

Central Asia Under Brussels' and Moscow's Eyes

Prospects and Realities

Andre W.M. Gerrits | ORCID: 0000-0003-3693-9186
Professor of International Studies, Leiden University, Leiden,
The Netherlands
a.w.m.gerrits@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Hugo Klijn
Senior research fellow, the Clingendael Institute of International Relations,
The Hague, The Netherlands
hklijn@clingendael.org

Abstract

While the Central Asian states try to balance their foreign policy options and to develop 'multi-vector' strategies, the region is tilting eastwards, especially towards China. What does this imply for two other external powers in the region: Russia and the European Union? This article reflects on the future prospects for the EU to play a role of significance in Central Asia and for Russia to manage its position as the region's former overlord. The uninterrupted continuity of authoritarianism in Central Asia suggests that the EU has exerted only a very limited influence in the region, while the interests of Russia and the local regimes seem to run in parallel. Yet we see both external powers adapting their strategies in part to the changed (geo)political situation in the region. In this article we interpret these changes and draw tentative conclusions about what they may mean for the future of the Central Asian countries, especially where the perceived contradiction between security and human rights is concerned.

Keywords

Central Asia – European Union – Russia – security – human rights

While after gaining independence Central Asian states have tried to balance their foreign policy options and to develop ‘multi-vector’ strategies, the region is currently tilting eastwards, especially towards China. What does this imply for two other external powers in the region: Russia and the European Union? We take a closer look at the future prospects for the EU to play a role of significance in the region and to reflect on the implications for the Russian Federation as Central Asia’s former overlord. A combined analysis of the EU’s policy towards Central Asia and that of Russia may seem counter-intuitive – the positions, ambitions and strategies of the two external powers are indeed quite different. Yet there are also similarities. Both external powers are confronted with Central Asian rulers whose foreign policy options are expanding, partly thanks to the growing involvement in the region of China. How do Moscow and Brussels deal with the changing geopolitical reality in Central Asia? Are they adjusting their ambitions? Are they changing their strategies? And what consequences does this have for the future security and human rights situation in Central Asia, which is the focus of this special issue?

Security and human rights have been the issues around which Western presence in Central Asia revolved. Western actors applied their own priorities, stemming from variable geopolitical interests and power differences, but these general aims and ambitions persisted, as did the political discussions they entailed. The security-human rights dilemma has been less urgent for the EU than for the United States. In the latter case, security issues became dominant once the US embarked on military operations in Afghanistan. America’s recent withdrawal from this country will decrease Central Asia’s significance in its strategic considerations and will probably lead to a redefinition of policies, which may further impact on the geopolitical shift of the region.

Of course, Russia’s ties to Central Asia extend to its imperial and Soviet past. After the demise of the Soviet Union, now thirty years ago, Russia’s initial focus was primarily directed at Western countries and institutions. After the gradual falling out between Russia and the West and the emergence of animosities about democracy, rule of law, human rights and security issues Moscow has embarked on a more particular ‘Eurasian’ path, which involves the strengthening of economic and security cooperation with Central Asian countries. The increased prominence of China, the sudden withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and a seemingly greater appetite for regional unity among Central Asian countries are changing Russia’s perspectives as well.

Security

How do the EU and Russia interpret security in the Central Asian region today? The EU tries to find a way out of the security-human rights dilemma by adopting a broader definition of security and a long-term perspective on human rights and democratisation. The EU's inclusive notion of security contains a greater number of threats and a wider spectrum of actors than traditional interpretations.¹ For the EU, security involves a combination of human security (democracy, human rights, and development), regime effectiveness and international stability. This broad definition is not unproblematic because, as is frequently noted, implementation requires fundamental political changes which inevitably cause friction. Recent data on state fragility indicate that Kyrgyzstan, which has long been considered the most democratic state in the region, is also the weakest. The idea that democratisation of the countries in Central Asia would necessarily be in the EU's interest,² does not seem to be based on a realistic assessment of the region's potential – or of the EU's capabilities for that matter.

The importance of Central Asia *for* the EU is defined in more traditional, narrow security terms such as 'economic potential' and 'energy diversification interests',³ recently supplemented by the region's 'strategic geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia'.⁴ In 2018, the European Commission dedicated a special Joint Communication to the ambition to further improve connections between Europe and Asia.

Russia's security considerations vis-à-vis the region are of an altogether different, considerably more extensive and traditional nature. The entire post-Soviet space is considered by Moscow a zone of special interests, reason why next to the broader Commonwealth of Independent States Russia organised the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) whose current six members include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁵ The organisation's

1 Not unlike the understanding of security in 'human security' or 'critical security studies', see Edward Lemon, 'Critical approaches to security in Central Asia: An introduction', *Central Asian Survey*, 37 (1), pp. 1–12.

2 J. Boonstra (ed.), 'A New Central Asia Strategy: Deepening Relationships and Generating Long-Lasting Impact', EUCAM Working Paper No. 20. Groningen 2018.

3 Report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (2015/2020(INI)). Rapporteur Tamás Meszerics. Committee on Foreign Affairs. European Parliament. Brussels, 8/3/2016, p.30. European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership. Brussels, 15/5/2019, p.1.

4 EU Builds a Strong and Modern Partnership with Central Asia, p.1.

5 The CSTO's treaty dates from 1992 and in 2002 a Charter was agreed: <https://en.odkb-csto.org/structure/>.

mandate ranges from military security (its treaty includes a NATO-like mutual assistance clause) to topics like combatting drug trafficking, illegal migration, terrorism and extremism, as well as sharing information on security issues, including cyber security. Russia remains the region's main security partner and arms supplier and has troops deployed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (as part of a CSTO rapid deployment force) and Tajikistan, where the 201st Military Base forms Russia's largest contingent stationed abroad.⁶ Since the Taliban regained control over Kabul, a contingency for which Russia had been preparing with regional partners,⁷ several CSTO exercises were held close to Afghan borders.⁸ Earlier, Russian troops carried out military drills with units from Uzbekistan, a country that, like neutral Turkmenistan, stays aloof from the CSTO.⁹

Another international organisation that deals with security issues in the region concerns the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001 by Russia, China and the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan. The SCO's goals and tasks include regional defence cooperation and, like the CSTO, the fight against terrorism, drugs, illegal migration and other forms of transnational criminal activities.¹⁰ Meanwhile, India and Pakistan have joined the SCO and the number of observer states and dialogue partners (including Turkey) has also increased. If one looks at Russia's primary security considerations in the region, then both organisations' mandates indicate that these revolve around preserving stability and predictability. So far, Russia has managed relatively well to achieve these aims. Except for the intermittent upheavals in Kyrgyzstan and, recently, in Kazakhstan, power transitions in the region have proceeded relatively smoothly and Russian-Uzbek ties, strained under former President Karimov, are improving.¹¹ Russia has been able to maintain good relations with all Central Asian States, despite the initial misgivings about the Ukraine crisis in 2014, which presented local leaderships with the twin challenges of, on the one hand, the spontaneous ouster of an authoritarian president and, on

6 B. Jardine and E. Lemon, 'In Post-American Central Asia, Russia and China are tightening their grip', <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/in-post-american-central-asia-russia-and-china-are-tightening-their-grip/>.

7 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/russia-central-asian-states-worry-about-instability-in-afghanistan/>.

8 <https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/smi/eadaily-ucheniya-odkb-stabilizirovali-situatsiyu-natadzhiksko-afganskoy-granitse-odkb/#loaded>.

9 <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tajikistan-uzbekistan-military-drills-afghanistan-/31403841.html>.

10 Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>.

11 See, for instance, the Kremlin readout of President Putin's latest meeting with his re-elected Uzbek counterpart Mirziyoyev: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67142>.

the other hand, Russian military action against a former soviet republic with a sizeable Russian minority.¹²

Importantly, from a Russian perspective, the US military presence in the region has dwindled after bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were given up in 2005 and 2014 respectively, and after American forces left Afghanistan altogether last summer. Although some observers opine that the heyday of Russian-Chinese relations may already be coming to an end,¹³ China presents a much more like-minded security partner in Central Asia, with whom some sort of division of labour exists¹⁴ and who will try to contribute to mitigate risks emanating from the Taliban regime in Kabul. The broader picture is that five authoritarian states, themselves bent on stability, are located in between authoritarian Russia and China who now experience an unprecedented level of bilateral security cooperation.¹⁵

Human Rights

The EU's relations with Central Asia are two-pronged. There is a regional approach (a 'core priority' as the EU Strategy Paper for the 2007–2013 period put it) and there are bilateral relations, based on Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), including an Enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan, and a Temporary Trade Agreement with Turkmenistan. Recently, the importance of bilateral relations has been emphasised over the regional approach, 'taking account of the differences between the countries (...) and the uniqueness of each', as the European Parliament put it in its Report on the implementation of the EU-Central Asia strategy (2016).¹⁶

At least on paper, democracy and human rights have been mainstreamed in EU external relations and Central Asia is no exception. In practice, however, democracy and human rights represent only a very modest portion of

12 <https://eurasianet.org/russia-ukraine-crisis-alarms-central-asian-strongmen>.

13 A. Lukin (2021) Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:3, 155–173 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970904>).

14 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/good-china-russia-relations-are-here-to-stay/>.

15 <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-12-15/Le-Yucheng-China-Russia-relations-at-best-period-in-history-161bHWmRSyQ/index.html>.

16 Report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (2015/2020(IN1)). Rapporteur Tamás Meszerics. Committee on Foreign Affairs. European Parliament. Brussels, 8/3/2016, p.8.

the regional assistance programmes.¹⁷ Prioritisation and terminology vary. The Central Asia strategy papers (2002, 2007, 2019) and bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements alternately refer to good governance, the rule of law, human rights and democratisation as key areas for support and as objectives or conditions for EU cooperation with the countries of the region.¹⁸ In line with the previously published global strategy,¹⁹ the 2019 EU policy document for Central Asia includes human rights, democracy and the rule of law under the heading 'resilience'. The discourse has changed and is gradually becoming less ambitious (or perhaps more realistic). The EU largely conceptualises its democratisation objective as rule of law promotion. Rule of law and good governance assistance have always appeared as less confrontational objectives, with potentially a more direct impact on the lives of the peoples of Central Asia. Still, there is not much reason for optimism – we know that where democracy promotion is difficult, rule of law assistance does not fare much better.

In the Joint Communication (2019) the European Commission aims to concentrate its efforts 'on those areas where it can make a difference'. Although it is not clear whether democracy, human rights and the rule of law belong to these areas they are, in contrast to earlier documents, no longer presented as conditions or core objectives of cooperation, but rather as issues to be promoted.²⁰

The EU is committed to discussing human rights issues with individual Central Asian countries in a systematic manner, by means of a 'structured, regular and results-oriented human rights dialogue', as the Permanent Representatives Committee communicated to the European Council in May 2007.²¹ At least up to that point, the dialogue had not generated much effect. In

17 For the period between 2007–2013, as the first EU strategy for Central Asia specified, only 20–25 percent of the Central Asia assistance budget was earmarked for the promotion of good governance and economic reform (European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013, p. 3).

18 European Commission, Regional strategy Paper 2002–2006 & Indicative Programme 2002–2004 for Central Asia. Brussels, 30 October 2002; The Permanent Representatives Committee, The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership. Brussels, 31 May 200; European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013; Report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (2015/2020(IN1)). Rapporteur Tamás Meszerics. Committee on Foreign Affairs. European Parliament. Brussels, 8/3/2016.

19 European Commission, Shared Vision, Common Action, A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Brussels, June 2016.

20 European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership. Brussels, 15/5/2019, pp. 2–3.

21 The Permanent Representatives Committee, The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership. Brussels, 31 May 2007, p. 7.

an earlier review of the Central Asia strategy (2005), the European Parliament concluded that ‘the EU (has) not been able to make any relevant contribution on the basis of its own values and societal models and concepts (...) overall respect for democratic standards, human rights and fundamental freedoms has not yet reached an acceptable level.’²² The noted lack of results encouraged the EP to advocate more detailed recommendations, including a quota system to promote women’s participation in government.

The logic of the EU’s human rights strategy is based on positive and negative conditionality. In the case of violations, there is no shortage of critical statements, but there is hardly any concrete action. Only once, following the Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan, the Union agreed on a Common Position. Although the incident occurred in May 2005, the EU issued its first critical statement only six months later, followed by a limited number of ‘smart sanctions’. The EU does not have much room for manoeuvre. The most drastic measure would have been to freeze development assistance, but it was assessed that the effect would have been counterproductive, depriving the EU of its main leverage and undermining the policy objective of human development.

For Russia, human rights as a foreign policy principle has increasingly become a serious bone of contention in its relations with Western countries. Although Russia as late as in 2010 subscribed to the idea that human rights and fundamental freedoms are ‘matters of direct and legitimate concern’ to other countries and ‘do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the (s) tate concerned’,²³ it has become allergic to comments by Western countries on the human rights situation either in Russia or in Russia’s partner countries.²⁴ Notions of state sovereignty and non-interference clearly take precedence over the adherence to fundamental freedoms, although Russia selectively uses similar arguments when it deems the rights of Russian speakers living outside its borders are at stake. Such concerns feature prominently in criticisms of the Baltic states and served as a pretext for annexing the Crimea in 2014 where, apparently, the right to self-determination of Crimeans overrode the concept of territorial integrity (whereas in the case of separatist ambitions of Chechnya during the 1990s the reverse order applied). Central Asian states,

22 Report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (2015/2020(INI)). Rapporteur Tamás Meszerics. Committee on Foreign Affairs. European Parliament. Brussels, 8/3/2016, p.10.

23 Point 6 of the OSCE Astana Commemorative Declaration towards a Security Community: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/74985.pdf>.

24 See, for instance, Russian Foreign Ministry’s reaction to new EU sanctions against Belarus, which were labeled ‘interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states’: <https://tass.com/politics/1370879>.

who invariably get very low scores in democracy ratings,²⁵ may be less vocal than Russia in rejecting international human rights ‘meddling’ but largely concur to its positions, stressing the need for stability, civilisational differences or the need to crack down on civilian unrest and religious extremism for national security reasons.

Therefore, even though the founding documents of regional multilateral institutions contain provisions about the promotion of a ‘democratic world order based on conventional principles of international law’,²⁶ a common understanding of human rights as predominantly serving the goals of regional state security, stability and sovereignty yields a high degree of like-mindedness between Russia and its Central Asian neighbours. In the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), for instance, these countries are critical of the way the so-called human dimension, pertaining to human rights issues, is championed by Western countries to the detriment of other components of ‘comprehensive security’ such as economic cooperation. During the OSCE Ministerial Council in Stockholm on 2 December 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov framed this Western tendency as drawing new dividing lines, or rebuilding a ‘wall’ by self-proclaimed ‘civilised democracies’ to contain ‘authoritarian regimes’.²⁷ As stated above, Central Asian delegations to the Organisation tend to couch their interventions in less confrontational terms but appear to subscribe to the gist of Russia’s stance. In 2017, Tajikistan refused to take part in the OSCE’s annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, that involves both official and civil society representatives, citing the presence of ‘terrorist’ Tajik organisations.²⁸ At the same time, Central Asian participating states increasingly exert control over the project portfolios of the remaining OSCE missions on their soil, in an effort to minimise human rights related activities – efforts that are consistently met with Russian approval.

Linkage and Leverage

The mainstreaming of democracy and human rights promotion in EU policies towards Central Asia turns out to be an ambivalent issue. Statements of

25 See, for instance, the University of Würzburg, Democracy Matrix: <https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking>.

26 Article 4 of the CSTO Charter (see note 6).

27 https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/1788501/.

28 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/tajikistan>.

principled policy have been systematically downgraded in practice, as a critical observer remarked.²⁹ The discrepancy between stated policy objectives and actual political behaviour is problematic, but it is not without reason. Given that the general goals of the Central Asia strategy are difficult to combine, they must be prioritised. Prioritisation is guided by two considerations: what is desirable and what is feasible? Feasibility is a matter of the EU's effectiveness, which is determined by a combination of internal (EU) and external (Central Asia) factors. Within the EU, the strategy towards Central Asia is not particularly controversial – it generally arouses little interest. EU member states seem to be comfortable with the mix of policy principles: energy, security, *and* human rights. However, the actual situation in Central Asia indicates that the EU has only limited impact on internal political developments in the region. And where opinions between the EU and the Central Asian governments diverge, leverage is needed to make a difference. How much leverage does the EU have in Central Asia? What is its bargaining power?

Due to the EU's absence in the field of 'hard' security, its bargaining power must be sought mainly in the economic realm, especially trade and investment. Although the total value of trade between the EU27 and Central Asia has decreased considerably since the early 2010s, mutual trade is still significant, albeit unbalanced (because of a core-periphery nature) and strongly varying per country. The EU is Central Asia's most important trade partner, although figures are highly 'inflated' by the large volume of trade with Kazakhstan. With a total trade value in 2020 of € 26,94 billion, the EU leaves Russia and China behind. It ranks first in exports from Central Asia and third in imports. In 2020 EU imports from Central Asia amounted to € 13,22 billion, while exports to the region reached € 9,13 billion. Almost 95 percent of all imports consisted of primary goods (predominantly mineral products) and 90,2 percent of exports were manufactures.³⁰

A lack of reliable data makes it difficult to compare the EU's financial and economic ties with the region with other external actors. The EU has allocated € 1.1 billion to development cooperation with Central Asia for 2014–2020.³¹ For the 2007–2013 period € 719 million was earmarked for Central Asia under

29 G. Crawford, 'EU Human Rights and democracy promotion in Central Asia: From lofty principles to lowly self-interests', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 9:2, 2008, 172–191, here 186.

30 Figures are from: European Commission, *European Union, Trade in goods with Central Asia 5*. Brussels, 20/5/2021.

31 EU Builds a Strong and Modern Partnership with Central Asia, p.2.

the Development Cooperation Instrument. From 1991–2006 total European Commission assistance to Central Asia amounted to almost € 1.4 billion.³² The Asia Investment and Central Asia Investment facilities have enabled over € 4.2 billion through grants and loans.³³ In comparison, China's cumulative investment in the region in the period 2005–2018 stood at over 50 billion USD.³⁴ Although these figures cannot be easily equated, the difference is still staggering.

Where linkages serve the interests of local elites, leverage is much easier to accept. The countries of Central Asia are not simple objects in a regional 'Great Game'. They are active agents, pursuing their own perceived interest. Within the limits of their possibilities, which differ from country to country, they aim to benefit from the 'competition' between external powers in the region while attempting to neutralise the negative consequences of their policies. The overbearing presence of Russia and China, especially the impact on their economic independence and political sovereignty, offers opportunities for other external powers. In trade and energy, the EU has a significant presence in the region. In security issues it is practically irrelevant. In the sphere of development, rule of law and human rights it provides a clear alternative, but the question remains how attractive this model is. The Central Asian countries are aware of the downsides of China's aggressive lending and investment policies, but this extensive and condition-light financial support is still preferable to the limited and conditioned assistance from the EU. The Chinese interpretation of democracy, human rights and development, and how these relate, is more palatable to the Central Asian leaderships than the liberal and more intrusive Western alternative. And perhaps most importantly, the Chinese example seems to show that economic development, prosperity and political stability can be realised without democracy and human rights.³⁵

As stated above, Russia has traditionally acted as the region's main security provider. But it is also still significantly present in the economic realm through trade,

32 European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013, p. 3. European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013, p. 42.

33 European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy. Brussels, 19/9/2018, p. 10.

34 American Enterprise Institute, China Global Investment Tracker (2019, April 28), Washington DC, 2019.

35 A. Sharshenova and G. Crawford, 'Undermining Western democracy promotion in Central Asia: China's countervailing influences, powers and impact', *Central Asian Survey* (36) 4, pp. 453–472.

energy exports (at subsidised prices) and remittances. The latter especially applies to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, although the pandemic has resulted in job losses and diminished the flow of migrant workers.³⁶ The main vehicle for Russia-led regional economic integration is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This Union, that was preceded by the Eurasian Economic Community, came to life in 2015 and counts Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as its member states. The EAEU is designed after the image of the EU, and sets out to provide for the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour.³⁷

It has often been observed, however, that the Union primarily serves Russia's geopolitical goals rather than the deep economic integration its founding documents envisage. The genesis of the Union was to a large extent the result of bilateral initiatives by Russia, and not of common, bottom-up endeavours. In the same vein, the integrationist potential of the Union remains untapped, not only because three out of five Central Asian states have not joined, but also because a key member like Kazakhstan seeks to minimise commitments and retain room for manoeuvre. Even the EAEU's initial flagship, the customs union, has been unravelling and it seems Russia itself doesn't go the extra mile to strengthen the Union's various institutions, apparently satisfied with its mere existence as an additional lever of political influence.³⁸

If one looks at Russia's WTO trade profile, no Central Asian country appears as a top ranking destination or origin of merchandise trade, while only Kazakhstan ranks fifth as destination of trade in commercial services.³⁹ With regard to investments, according to figures provided by the Eurasian Development Bank, the entire intra-EAEU volume reached just over 25 billion USD by the end of 2020;⁴⁰ sign of an upward trend since 2015 but overall modest figures in comparison to, say, Chinese investments in Central Asia in the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative.⁴¹ As stated above, EU countries remain the region's main trade partners, accounting for about a third of total volumes while they cover over 40 percent of foreign direct investment. But, again, these statistics do not translate into wielding corresponding levels of influence. For several years, commentators have been concluding that for the foreseeable future Russia will remain the preponderant power in Central Asia.⁴² After a

36 <https://eurasianet.org/central-asian-migrants-worst-hit-by-coronavirus-job-losses-in-russia>.

37 <http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#about>.

38 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-05-02-eurasian-economic-union-dragneva-wolczuk.pdf>.

39 https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/trade_profiles21_e.pdf.

40 <https://eabr.org/en/press/news/mutual-investments-in-eurasia-calculated-using-a-new-methodology-reach-us-46-billion-fdi-has-been-gr/>.

41 https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/belt_and_road_initiative_in_central_asia.pdf.

42 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-lasting-influence-central-asia>.

bumpy post-independence start, Russia no longer exercises hegemonic power in the region but has managed relations relatively well. The anticipated rivalry with China has not materialised. Rather, the region has turned into a platform for cooperation, not on the basis of a sharply defined 'division of labour' but according to Moscow's and Beijing's distinctive roles, leaving room for Central Asian agency. There are presently no indications that the turbulence caused by the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan will upset this balance.

Conclusion: the Prospect for Change

Although from the early 1990s onwards the countries of the region signed all major international documents on human rights, the human rights situation has only marginally improved, individual differences notwithstanding. Political repression does not seem to have abated in the region. Dissidents within and outside of the elites are still being harassed, imprisoned, exiled, and occasionally assassinated. Political opposition is tolerated at best, but usually suppressed. Most media and civil society organisations remain under state control. Civil rights continue to be curtailed. Opposition, including Islamist groups, stay underground, which makes it difficult to assess their popular support. Most quality-of-life indicators (healthcare, education, sanitation, employment, and the like) have improved over time, but still show relatively poor performance. The fragile nature of the Central Asian economies is another challenge. They are heavily dependent on the export of primary goods (oil, gas, cotton) and, therefore, sensitive to global price fluctuations. Economic stagnation or slower growth in Russia (remittances) and China (investments) may amplify these negative economic developments.

This combination of factors seems to indicate an explosive political mix, but there is not much evidence of such a plight in practice. All countries in the region cope with limited capacity and uncertain legitimacy,⁴³ but do not appear to be dangerously 'weak', as international indexes confirm.⁴⁴

Democratisation in Central Asia requires political transition. The leadership changes that the region has seen so far, have only had a limited effect on

43 A. Frigerio and N. Kassenova, 'Central Asia: Contemporary Security Challenges and Sources of State Resilience', *Security and Human Rights*, 24 (2013), pp.123–135.

44 *The Fragile States Index 2021* by The Fund for Peace (Washington, DC., 2021) ranks Kirgizstan as the weakest state in the region (68th of 179 countries), Tajikistan is at place 71, Uzbekistan at 80, Turkmenistan at 97, and Kazakhstan ranks 116th (<https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>).

the nature of the regimes. Experience with democracy and human rights is practically non-existent in Central Asia, except perhaps for Kyrgyzstan, where short spells of liberalisation did not work out very well. In most of Central Asia democracy and individual political and civic rights remain theoretical concepts, alien to the region's political culture. The international context is not conducive to political change either. For the time being, neither Russia nor China, as a new prevailing power in the region, has a reason to engineer change in the internal affairs of the Central Asian countries.

With the exception of obvious cases like conquest or occupation, it remains difficult to estimate the impact that external actors have on a country's or region's domestic political developments. It is probably easier to suggest negative causality, when specifying the absence of influence by an external actor. The largely uninterrupted continuity of authoritarianism in Central Asia indicates that the EU has exerted only a limited impact on political developments in the region. Does this call for a change in policy? In a sense, the EU has already adjusted its strategy towards Central Asia. Interpretations of security and stability have changed. The ubiquitous notion of 'resilience' has made its appearance. The EU intends to concentrate its future efforts on those areas 'where it can make a difference'. The EU's policy towards Central Asia has always been more pragmatic than one might have guessed on the basis of official documents. But since recently official language also strikes a more pragmatic, realistic tone. Europe has clear economic interests in the region, especially with regard to its energy relationship with Kazakhstan. Arguably, the EU also stands to gain from political and administrative stability in Central Asia, not least because of cross-border migration and drug issues. And it makes sense for the EU to continue to cooperate with the Central Asian authorities and civil societies in the areas of good governance, rule of law and human rights. The priority for the EU should be to keep focusing on human development and security in the broad sense of the word: education, health, environment, civil society, and administrative and legal reforms.⁴⁵ In doing so, it should take into account local ideas, practices, and possibilities. Effective strategies for change have to connect to ideas and initiatives that have a reasonable degree of local ownership. As applies to other policy areas as well: 'there is no real way to alter the behaviour of a regime through disengagement.'⁴⁶

45 For more detailed suggestions, see J. Boonstra (ed.), *A New Central Asia Strategy: Deepening Relationships and Generating Long-Lasting Impact*. EUCAM Working Paper No. 20. Groningen 2018.

46 J. Foust, 'Security and Human Rights in Central Asia', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 19 (Fall/Winter 2012) 1, p.53.

The continuity of authoritarianism in Central Asia generates opposite conclusions for relations between Russia and the countries in the region. In general, the interests of the local regimes and their main international partners run in parallel, but Russia has to tread a fine line. On the one hand, thirty years of independence have created more self-conscious Central Asian governments, with growing and younger than average populations, who do not necessarily consider Russia a role model and at some point may make higher demands on their authoritarian, often Soviet-educated leaderships.⁴⁷ The recent demonstrations in Kazakhstan may have been symptomatic in this regard, on the other hand, the asymmetry between Russian and Chinese economic strength and ambitions may at some point have an effect on both countries' current regional complementarity and lead to bilateral tensions. At the same time, rising anti-Chinese sentiments in Central Asian states, related to debt dependencies or to simmering unease about China's treatment of ethnically and religiously kindred Uyghurs, may in the future put constraints on Beijing's role.⁴⁸ As long as Russia, exploiting its long-standing ties to the region while giving sufficient room to Central Asian governments for adopting their own multi-vector policies, acts responsibly it doesn't run the risk of turning once more into an overbearing neighbour. At present, however, it is not likely that any party, either Russia, China or one of the Central Asian states, who share the goal of stability and gradual change, wants to alter course in a significant manner. Russia's anxieties primarily concern the Western world and since these amount to a long-term antagonism, it makes the case for partnering with China on Central Asia a compelling one.

This Special Issue

Geopolitical relations in Central Asia are changing. From completely different starting points, Russia and the European Union are trying to maintain and strengthen their positions in the region. In doing so, they are primarily confronted with two separate but interrelated issues: the growing presence of China in the region and the growing ability of local leaders to diversify their international relations and thereby, to a certain extent, strengthen their political position. This issue's introductory piece focused on the Central Asia

47 <https://emerging-europe.com/news/can-central-asias-young-population-be-the-key-to-its-democratic-transformation/>.

48 <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Rise-Anti-ChineseV2.pdf>.

strategies of Russia and the EU. In the remainder of this special issue, we set our sights primarily on China.

International relations in Central Asia are not a 'Great Game' of external great powers. Such a representation underestimates the diversity of the region and the agency of local powers. The geopolitical differences among Central Asian countries are significant. National interests are partly overlapping and partly competing. **Flora Roberts** (Cardiff University) focuses on one of the key strategic issues among Central Asian states, on the security and human rights implications of water. Taking an environmental history approach, based on archival material in Moscow, she corrects the prevailing image that current water issues are caused by the Soviet habit of disregarding borders and republican-level interests. Current tensions are not a response to a sudden and unexpected hardening of borders, but result from much longer processes. Roberts makes it clear again that we cannot view Central Asia as an undifferentiated entity. Political developments in the region are largely determined by the divergent interests of the countries themselves.

Pál Dunay's (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies) analysis of the role of the OSCE in Central Asia gives rise to similar conclusions. While Central Asia is a region where the OSCE has been engaged for more than two decades, an engagement which reflects the hope that these countries will gradually align themselves with the principles and norms of the organisation, the result so far is disappointing. Central Asian states strictly adhere to state sovereignty and aim to constrain the OSCE's involvement in domestic affairs. The leaderships prioritise the organisation's economic and ecological dimension and they reduce the importance of its human rights dimension. The fact that the Central Asian states are trying, not without success, to steer their participation in the OSCE in such a way as to primarily serve their own interests is yet another example of the international agency that these countries enjoy.

Niva Yau (OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia) and **Sebastien Peyrouse** (Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University) focus on the most important recent geopolitical development in Central Asia, the increasing presence of China. Peyrouse discusses how Beijing's narrative has supported authoritarianism in the region and he analyses the tools that China has exported to support the political legitimacy of Central Asian authorities and their efforts to monitor their citizens. His article argues that although China has had a tangible impact on human rights in Central Asia, other elements also need to be taken into consideration, including the influence of other foreign actors such

as Russia as well as the goals of the Central Asian leaders themselves, who, as Peyrouse emphasises, are not passive recipients of Chinese policy but rather have embarked on their own on the road of authoritarianism. Yau dives deeper into the theme of China's influence on domestic political developments in Central Asia. She shows how the People's Republic of China has been actively promoting its governance styles abroad. In Central Asia, these programs have increased rapidly in frequency and scope. Her article documents dozens of in-China training programmes for Central Asian officials from 2007 to 2020, the majority of which concerned security management and involved Chinese technology and equipment transfers. As Central Asian states absorb these governance models, she concludes, a new set of security and human rights issues is emerging.

Finally, **Noah Tucker** (Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, UK) describes a key link between internal developments in Central Asia and the region's larger international context. His contribution looks at the recent history of Central Asians' involvement in foreign conflicts and insurgencies, including in Afghanistan and Syria. Tucker emphasises the importance of understanding the causes of conflict migration from Central Asia to both ensure successful re-integration of returnees and to prevent new waves of conflict migration. He presents evidence that a one-dimensional focus on ideological motivations for past waves of conflict migration is a poor explanatory mechanism for the broader conflict. A complex, localised and multi-factor approach provides a much better model for mobilisation to both local violence and foreign conflict.