics as independent entities was called into question.

The first priority was to maintain stability and social cohesion. Many feared that the outbreak of civil strife in Tajikistan in 1992 was a harbinger of chaos and bloodshed throughout the region. In fact, within a relatively short period, a peace process was underway and in 1997 the warring factions signed a peace agreement which has remained in force since then - an exceptional outcome by any standards. Meanwhile, in all the Central Asian states, fundamental reforms were undertaken, aimed at (re-)building the state and the nation. Initially, there were attempts to apply foreign models - for example, Turkish or South Korean. It soon became apparent, however, that the Central Asian situation was unique. Solutions, likewise, had to be unique, drawing on local traditions and experience. Formulating and applying coherent domestic and foreign policies required complex problem-solving skills, founded on strong analytical, administrative and organisational capabilities. This was a process of trial and error: inevitably, some reforms were successful, others less so. No one would suggest that the Central Asians have created utopias, or that the process of transformation is complete. Nevertheless, steady progress has been made and when set in historical and geographical context, the record is impressive.

Perceptions of the EU

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In the early 1990s, Central Asians regarded the EU as an exemplar. Some even dreamt of eventually joining the European Union. Yet as they began to travel to member states for work or study, firsthand exposure to life there revealed a darker reality. Central Asian visitors encountered - in some cases for the first time in their lives - intolerance and abuse of ethnic and religious minorities. They saw widespread under-age prostitution and paedophilia; drug abuse; violent street crime; fraud and other forms of corruption (including in EU organs); poverty; family breakdown; social exclusion. These and other social ills are not unique to the EU, but they contrast painfully with the high moral tone that its officials frequently use in their dealings with other countries. The values and ideals that the EU proclaims - democracy, rule of law, good governance and human rights - are noble and the Central Asians strive to live up to them as best they can. However, the European experience also shows that good intentions do not necessarily create humane, just societies. Central Asia has not solved all its problems, but neither has the EU. As Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev commented caustically, "We have enough advisers now from here and from there, from the West, from beyond the ocean ... Kazakhstan is no longer a state that can be ordered about and told what to do. We know what we have to do. We shouldn't run after foreign recommendations with our pants down."

EU perceptions of Central Asia

In the EU, Central Asia is often described as lawless and poverty- stricken, ruled in arbitrary fashion by corrupt, brutal dictators with bizarrely extravagant habits. Unemployment, organised crime and drug trafficking are said to be rife; ethnic conflict, fuelled by competition over scarce land and water resources, is believed to be imminent; a youthful, fast-expanding population is depicted as easy prey for religious extremists and terrorists.

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These and other negative images are deeply embedded in popular perceptions of Central Asia. In turn, they inform EU policy-making by raising the spectre of state failure and consequent chaos. Yet this doom-laden picture is far from complete. It lacks scale and context. It also ignores the many positive developments of recent years, the observable improvement in people's standard of living, the new opportunities that are available. This is not to deny that areas of serious concern remain. These states are vulnerable: they face complex problems for which there are no fail-safe solutions. Some are the result of the internal stresses of transition. Others are caused, or exacerbated, by instability in the volatile regional neighbourhood.

COMMON THREATS. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES

Terrorism is a prime common concern. It is a global phenomenon, supported by underground networks and support systems that are ill understood. The first terrorist acts in Central Asia occurred in Uzbekistan in the late 1990s; since then there have been several more incidents, but also many pre-emptive arrests in Uzbekistan and the neighbouring states. Western commentators often suggest that the Central Asian governments are themselves to blame for the spread of terrorism and religious extremism in the region because of their repressive policies. Democracy and economic development, it is claimed, are the only way to combat these threats. Yet the reality is that terrorism flourishes across the world, in countries with very different political systems and levels of economic development. Moreover, some of the most notorious terrorists have been born, bred and/or educated in Western democracies. It should also not be forgotten that when confronted with terrorist activities on their own territories, Western governments (including some EU member states) have introduced harsh, legally dubious and morally reprehensible measures. This undermines the credibility of their prescriptions for dealing with this problem. For the Central Asians, the stakes are too high for experimentation. Rather than risk destabilising still fragile

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societies, they prefer to trust their own judgement. Their policies, grounded in familiarity with the context, combine education and development with tough policing. It is impossible to predict how successful this approach will be in balancing security needs with basic civil liberties. Other governments who face similar threats are also still struggling to find an appropriate balance.

Drug trafficking from Afghanistan and the related cluster of problems Is another area of common concern. This is a relatively new evelopment. The Western intervention in Afghanistan triggered an exponential increase in drug cultivation and concurrently, the demand for illegal opiates rocketed in Europe. Located on the northern route out of Afghanistan, the Central Asian states are the "frontline". The fall-out from the transit trade in narcotics - violent crime, corruption, local addiction, health and social problems - causes huge damage to the region. The Central Asian governments are fully committed to the struggle to combat drug trafficking, using their own resources as well as cooperating with international agencies and donors.

The support they receive is usually termed "assistance". Yet as victims of a disaster not of their making, it would arguably be more fitting to consider this aid as a form of reparation for harm inflicted. Moreover, as they are directly affected by anti-narcotics campaigns at both ends of the trafficking chain - caught in a cleft stick between producers in Afghanistan and consumers in Europe - they should surely be more actively involved in developing and evaluating these measures. In the EU, that would include participating in debates on ways to curb demand education and rehabilitation, punishment or legalisation. These few examples illustrate the distance in perceptions and attitudes that exists between the EU and Central Asia. This gulf must be bridged if there is to be genuine cooperation.

EU ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA: PIRANDELLO OR DOSTOEVSKY?

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EU engagement in Central Asia, as commented above, has been distinguished by a lack of focus. It might, in Pirandello-like terms, be dubbed "twenty-seven states in search of a purpose": there is a symbolic desire "to be present", but the rhetoric, lofty and altruistic, offers only a vague explanation as to why this should be so. Over a century ago, Dostoevsky addressed the question of Russia's involvement in the region in a more trenchant fashion. He asked "Why do we need [Central] Asia?" and responded that it was necessary for Russia's self- image, because it gave a sense of superiority. The idea that there might be any such motivation behind the EU's presence in Central Asia would seem both ridiculous and insulting. Nevertheless, there are echoes of a colonial mindset. Stated EU priorities for the region combine development assistance, focused on the need to ensure stability and security and help to eradicate poverty, with economic goals such as the promotion of closer cooperation between Central Asia and the EU in spheres of energy and transport.

These objectives are oddly reminiscent of past imperial ambitions, when a "civilizing mission" was twinned with the exploitation of natural resources. This process was memorably lampooned by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "The white man came to our land and told us to kneel down and hold out our hands. We did so. When we opened our eyes, we had the Bible - and the white man had the land".

Of course the EU has no desire to mount a land grab, or any other sort of grab, in Central Asia. Yet the combination of assumed moral superiority and eagerness to secure access to the region's energy resources resonates jarringly. As Muhiddin Kabiri, a respected Tajik opposition leader puts it, Europe gives the impression that "Central Asia is all about oil and gas ... important to Europe only as a reserve fuel tank".[21] At the same time, the insistent portrayal of Central Asia as a place of danger and threat can seem to justify and rationalise the need for a "civilising mission" to bring order, enlightenment and prosperity to the region. Linked to the EU's desire for "safe energy supplies", ideological and economic agendas appear as two

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sides of the same coin. Possibly this approach reflects a subconscious "default mode" in European thinking about this part of the world. However, today's reality is that the EU's power to pursue these hopes and ambitions is very limited. Hence, the Pirandello-esque "search for a mission" takes on the guise of displacement activity, a substitute for productive action. The challenge for the EU is to make a sober assessment of the discrepancy between wishes and abilities - and to devise a realistic, deliverable strategy.

In Central Asia, the attitude is more pragmatic. The regional governments welcome cooperation with foreign partners, but this has to accord with the orientation and desired pace of their development strategies. The EU has outlined major initiatives such as INOGATE (EU, Central Asia, Caucasus, Black Sea energy co-operation programme) and TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe, Caucasus, Asia).

However, ministerial meetings and grand declarations notwithstanding, attention has mostly been directed towards the Caucasus and Black Sea regions, with little concrete implementation of either programme in Central Asia. Equally, the vaunted Nabucco gas pipeline, an ambitious project to carry Caspian and Middle Eastern gas to Europe, bypassing Russia, remains highly problematic. It has been on the EU's political and economic agenda since 2002; but again, despite upbeat announcements about potential agreements, at the time of writing its future is still uncertain.

Meanwhile, new facts are being created on the ground. Exploration and development ventures with partners from Asia are proliferating. The same is true of export pipelines. Since 2005, an oil pipeline from western Kazakhstan to China has been completed; a gas pipeline following approximately the same route is planned for the near future. A gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China is already in operation. Russia is upgrading and expanding the Central Asia-Centre (Turkmenistan- Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Russia) network of gas pipelines.

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A new Turkmenistan-Iran pipeline has been launched. The picture is similar in other sectors, including uranium and rare earths. Road and rail transport corridors are also spreading out in all directions. As for ensuring the security of energy supplies - a stated EU aim - the most constructive contribution to date has come from Turkmenistan. In December 2008, at a session of the UN General Assembly, it proposed a resolution on "Reliable and Stable Transit of Energy and its Role in Ensuring Sustainable Development and International Cooperation"; the document was endorsed with the full and unreserved support of all UN members.

Against this background of rapid development and large-scale investment from a growing number of partners, the EU's credibility is dented by its procrastination in implementing the grandiose infrastructural projects that it has proposed.

EU PROPOSAL TO "ENHANCE REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA" - A CASE OF HUBRIS :

Another stated EU priority is "to facilitate/promote closer regional cooperation in Central Asia". This is hubris. These countries are independent, sovereign states. They will not accept external interference in matters of policy. The EU can exhort, admonish and cajole as much as it wishes, but it does not have the leverage to influence the actions of the Central Asian states.

The idea that external help/pressure can be used to "enhance regional cooperation" merely underlines how little understanding of the region there is in EU capitals. It is not that the Central Asians are too obtuse to realise the need for joint action to resolve regional problems. On the contrary, they know this better than any outsider ever could. They are not newcomers to this region: they have lived with their neighbours for centuries and will no doubt do so far into the future. It is precisely for this reason that they understand the need to make

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agreements that have the support and voluntary consent of all the concerned parties. A notable example of consensus, achieved after long discussion, was the Treaty on the Creation of a Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone, endorsed by all five states in September 2006.

Various multilateral formats have been tried since independence, starting with a trilateral Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan economic and defence union in 1994; this was eventually transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Union, which, after merging with the Eurasian Economic Community, was dissolved in 2005. None of these structures proved to be effective. A new form of association might be proposed in the future. For the present, cross border issues are the main concern and bilateral relations are regarded as a more flexible mechanism for regulating such matters. It is a tortuous, sometimes acrimonious process, but results are gradually achieved.

It could be argued that some issues, such as water and border management, cannot be resolved in piecemeal fashion, through bilateral agreements. Instead, an integrated regional strategy is required. However, these issues are of such vital importance to the security of each state that there is extreme sensitivity over every detail. Consequently, it is only when the conflicting concerns and needs of neighbouring states have been resolved that it will be possible to reach a robust regional agreement, supported by viable, effective instruments. The EU has offered to facilitate this process. This well-meaning gesture is not likely to find widespread support. To be blunt, the EU has not established a reputation as an "honest broker" in the region. Rightly or wrongly, there are suspicions that the Europeans will favour the interests of some parties instead of taking an even-handed approach to all. Specifically, there are concerns that the EU will favour the smaller, weaker states of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the hope of gaining political leverage within the region by "buying" allies through which to exert pressure on the larger, sometimes obdurate, states. Whatever the reality may be, this perception of bias is a liability. Thus, if an outside body is to be involved, there is a

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general consensus that it should be the United Nations. In the case of water management, this is already happening: in mid-2009, at a meeting sponsored by the Ashgabat-based UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA), notable progress was made when, for the first time, downstream states agreed to share some of the costs of managing rivers that originate in upstream states.

RESPONDING TO "CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER": KYRGYZSTAN

One of the key features of the EU Strategy in Central Asia is the strong emphasis that is placed on security and stability. However, there is a marked contrast between perceptions in the EU and perceptions in Central Asia as to what constitutes pressing security threats. In the EU, it is the lack of good governance, poor human rights, corruption and other such abuses. In the Central Asian states, it is terrorism, drugs trafficking and other forms of criminal activity. This reflects the very different security environments. The EU approach is "soft", long-term and largely developmental in concept. In Central Asia, the threats are immediate and deadly, requiring a swift, "hard" response and the use of whatever force is necessary to protect the public. There is no argument as to the need for ongoing reforms in all sectors of government: all the Central Asian states realise that this is essential. However, it cannot provide protection against the "clear and present dangers" that the region faces.

The violent clashes in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 were a tragic illustration of the type of situation that is liable to irrupt in the region. The conflict began in April in the capital Bishkek, but reached a climax in the south of the county in early June. The death toll was officially set at some 400, but unofficial estimates suggested a figure of at least 2,000. It is not clear whether the fighting was sparked by a clash between criminal gangs, by supporters of the ousted President Bakiev or by inter-ethnic rivalries. What is certain is that the great majority of the victims were ethnic Uzbeks, who form a large proportion of the population in southern Kyrgyzstan.

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Some 100,000 of them sought asylum in Uzbekistan. It took several days for aid from international agencies to arrive, thus the Uzbek government had to mobilise its own resources to cope with this massive influx of vulnerable, traumatized people. The Kyrgyz government, having appealed in vain for assistance from Moscow, eventually succeeded in restoring calm using its own armed forces. This enabled the refugees from Uzbekistan to be repatriated at the end of the month.

Tashkent's response to the disaster was crucial. On the organizational level, it was well coordinated and emergency aid was delivered efficiently. On a political level, President Islam Karimov's unequivocal rejection of attempts to ethnicise the conflict, along with his firm stance against impromptu acts of revenge, prevented the conflict from spreading across the border. The danger of this happening was very real: many ordinary Uzbeks, outraged by the atrocities that had been inflicted on their kin, wanted to launch retaliatory cross-border attacks. This could easily have escalated into an inter-state confrontation.

In such a volatile environment the EU prescriptions for stability have little practical relevance. In the long-term undoubtedly they make sense, but that is of little comfort when a brutal insurgency is underway. In the case of the Kyrgyz conflict, the most that external actors have been able to do is to offer disaster relief and humanitarian aid.

This is of course not an insignificant contribution, but it did not stop the violence and it certainly does not take away the possibility of renewed disorders. Initiatives such as the EU's Instrument for Stability, which are supposedly intended to respond in a time of crisis, do not have the capacity to react rapidly. For those who are caught up in the situation and desperate for help, this is frustrating. As one Kyrgyz official put it, "The EU people smile, say kind words - and do nothing". This comment is not so much a criticism as a failure of communication: the EU appears to be giving one sort of message, but in reality it means

something different. In this context, it is important to appreciate the role of local actors: Uzbekistan, initially without the support of international agencies, took appropriate action because, quite clearly, it was necessary for the security and stability of its own population as well as for the region at large. This underlines the fact that in the face of an unfolding crisis, it is the Central Asians themselves who must take responsibility for their own security.

KAZAKHSTAN'S CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE OSCE: AN AID TO PROMOTING EU'S CENTRAL ASIA AGENDA?

In the EU, the hope has been expressed that Kazakhstan's status as Chairman of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) will enable it to play a key role within Central Asia, promoting EU/OSCE agendas in such areas as human rights and democratisation, likewise in enhancing regional cooperation. These are vain hopes. To Western eyes, Kazakhstan may appear to be more "advanced", and therefore worthy of emulation, but within the region it does not occupy a special niche of respect and authority. As mentioned previously, the Central Asian states share some common features, but there are also significant differences. This is recognised by the Kazakhs themselves. As one senior official expressed it: "We are like the five fingers of a single hand, organically joined but distinct and separate". It is no accident that these states are set on divergent political paths. Each state has its own social structures, its own cultural peculiarities.

There is a degree of economic cooperation between them, strengthened by some Kazakh investment. However, none of the Central Asian states shows any inclination to adopt Kazakhstan's development model. There is also no convergence in their foreign policies. On the contrary, they are pursuing separate trajectories. Certainly there are occasions when foreign policy objectives coincide, but this is not the result of a unified approach. Rather, it is because these states face similar challenges and may sometimes come to similar

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conclusions as to how best to respond. For example, the Central Asian states backed Kazakhstan's bid to secure the chairmanship of the OSCE.

However, this was in the context of a broader campaign by the Commonwealth of Independent States, energetically promoted by Russia, to counter perceived Western domination of the OSCE agenda. Once Kazakhstan had secured the coveted post, there was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm in Central Asia for Kazakh-led initiatives.

The limitations to Kazakhstan's ability to assume a leadership role in Central Asia was demonstrated during the crisis in Kyrgyzstan earlier this year. In its role as OSCE chairman, Kazakhstan helped to organise the evacuation of ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev in April. It did not play a role during the conflict, but in July it hosted an informal OSCE meeting of foreign ministers. As a result, a preliminary agreement was reached to send an international police force, drawn from OSCE members, to southern Kyrgyzstan. The decision was later formally confirmed, but although the Kyrgyz government favoured the deployment, it was strongly opposed by others, including the mayor of Osh. At the time of writing this paper, it is not clear whether the mission will proceed. Even if it does go ahead, it is unlikely to have much impact on the underlying tensions in such a hostile environment. On a bilateral level, Kazakhstan closed its border with Kyrgyzstan after the April disturbances, on grounds of national security reasons, since it feared an influx of refugees as well as drugs and arms. This was a serious blow to the Kyrgyz economy, as the country relies heavily on its trade with Kazakhstan. The border remained closed until mid-May, when it was partially re-opened. Heightened security measures are still in place, heavily restricting cross-border movement. Realistically, there was little else that Kazakhstan could do, either on its own or as chairman of the OSCE.

The relationship between the EU and Kazakhstan is important in its own right and no doubt

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could prove to be mutually beneficial.[36] However, as discussed above, it would be futile, not to mention counter-productive, to extrapolate from that the notion that Kazakhstan could assume a leadership role in the region. Undoubtedly, it would be convenient for the EU to designate, albeit tacitly, a "Mr Central Asia" - a surrogate through which to channel an EU agenda. This grossly underestimates the keen sense of national pride within the region. Efforts to pursue such a policy would not only have a deleterious effect on the EU's image, but more seriously, would provoke resentment, stir up latent rivalries and ultimately to lead to greater fragmentation within the region.

A CHANGING WORLD:

During the Soviet era, Central Asia was largely isolated from the external world. There were almost no direct communications or transport links with neighbouring countries, let alone with more distant lands. Thus, in the aftermath of independence one of the first tasks was the creation of the physical as well as the organizational infrastructure for engagement with the international community. Remarkably, within some eighteen months functioning ministries of foreign affairs and foreign economic relations were established in all the Central Asian states. It is noteworthy that from the outset, they were careful to avoid becoming enmeshed in any single bloc or grouping. Thus, for example, they joined the Commonwealth of Independent States; the Organization for Islamic Conference; the NATO Partnership for Peace programme; and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This diversification of links was not accidental: it was part of a broader process whereby the Central Asians "re-possessed" the centrality of their physical and cultural geography.

The Central Asian states, with the exception of Turkmenistan, are now active members of regional structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO),[38] the Eurasian

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Economic Community (EURASEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

These bodies share some of the same objectives as the EU, particularly in the field of security. It is therefore reasonable to seek ways of promoting synergy. At first the EU seemed determined to ignore them, as their existence was mentioned only in passing in the Strategy Paper 2002-2006.

If the EU is now genuinely interested in pursuing cooperation with these organisations, as stated in its Strategy For A New Partnership and other recent documents, a formal basis needs to be established, underpinned by the signing of a memorandum to clarify the scope and nature of the relationship. Such cooperation, moreover, would only be viable if it were based on parity. There could be no special status for the EU as primus inter pares.

Thus, the situation today is very different from what it was in the early 1990s. Then the Central Asian states urgently required technical assistance and investment. The EU was welcomed as a generous donor. Now, more sources of funding are available, some of which are more in tune with their needs and importantly, more likely to yield results. For example, the EU-CA strategy for 2007-2013 maps out an ambitious vision for activities in the region, but for the entire period, covering five states, a meagre budget of €750 million has been allowed. By contrast, in 2004

China established a credit fund of US$900 million for its Central Asian partners and in June 2009, made available a loan worth US$10 billion for members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Additionally, China is already involved in a number of major infrastructural projects in the region.

Other regional states such as Russia and Iran, and international financial institutions such

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as the Asian Development Bank, are also actively involved in strategic infrastructural projects in Central Asia. Transport corridors - air, rail and road - are being developed to create networks that span Eurasia in all directions. Projected routes (already under construction) include the E-40 highway, connecting Western Europe through Russia and Central Asia to China. Transcontinental high speed rail links are also planned. Trade between the Central Asian states and their neighbours, especially China, is growing rapidly. Within the framework of the SCO there are a wide range of initiatives on cultural and educational exchanges. Several of these, such as the SCO University and the electronic research network, are similar in concept to EU projects.

Developments such as these create a web of physical and cultural ties, thereby giving substance to the concept of a shared "Eurasian space". By contrast, the boundaries of the EU are very distant from Central Asia. This is merely emphasised by efforts to portray it as the outer rim of an already extensive band of "Eastern Neighbourhood" countries. In an attempt to give more prominence and significance to the region it is sometimes described as a "bridge" on the way to somewhere else. Both formulations are at odds with the Central Asian perception that they constitute a transcontinental pivot, or hub, from which spokes radiate outwards in all directions. In other words, they do not locate themselves on anyone's periphery, but at the centre of a vital, dynamic region.

CAN THE EU ENGAGE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH CENTRAL ASIA?

There are conceptual as well as practical issues that need to be resolved if the EU is to achieve a relationship with the Central Asian states that goes beyond good intentions. Strategic engagement requires long-term commitment, driven by a shared vision of mutual benefits. It also needs appropriate structures and instruments, so as to enable interaction to develop into trust and cooperation. At a very basic level, this means knowing who your partners are and

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understanding their intentions. For the Central Asian states, the EU is an opaque organisation, with fuzzy goals and no clear identity. Up till now, bilateral links with individual EU member states have been far more effective than any relationship with the European body as a whole. This, then, is the first challenge: is the EU able to establish itself as a genuine unitary actor, with a collective strategy, or will it continue to be a group of disparate member states that have different foreign policy stances and different (and sometimes rival) economic interests? This lack of coherence reflects the complex internal dynamics of the EU. The Common Foreign and Security Policy, established almost 20 years ago by the Maastricht Treaty, has not as yet resulted in a coordinated European foreign policy stance. The European External Action Service, a creation of the Lisbon Treaty (2007), is intended to fulfill the functions of a foreign ministry and diplomatic service, but it is still in the process of formation. In the future, it may be able to forge an authentic EU foreign policy, but as of now, the key components are not in place. Thus, it is not surprising that mixed messages emanate at different times from different parts of the EU. This creates an impression of chronic indecisiveness. This does not inspire confidence in potential partners.

Another challenge for the EU is that of collective visibility. Until recently, the only fully fledged Delegation of the European Commission was based in Kazakhstan. By contrast, a number of member states were represented by their national embassies: eighteen in Kazakhstan, ten in Uzbekistan, with several ambassadors holding multiple accreditations to other states in the region. At the time of writing, Germany and France have embassies in all five states, and the UK in four (minus Kyrgyzstan). The need for more collective representation has now been recognised in Brussels and in 2010, EU Delegations were opened in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan there are “Europe Houses” and it is hoped that they will soon be upgraded to full delegation status.

The delivery of aid is another area in which the EU has not established a strong a profile. This is

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partly because individual member-state donors are more readily identified and remembered. Germany in particular is at least as well known and respected as the EU for its various projects. Another reason why the EU appears to be "fighting beneath its weight" is that some of its most successful activities are executed by other agencies. Notably, the two major EU programmes in Central Asia, border management (BOMCA) and counter narcotics action (CADAP) have until now been implemented by UNDP. Consequently, they are often assumed to be UN projects. The intention is that henceforth member states should take over this role. This may heighten awareness of the EU contribution, but it also risks confusion with national bilateral aid and technical assistance programmes. This again raises the question of the image that the EU hopes to project: is it one or many actors?

The third and perhaps most difficult challenge for the EU is to decide what its strategic interests in the region really are. Why should it seek to be present and active? The wish "to do good" is laudable, but it is not a strategy. The priorities and objectives that are set out in the Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance ... 2007-2013, are aspirations, not concrete goals. Moreover, they cover such a wide range of sectors that there is a tendency to concentrate less on results and more on the need to "tick all the assistance boxes" that are indicated by the Strategy. This is inevitable, as it would have been well-nigh impossible to implement this agenda in the most propitious circumstances.

Today, when so many EU member states are in the grip of a severe and possibly long-term economic crisis, it is unrealistic. Clearly, it is time for the EU assistance strategy to "go back to the drawing board". A more focused approach is required, based on a pragmatic assessment of capabilities and means to achieve desired goals. There is, too, a need for a more nuanced, country-specific engagement. Doing less, but better, is generally more productive than superficial dabbling in many sectors. Choices must be made so as to gain maximum benefit from limited resources. Above all, it is important to look beyond the façade of political

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correctness and to focus instead on the actual outcomes on the ground. This is well illustrated by the EU-funded initiatives on law and education. In these areas there is an obvious match between EU capabilities and local demand. Yet so far, these projects have tended to be driven more by political agendas (both local and EU, it should be stressed) rather than by a careful response to specific needs in the relevant sectors. The result is that so far they have been less effective than they ought to have been, given the investment of resources.

To sum up, the chief problem for the EU in its efforts to engage in Central Asia is the lack of a clear, strongly collective vision. Good intentions are undermined by internal divisions, differing foreign policy stances. In these circumstances, it is difficult, if not indeed impossible, to summon up the general political will that is necessary to support a consistent, long-term strategy in the region.

PRESSING THE "RE-SET BUTTON": PARTNERSHIP NOT MENTORSHIP

The role that the EU plays in Central Asia in the future will depend very much on two things: firstly, as discussed above, the extent to which it can resolve internal weaknesses; secondly, the extent to which the relationship can respond to changing circumstances. Since the early years of EU engagement with the region, the Central Asian states have undergone dramatic transformation. The most fundamental change has been psychological. The confusion and disorientation of the first years of independence has been replaced by a confident assertion of national identity. Consequently, their attitude to foreign partners has changed: they demand equality. Located at the heart of Eurasia, they have re- possessed the centrality of their physical and mental geography. This has become all the more important with the shift in global relations, specifically the rising economic might of Asia. This has given the Central Asians the opportunity to forge new and powerful relationships.

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Europe remains important for the Central Asian states. It may not have delivered all that was initially expected of it, but nevertheless it continues to be valued. At the same time, the Central Asians have become more assertive (and some would say more arrogant).

Increasingly, they are putting the "di-" back into "dialogue", to create a genuine two-way exchange. Thus, for example, Uzbekistan participates in a regular human rights dialogue with the EU, but does not merely listen to the concerns of the Europeans. Instead, it "aggressively" insists that issues such as Islamophobia in Europe should also be on the agenda.

This change in attitude suggests that if the EU wants to continue its engagement in Central Asia, it needs to re-think some of its assumptions. This may mean re-calibrating some of its priorities, thinking again about objectives and how best to achieve them. Re-setting of the tenor of the relationship does not, and cannot, mean that the EU should abandon its core values. It does, however, involve the recognition that others may not share the same vision, or that they may espouse the same values, but interpret them differently. Judgements will have to be made regarding both the limits of forbearance and likewise the consequences of a given stance. The imposition of sanctions on Uzbekistan after the violence in Andijan in May 2005, arguably, on the basis of incomplete and one-sided information, revealed the limits of EU power. Uzbekistan refused to make concessions and the EU was eventually forced to lift the sanctions. Within Central Asia, this was seen as a humiliating climb- down. Moreover the punitive measures adopted towards Uzbekistan provoked comparison with the EU's cautious response to Israel's actions in the Middle East, thereby providing yet another example of European "double standards". If the EU does succeed in forming partnerships based on mutual trust, respect and common interests, it could become a respected, influential actor in the region. If that does not happen, it will be relegated to the position of a "virtual gaming chip", reserved for tactical use in negotiations with powerful neighbours, when the hint of a

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counterweight might be a convenient bargaining ploy. The choice is in the hands of the EU: if the relationship with Central Asia matters, then it is worth the effort to build a genuine partnership. Without this, the relationship will be reduced to a formality, devoid of significant substance.

To conclude, if the EU wishes to be engaged in Central Asia it must understand the possibilities of the relationship, but also its limitations. The EU has much to offer and the Central Asian states recognise and appreciate this. However, they have their own vision of their national interests and they will act accordingly, making the policy choices that they believe are most appropriate. Equally, Europe must define its priorities more clearly and make a more critical assessment of its capabilities. The question posed by Dostoevsky as to why Russia needed to be involved in Central Asia is pertinent for the EU today - and it requires a considered answer if EU engagement in the region is to be set on a sound footing.

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