The ‘EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership’ commemorated its fifth anniversary in June with an in-depth review of the European Union’s approach to the troubled region. The European Council concluded that the overall Strategy was still valid and that no substantial changes were necessary. This was a missed opportunity because the world has dramatically changed over the last five years, including Europe and Central Asia; that should have led to a rethinking of the strategy. The EU is in crisis as a result of the ever deepening economic and debt crisis, while Central Asia is far less stable than it was a few years ago.

Whereas there might not be reason for celebration the EU has developed into a substantial actor in Central Asia over the last five years. Several high-level meetings were held; mechanisms and structures were established for cooperation and exchange of views; development projects have started; and the EU opened Delegations in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (there was already a Delegation in

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Kazakhstan, and Brussels still hopes to reach a deal with Turkmenistan on opening a full-fledged Delegation soon. But meeting with the regions leaders and a basic presence are likely to be insufficient in having an impact on the three key areas of interest for Europe: promotion of universal values; energy; and security.

These areas of interests and a long list of development priorities are furthered by EU Commission development funding of €674 million (US$817.6 million) over the period 2007-13. Spread over seven years, five countries and multiple programs, the average of €20 million (US$24.3 million) a year spent per country seems to be insignificant to cover all of the priorities. The EU would do well to limit them to a few areas where it really believes it can have an impact and therefore strengthen EU’s visibility in the region. The funding could be regarded as substantial though when the low development aid absorption capacity in Central Asia is taken into account. Moreover, the amount of EU development funding can roughly be doubled when adding bilateral development aid activities by individual EU member states.

This brief seeks to discuss the EU’s main interests while outlining the activities that have been developed in the first half-decade of EU Strategy implementation.

Whereas Central Asian regimes resist democratic change, they do wish to be recognized as civilized countries by Europe in order to strengthen their independence against the rising Chinese and the declining but still significant Russian influence. The leverage for the EU in this sphere remains limited however, which has resulted in an increased focus on security issues and energy interests at the expense of values promotion.

The EU made a positive step forward though by establishing the annual Human Rights Dialogues with each of the five Central Asian states. Behind closed doors EU officials air concerns about human rights violations, juridical shortcomings and particular cases of offenses. Central Asian officials are often prepared to rebuff these criticisms, asking for concrete advice on particular procedures in member states or criticizing perceived offenses in the EU. Here the development has stopped because of little to no noticeable improvement in the human rights situation in Central Asia. The EU recognized in its review that there is a need to make the “dialogues more result-oriented taking into account best practices” in the future.

In the rule of law field the EU created a regional initiative that sought to bring Central Asian countries around the table to discuss reforms. Indeed rule of law improvements are desperately needed in Central Asia but remains an odd topic to discuss on a region wide basis. After initial meetings a Rule of Law Platform is now being established, funded by the EU and implemented by a consortium of European consultants, including a few Central Asian actors. This platform should largely play a coordinating role because EU funding for rule of law is scarce and most substantial projects are still implemented on a bilateral basis, with Germany and Finland being especially active in this field.

Aspects of good governance are also part and parcel of several EU funded activities in the form of budget support in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, or support to local governments and civil society implemented projects. So far though core democratic principles, such as genuine political pluralism, transparent and accountable government, as well as free and fair elections, have barely been taken up by the EU because Central Asian political elites see democracy as a threat to their existence and due to the population’s misconceptions and skepticism about democracy.

A values driven approach

One of the priorities outlined in the EU Strategy is the promotion of human rights, rule of law, good governance and democracy. The EU acts as a normative actor in the region and this aspect makes Europe different from most other actors such as China and Russia. Whereas Central Asian regimes resist democratic change, they do wish to be recognized as civilized countries by Europe in order to strengthen their independence against
Energy interests and water management concerns

Energy security was the main driver in 2007 for the EU to develop closer relations with Central Asia. Since then tensions with Russia over gas have eased and opportunities for importing gas and oil from Central Asia have not come closer to materialization. Relations with Kazakhstan that are largely based on oil exports have risen and are fairly stable. The energy question mostly concerns Turkmenistan’s gas where the EU continues to work towards an agreement with Baku and Ashgabat on building a Trans-Caspian pipeline to bring gas to Europe. So far, the project’s prospects do not seem hopeful, at least in the short term. It remains to be seen whether Turkmenistan will be a reliable exporter to Europe. It is uncertain whether it can meet demand, in view of its limited production capacity and the increased volumes it plans to supply to China.

Europe’s energy concerns in Central Asia are not only based on its own energy security interests but also relate to the region’s energy problems as well, especially in the sphere of water management. The EU regional Water and Environment Initiative (next to the regional Rule of Law and an Education Initiatives) should place Europe on the map in this problematic and sensitive sector. So far though it is not clear what exact role the EU could take on: coordination among European donors or even international donors; providing technical assistance and possibly even involvement in infrastructure development and renovation; or a mediating role between the countries. This last role is needed especially between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who are at odds over Tajik plans to build the Rogun dam that would increase the latter’s power over water reserves needed for hydroelectric capacity in Tajikistan and irrigation purposes in Uzbekistan.

So far the EU activities, which have been coordinated by Italy, have little to show besides a few high level talks and National Policy Dialogues with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan that hopefully will result in more concrete water-related projects and a transfer of European expertise. Seen from a broader European perspective the EU is just one of the many players next to individual European states such as Germany, Finland and Switzerland, that are active in this area.

Using soft security to impact development and stability

The underlying thought of the EU Strategy has been security and stability but it is unclear what the EU hopes to achieve in this regards and through what means. In a 2010 evaluation report of the Strategy, the EU argued for more attention to “security broadly defined”. Taking into account EU texts and programming the security concerns can be divided into three broad strands.

The first strand is the concern about possible negative impacts of the NATO troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. So far the EU has not reacted to this concern by connecting programming for Central Asia and Afghanistan. It would also make sense to include Afghanistan in talks on water because it is part of the same Amu Darya River basin, while separating support to border control activities seems artificial. Besides a need for flexibility in joint programming the EU should not overestimate the possible negative consequences of troop withdrawal.

The radical Islamic threat to the region does not necessarily originate from Afghanistan and drug flows from Afghanistan through Central Asia have been steady regardless of war or internationally supported border programs. In this sense the EU approach to Central Asia radically differs from the U.S. one, which sees its Afghanistan policy as the basis from which its Central Asian policies flow. Washington has also taken an ‘Asia approach’ linking Central Asia to South Asia, while Brussels sees Central Asia as an extension of its Eastern neighborhood including Russia.
The second strand in EU thinking about security is also regionally driven but largely excludes Afghanistan as outlined above. An EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue was organized in 2008 and 2009 and the Council’s recent review suggests that this engagement might be further institutionalized. Central Asian leaders see the EU as an impartial partner, but amongst themselves they have many differences and a lot of personal resentment. Trying to bring Central Asian countries around the same table to talk about ‘common threats’ is useful, but the EU needs to start thinking about how it will react if destabilizing circumstances arise. These circumstances could include tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan turning violent or the outbreak of new ethnic violence in the region.

The EU is not a hard security actor in the region. The only program that could be labeled hard security is the Border Management Program (BOMCA), which is financed by the EU and implemented by UNDP. From a strategic point of view it would make sense for the EU to develop some hard security activities in Central Asia, foremost on border control support by transferring aspects of BOMCA into a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) mission. But clearly member states lack the political will and resources to get serious about border monitoring (as is done in Georgia) or assistance (as is done on the border of Moldova-Ukraine).

The third strand of EU security thinking and programming for Central Asia can best be labeled as soft security or human security. Here it funds a host of projects that indirectly can be linked to security as part of a broader security-development nexus. Most of the projects under headers such as good governance, rule of law, water management, poverty reduction and civil society development can be seen as part of this.

Indeed this is the way to go for the EU because it allows Brussels to avoid becoming part of the geopolitical squabbles in Central Asia between China, Russia and the United States, but more importantly it addresses the gravest security threats that face the region and are mostly national by character. Whereas Afghanistan and possible inter-state tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan pose a challenge, the foremost threats to the countries stability are found in poverty; lack of opportunity for new generations; homegrown radical Islam; harsh autocratic rule and the lack of established succession mechanisms; weak governance; and widespread corruption.

Conclusion

The EU has built relations with Central Asian countries in the last five years, but it needs to rethink what tangible achievements it hopes to obtain in the region.

A clearer security narrative is necessary to outline the most urgent threats to EU interests instead of emphasizing the 'common threats' that are perceived by Central Asian leaders as terrorism and radical Islam but which does not take into account other factors of potential internal instability. The next step for the EU would be to closely link security (and other) priorities to available funding. The European External Action Service (EEAS), which falls under joint EU Council, and EU Commission authority implements policy while the Commission’s Directorate General Development and Cooperation (EUROPEAID) oversees development funding. The divide between these two largely separate entities results in a disconnect between policy priorities and actual funding.

While there is little funding available, the EU could consider downscaling the number of priorities; to focus more on tangible development projects (foremost in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as they are the poorest countries); and increasingly support civil society instead of Central Asian governments. The latter is difficult because political contacts with Central Asian governments are the basis of cooperation, even though those regimes remain authoritarian and averse of reform. None-
theless, the funds are better directed towards projects that the EU implements itself or that local civil society implement then towards running the risk that money disappears due to corruption or in supporting harsh authoritarian regimes.

Central Asia is still considered to some extent an open arena for a new ‘Great Game.’ There are certainly some energy interests, foremost in Turkmenistan and in transit through other Central Asian states, and there are also security interests related to Afghanistan and stability in the Central Asian region. Overall though the main external powers China, Russia and the United States understand that Central Asia offers little opportunity or economic gain and a high potential for security problems. The EU currently plays a secondary role on a geopolitical level that includes hard security interests and capabilities, and is probably well advised to keep it that way. But on a broader level of engagement through political contacts and development efforts the EU’s activities have sharply risen over the years and have made the EU into a substantial external player in Central Asia. Europe must now decide how best to use its new role.

A non-partisan initiative, the Central Asia Program at George Washington University aims to develop academic and policy-oriented research on contemporary Central Asia by providing a space for discussion connecting the policy, academic, diplomatic, and business communities. Its research activities focus on four main axes: security, development, state-building, and regional environment. It calls for a multidisciplinary approach combining political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, history, globalization studies, and security studies. The CAP aims to get US, European, Russian, Asian, and Central Asian counterparts working together, by promoting various forms of interaction and joint projects.

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