

A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS IN EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S CENTRAL ASIA POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE C5+1 FORMAT AND TÜRKİYE'S ROLE

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Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the five newly independent Central Asian states □□□□□□□□□□ Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan □□□□ emerged as pivotal actors in international relations due to their abundant natural resources, rare earth element reserves[1], and critical geopolitical position bridging Asia and Europe[2]. The regions strategic significance is underscored by multilateral cooperation platforms such as the C5+1 format, launched by the United States in 2015[3] and institutionalized through a declaration at the foreign ministers level. The C5+1 framework (comprising the five Central Asian states and the United States) emphasizes cooperation over competition, aiming to establish a new collaborative structure grounded in mutual interests. Amid competing efforts by global powers (the United States, Russia, and China) to assert influence in the region, Central Asia has transitioned from being a passive observer in great-power politics to a prominent player within the Eurasian landscape.

This article analyzes, from a diplomatic and academic perspective, the European Unions (EU) strategic orientation toward Central Asia □□ region increasingly at the center of international attention □□□ the significance of the Turkic republics as they seek to expand their economic maneuverability along with Türkiyes role in this context.

The European Unions Growing Interest in Central Asia

Central Asia holds substantial importance for global political and economic trajectories.

Commentors have highlighted that the region is a vital economic and trade partner not only for China but also for the EU. Indeed, in recent years, the EU has intensified high-level engagement with Central Asian states, which is exemplified by the inaugural EU–Central Asia Summit held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in 2025.

The EUs approach to Central Asia has gained strategic salience in light of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war and developments in Afghanistan. In 2019, the EU adopted a new strategy for Central Asia that highlights the regions growing strategic importance for EU interests. The underlying strategic and economic objectives of the EUs engagement with the region can be summarized as follows:

1. Economic and Trade Partnership: As the regions second-largest trading partner and the source of over 40% of its foreign direct investment[4], the EU is the leading investor in Central Asia. The EU is adapting its foreign policy to prioritize trade and economic opportunities in the region.
2. Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs): The EU has signed or is negotiating EPCAs with Kazakhstan (2020), Tajikistan (agreed upon in July), and Uzbekistan (signed on 24 October). These agreements aim to expand trade relations, streamline customs procedures, and improve the investment climate to attract European companies[5].
3. Critical Minerals and Energy Diversification: The EU has demonstrated clear interest in accessing Central Asias critical minerals and diversifying supply chains to reduce Chinas dominance in this sector. Additionally, the EU is targeting the Caspian Basin as an alternative energy source and promoting cooperation in green energy.
4. Infrastructure and Connectivity: During the Samarkand Summit, the EU committed approximately 12 billion Euros to regional infrastructure development under the Global Gateway framework. This initiative supports Central Asian states multi-vector foreign policies aimed at mitigating excessive reliance on Russia and China.

Nevertheless, the EUs heightened interest in Central Asia is widely regarded as a belated initiative. Türkiye, recognizing the geopolitical vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has □□□□□□□ not receiving the support from the EU that it had anticipated □□□□□□□□□ extensive diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagements with the region since 1991[6].

The Strategic Importance of the Turkic Republics and Türkiye in Eurasian Geopolitics

The Central Asian republics are striving to establish a cooperative framework that mutually serves national interests while maintaining multi-vector foreign policies that avoid exclusive alignment with any single power. The region is no longer the backyard of any great power or a mere stage for a new great game of political rivalry.

Within this dynamic context, the institutional and geoeconomic ties between Türkiye and the Central Asian republics provide critical support for Western (US/EU) efforts to enhance

their influence in the region:

1. Historical and Cultural Ties: Türkiye has forged strong cultural, traditional, and linguistic bonds with Central Asian states, which has fostered close relations.
2. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS): With the transformation of the Turkic Council (established in 2009) into the OTS in 2021, Türkiye has emerged as a leading actor through deep institutional, diplomatic, and economic linkages with the region. The OTS targets cooperation in economy, security, and culture[7].
3. The Central Role of the Middle Corridor: At the heart of Central Asias economic strategy lies the Middle Corridor; a trade route that bypasses Russia and extends from China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian region, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. This corridor serves as the regions gateway to global markets. Realizing the Middle Corridors potential requires long-term commitments. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, a significant portion of which traverses Türkiye, further strengthens the countrys international standing[8].
4. Contribution to Regional Integration: Central Asian states have convened in Tashkent to bolster regional cooperation and formally accepted Azerbaijan as a member. Azerbaijans inclusion accelerates the regions momentum for broader economic development. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, both pivotal along the Middle Corridor, play central roles in the functioning of the corridor.
5. Geostrategic Bridge Role: Being Europes eastern frontier and having indispensable position in Eurasia, Türkiye is a vital conduit that neither the West nor Asia can afford to exclude. Through agreements aimed at facilitating the -albeit limited- flow of Turkmen gas from the Caspian Basin to Europe, Türkiye is enhancing its role as an energy hub bridging East and West.

Trade and logistics □□□□□□□ to US and EU interest in Central Asia □□□□□□ Türkiyes position indispensable. Today, the Middle Corridor, originating in China and traversing Central Asia, the Caspian, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye en route to Europe, stands at the core of the regions economic strategy[9]. This route definitively shapes a critical trade corridor bypassing Russia, with Türkiye positioned as the primary gateway for this emerging trade to access global markets[10].

Conclusion

The transformation of C5+1 into C6+1, alongside the EUs Central Asia strategy, signals an intensifying multipolar geopolitical competition in the region. Central Asian states are pursuing deeper cooperation with the West to achieve economic diversification and preserve their sovereignty.

Türkiye plays an indispensable role in this strategic equation. As a natural partner, Türkiye is pivotal to Western efforts to expand influence in Central Asia. However, the EUs preference for negotiating EPCAs directly with Central Asian states □□□□□□□□□ Türkiye—has impeded full-fledged cooperation.

Collaboration with Türkiye is essential for the EU to secure tangible and enduring gains in

Central Asia. The Wests (US/EU) ability to establish lasting and effective influence in the region, counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence, and develop the Middle Corridor □□□□ regions primary connectivity route □□□□□□□ on Türkiyes pivotal role. Türkiyes entrenched position within the OTS and along the Middle Corridor positions it as a strategic bridge in the Eurasian geography, offering the reliable and established partnership potential necessary for the EU to achieve its economic objectives.

*Picture: https://yep.uz/en/2025/11/c5-1-washington-trump-central-asia-analysis/

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