

A Geopolitical Europe in Action: Pragmatism and Partnership in EU-Central Asia Relations beyond the Samarkand Summit

Ikboljon Qoraboyev* and Nazym Umirzakova**

The European Union's engagement with Central Asia has entered a new phase shaped by pragmatism, reciprocity, and strategic calculation. In line with Ursula von der Leyen's vision of a "Geopolitical Europe", the EU has recalibrated its approach from a normative agenda toward interest-driven partnerships anchored in connectivity, critical raw materials (CRM), and energy security. The Samarkand Summit of April 2025 crystallized this transformation by institutionalizing a strategic partnership supported by substantial Global Gateway investment packages. This article examines how the EU's evolving geopolitical posture is articulated through four dynamics: the elevation of Central Asia's centrality in EU discourse, the prioritization of material interests with CRMs at the core, the discursive and policy shift from globalization to connectivity, and the rise of quid pro quo diplomacy in place of conditionality. While this pragmatic turn has enhanced predictability and mutual accommodation, it also entails significant risks. Transactional bargains can create strategic blind spots and expose the EU to unintended consequences in a region defined by multi-vector balancing. The analysis highlights both the promise and limitations of the EU's emerging geopolitical actorness in Central Asia, underscoring the need to balance strategic realism with long-term credibility. The study finds that the EU's recalibration toward a pragmatic and interest-driven partnership centred on connectivity, CRMs, and strategic reciprocity is contributing to the enhancement of its geopolitical actorness in Central Asia, while also bringing new challenges in sustaining strategic coherence and long-term engagement.

Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, Geopolitical Europe, critical raw materials, connectivity



* **Ikboljon Qoraboyev** is Professor and Director of Center for Global and Regional Governance (CEGREG) at Maqsut Narikbayev University, Kazakhstan i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz, ORCID: 000-0003-0197-5881

** **Nazym Umirzakova** is a graduate student at the Tsukuba University, Japan.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is evolving into a more assertive geopolitical actor in Central Asia, in line with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s vision of a ‘Geopolitical Europe’. This transformation has been driven by the return of hard politics and great-power rivalry in international relations, which has pushed the EU to recalibrate its foreign policy tools away from purely normative conditionality and toward a more interest-driven, strategic approach.

This shift became most visible during the first Central Asia-EU Summit, held in Samarkand on April 4, 2025, where official rhetoric and concrete political commitments revolved primarily around transport connectivity, critical raw materials (CRM), and energy security – rather than the EU’s traditional normative agenda. Among the expert community, the summit was also interpreted as signalling the emergence of a *quid pro quo* dynamic, exemplified by Central Asia’s symbolic endorsement of the EU’s position on Northern Cyprus in exchange for major investment pledges.¹ Together, these developments reflect a profound reorientation of the EU policy: one that prioritizes pragmatic deals and reciprocal benefits over normative transformation. This manuscript examines how this transformation manifests in four key dynamics – Central Asia’s centrality in EU strategic discourse, the prioritization of material interests with a focus on CRMs, the shift from globalization to connectivity, and the emergence of *quid pro quo* diplomacy.

While this shift toward a more pragmatic and interest-driven geopolitical approach has enhanced predictability in EU–Central Asia relations and recalibrated mutual expectations in a manner acceptable to both sides, it also introduces important limitations. Transactional diplomacy can create strategic blind spots and unintended consequences, especially in a region defined by multi-vector balancing and overlapping spheres of influence. Understanding this new reality requires not only mapping the material foundations of EU–Central Asia cooperation but also examining the constraints and long-term implications of the EU’s emerging geopolitical posture.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach, drawing on official EU and Central Asian policy documents, summit declarations,

1 Qoraboyev, I., “Understanding Central Asia’s position on Northern Cyprus”, in I. Qoraboyev and Z. Bekshora (eds.), *Cegreg Yearbook: Central Asia in Global and Regional Governance* (Maqsut Narikbayev University), pp. 177–187.

and speeches. Through discourse analysis, it examines how narratives of Geopolitical Europe, connectivity, and partnership reframe the EU's engagement with Central Asia, highlighting the interplay of strategic, symbolic, and material dimensions. This approach allows us to situate policy shifts within broader geopolitical narratives and to uncover the implicit logic underpinning the EU's recalibration from normative conditionality toward pragmatic reciprocity. The article proceeds in four sections. The first section situates the EU–Central Asia relationship in the context of the Samarkand Summit, identifying this event as a key moment that highlights the shift from normative engagement toward a strategic partnership anchored in material and geopolitical considerations. The second section unpacks the core dynamics of this transformation across four interrelated processes. The third section places these developments within a broader comparative frame, drawing parallels between the EU's approach and China's 'March West' logic to illuminate the evolving geoeconomic rationality behind the EU's recalibration. The concluding section reflects on the implications of this pragmatic turn, emphasizing how it contributes to enhancing the EU's geopolitical actorness in Central Asia while introducing new challenges in sustaining strategic coherence and long-term engagement.

***The Central Asia–EU Summit in Samarkand:
From Normative Engagement to Strategic Partnership***

The first-ever Central Asia–EU Summit, held in Samarkand on April 3-4, 2025, marked a turning point in relations between Central Asia and the European Union. Against the backdrop of a shifting international order, the summit brought together European Council President António Costa, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and the heads of state of all five Central Asian republics to redefine their partnership.²

During the summit, the EU and Central Asian leaders elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership, marking a decisive shift away from the traditional donor–recipient model toward one grounded in mutual strategic interests. The summit produced a series of concrete deliverables anchored in the €12 billion Global Gateway investment

2 European Council, "First EU–Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025: Main results", April 4, 2025, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/> (Accessed: October 13, 2025)

package, which is structured around four priority areas: €3 billion for transport connectivity, €2.5 billion for CRMs, €6.4 billion for water/energy/climate projects, and €100 million for digital connectivity. Key outcomes included the endorsement of an EU–Central Asia Declaration of Intent on Critical Raw Materials, the announcement of a Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Investors’ Forum and the EU–Central Asia Economic Forum in Uzbekistan, and major investments in clean energy and climate resilience. The European Investment Bank (EIB) also signed a host-country agreement with Uzbekistan and announced a partnership with stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, where it will commit €365 million for sustainable transport and climate projects. It was also announced that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) was working on a €7–8 billion project pipeline through to 2027 that will include transport connectivity, CRMs, and renewable energy.³ Collectively, these decisions signal a qualitative transformation in EU–Central relations, embedding cooperation within a framework of connectivity, resource security, and shared geopolitical interests.

Ursula Von der Leyen emphasized that the EU’s approach sought to distinguish itself from that of other major powers by linking investment with local development: “Some are only interested in exploiting and extracting. Europe’s offer is different. We also want to be your partners in developing your local industries.”⁴ This framing reflects a broader shift in EU policy from normative mentorship to pragmatic, mutually beneficial cooperation, driven by strategic calculations as much as shared values.

The Samarkand Summit highlights the arrival of a more transactional phase of EU–Central Asia relations, in which we can see a clear shift from normative engagement to a pragmatic, connectivity-driven, and resource-focused agenda. The early phase, as evidenced in the 2007 EU Strategy, was dominated by a focus on values – human rights, the rule of law, and education – underpinned by political dialogue and institution-building. By 2019, however, the EU started to recognize

3 European Commission, “*EU–Central Asia Fact Sheet*”, April 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/881028/EU-Central%20Asia_Factsheet_2025-04.pdf (Accessed: September 10, 2025); Gazeta.uz, *EU to allocate €12 billion investment package for Central Asia in four areas*, April 5, 2025, Available at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2025/04/05/ca-eu/> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

4 European Commission, “The European Union and Central Asia establish a Strategic Partnership during groundbreaking summit”, April 4, 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_25_990 (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Central Asia’s growing regional cohesion and its own need to adapt to a changing geopolitical environment. This recalibration placed greater emphasis on resilience, sustainability, and functional cooperation in areas such as climate adaptation and CRMs, while still maintaining a rules-based framework. The Samarkand Declaration of 2025 builds directly on this trajectory, but it represents a qualitative shift. It elevates EU–Central Asia ties to the level of a strategic partnership rooted in connectivity, green transition, security, and economic development. This signals not only a deepening of the EU’s regional footprint but also a more explicit alignment of its engagement with broader geopolitical competition, especially vis-à-vis China and Russia. It is within this context that the EU’s geopolitical logic becomes most visible, as recent policies and discourse reveal how the EU has repositioned Central Asia from a peripheral concern to a central node in its strategic map. From a Central Asian perspective, the Samarkand Summit represents the recognition of a new regional dynamic whereby Central Asia is able to articulate priorities with greater cohesion and strategic clarity.⁵

The EU’s evolving engagement with Central Asia reflects a decisive shift toward a more explicit geopolitical posture. No longer defined primarily by its normative agenda, the Union has been recalibrating its approach to align with the region’s rising strategic importance amid intensifying global competition.

Geopolitical logic of the EU engagement with Central Asia

The EU’s evolving engagement with Central Asia reflects a decisive shift toward a more explicit geopolitical posture. No longer defined primarily by its normative agenda, the Union has been recalibrating its approach to align with the region’s rising strategic importance amid intensifying global competition. This transformation is manifested in four interrelated dynamics: the rise of a centrality discourse; a sharpened focus on material interests, with CRMs at the heart; a pivot from globalization to connectivity; and the emergence of pragmatic quid pro quo arrangements replacing traditional conditionality. Taken together, these developments illustrate how the EU is repositioning itself as a pragmatic and strategic actor in Central Asia, pursuing partnerships grounded in mutual interest rather than unilateral prescriptions.

⁵ Aripov, A., “EU–Central Asia Summit offers a new model of mutually beneficial partnership”, *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2025, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/eu-central-asia-summit-offers-a-new-model-of-mutually-beneficial-partnership/> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Centrality Discourse

EU leaders have embraced a centrality discourse, as historically advocated by Central Asian states. In the post-pandemic era, EU leaders have increasingly emphasized Central Asia as a region of strategic priority, adjusting their rhetoric to reflect its rising geopolitical relevance. The EU's then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, captured this shift in a 2022 statement, describing Central Asia as being “at the centre of events, in geo-strategic and geo-economic terms” and identifying the EU as a “partner of choice” for the region. According to him, “Central Asia was in the middle of nowhere, now it is in the middle of everything.” This narrative has been echoed at the highest levels of the EU leadership.⁶

At the inaugural EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand (April 2025), Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared: “In an uncertain world, we send a clear and powerful message: we are partners of choice, and we can rely on each other.”⁷ Such statements reflect a broader recognition of Central Asia as a pivotal arena for connectivity and strategic competition. EU officials now routinely describe Central Asia as critical to Europe’s interests, as a transit corridor, energy supplier, and a source of regional stability. In 2023, the European Parliament labelled the region an area of ‘strategic interest’ for the EU in terms of security, connectivity, energy, and resource diversification.⁸ In sum, the region has moved from the periphery to become a visible part of the EU’s strategic discourse, with top officials reaffirming its importance and the EU’s commitment to a deeper partnership.

Focus on Material Interests, with CRMs at the Heart

A defining feature of the EU’s post-2020 engagement with Central Asia is its sharp focus on tangible material interests – CRMs, energy supplies, and transport corridors – which often take precedence over traditional

6 Borrell, J., “Central Asia’s growing importance globally and for the EU”, *European External Action Service*, November 20, 2022, Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/central-asia%E2%80%99s-growing-importance-globally-and-eu_en (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

7 European Commission, “Joint press release on the EU–Central Asia Summit”, April 3, 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_983 (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

8 European Parliament, Report on the EU Strategy on Central Asia (A9-0407/2023), Brussels: European Parliament, Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0407_EN.html (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

normative agendas. European leaders now increasingly highlight the region's strategic assets, including oil, gas, uranium, rare earths, and its pivotal geography. Energy cooperation has been central to these efforts: Kazakhstan already supplies over 13% of the EU's oil imports, and the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has pledged to increase this flow.

The EU also supports the Green Corridor, a joint Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Azerbaijan project to transmit green energy across the Caspian to Europe.⁹ Meanwhile, with Russian transit routes becoming untenable, the EU is prioritizing the “Middle Corridor”, the Trans-Caspian transport route linking Europe to Central Asia via the South Caucasus. Although the Samarkand EU–Central Asia Summit involved only the five Central Asian states, several flagship items on its agenda – such as the Middle Corridor and the new Coordination Platform for the Trans-Caspian route – are inherently dependent on South Caucasus partners. The Joint Declaration itself links successful implementation to “peace and stability in the South Caucasus” and explicitly endorses the establishment of a Coordination Platform for the Middle Corridor.¹⁰ In practice, this emerging synergy is already visible.¹¹ Azerbaijan participated as a guest of honour in the two most recent Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State (Dushanbe 2023 and Astana 2024). Recent progress in Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization further increases the strategic significance of the South Caucasus for EU–Central Asia connectivity. It is therefore reasonable to expect that future EU strategic thinking will evolve toward more explicit and institutionalized EU–Central Asia–South Caucasus cooperation on connectivity.

At the heart of this material turn, however, lies the EU's growing emphasis on CRMs. CRMs were elevated to the top of the agenda

9 Avdaliani, E., “Europe battles to win favor in Central Asia,” *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, April 15, 2025, Available at: <https://cepa.org/article/europe-battles-to-win-favor-in-central-asia/> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

10 Council of the European Union, “Joint Declaration following the First European Union–Central Asia Summit”, April 4, 2025, Samarkand, Uzbekistan (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2025), Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7745-2025-REV-1/en/pdf> (Accessed: October 13, 2025)

11 AzeMedia, *From ‘5+1’ to Six-State Unity: Azerbaijan’s Central Asian Unity*, September 8, 2025, Available at: <https://aze.media/from-51-to-six-state-unity-azerbajjans-central-asian-unity/> (Accessed: October 13, 2025); Times of Central Asia, *Sixth Consultative Meeting of Heads of Central Asian States Takes Place in Astana*, August 19, 2024, Available at: <https://timesca.com/sixth-consultative-meeting-of-heads-of-central-asian-states-takes-place-in-astana/> (Accessed: October 13, 2025).

during the Samarkand Summit, reflecting both the EU's urgent need to reduce its 98% dependence on China for these resources¹² and Central Asia's potential to emerge as a strategic supplier.¹³ The region holds an estimated 40% of global reserves of manganese, along with significant deposits of lithium, graphite, cobalt, and rare earth elements – resources essential for the EU's green and digital transitions.¹⁴ During the Samarkand Summit, the EU endorsed a Joint Declaration of Intent on CRMs with all five Central Asian states and committed €2.4 billion for CRM-related projects within its €12 billion Global Gateway package.¹⁵

The EU has framed this agenda as a partnership model that goes beyond mere resource extraction, seeking instead to foster local value chains through investment in mining, refining, research, and workforce training. As the EU Commission's President von der Leyen underlined in Samarkand, the added value has to be local, signalling the EU's intent to distinguish its approach from the more transactional strategies of other external powers.¹⁶ Yet despite initial steps – including memoranda of understanding with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – Europe faces stiff competition from China and structural obstacles in attracting private investment. The ultimate test for the EU will be its ability to translate these high-level commitments into concrete, mutually beneficial projects on the ground.

Connectivity over Globalization

The narrative has pivoted from normative globalization toward connectivity, emphasizing material exchange rather than normative

12 Vigna, A., *The EU's Dependence on Chinese Rare Earths: Assessing the Potential for Trade Weaponization*, Master thesis, European University Institute, 2023, Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/76073> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

13 Qoraboyev, I., "Critical Raw Materials as an Emerging Pillar of Central Asia's Geoeconomic Centrality", in I. Qoraboyev and Z. Bekshora (eds.), *CEGREG Yearbook: Central Asia in Global and Regional Governance* (Maqsut Narikbayev University), pp. 148-156.

14 Vakulchuk, R. and Øverland, I. "How Central Asia can help the global energy transition", *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUP)*, March 28, 2022, Available at: <https://www.nupi.no/en/news/how-central-asia-can-help-the-global-energy-transition> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

15 Bouckley, K., "European Union commits €2.5 billion to critical minerals projects in Central Asia", *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, April 7, 2025, Available at: <https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/metals/040725-european-union-commits-eur25-billion-to-critical-minerals-projects-in-central-asia> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

16 European Commission, 4 April, 2025, *op.cit.*

transformation. Accompanying this shift in priorities is a noticeable change in the EU’s language – it has moved away from normative rhetoric, and ‘connectivity’ has displaced ‘globalization’ as the buzzword in its Central Asia policy. European officials now frame their engagement in terms of building links and networks, rather than exporting values. In late 2022, the then High Representative, J. Borrell, explicitly noted “connectivity is going to be the keyword for the future”, thus aligning with the EU’s Global Gateway initiative to boost digital, energy, and transport links worldwide.¹⁷ EU action in Central Asia is increasingly integrated into the Global Gateway in terms of both policy and discourse. It was a primary instrument through which most of the commitments of the Samarkand Summit were framed. The language surrounding these efforts is pointedly pragmatic and inclusive – EU leaders emphasize partnership, mutual interest, and sustainable connectivity rather than the older discourse of democracy promotion. This is not to say that the EU has abandoned its values, but in official communications, the emphasis has clearly shifted. As noted by Anna Matveeva, “the EU’s main priorities in Central Asia are connectivity, security, and geopolitics, which broadly match the countries’ own priorities”, implying that normative agendas have taken a back seat.¹⁸ As noted in a recent report published by the Clingendael Institute:

European officials now frame their engagement in terms of building links and networks, rather than exporting values.

However, even though this topic is still a priority for the EU in theory, this no longer seems to be the case in practice. Today, the talk of the town in Brussels is all about energy and trade – not human rights and democracy. Stability in Central Asia is valued more highly than democracy, and so the European Union maintains cordial ties with the Central Asian governments in spite of their autocratic style of governance and regular human rights abuses.¹⁹

Hence, the value-based initiatives of the EU are framed through the lexicon of connectivity in the report – for instance, promoting “people-to-people connectivity” via education and research programmes.

¹⁷ Borrell, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Matveeva, A., “A new opening for EU–Central Asia relations?”, *Carnegie Europe*, April 13, 2023, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/04/a-new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations?lang=en> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

¹⁹ Drost, N., Cretti, G. and van Giersbergen, B., “*Central Asia emerging from the shadows: European Union–Central Asia relations in evolving Eurasian geopolitics*”, *Clingendael Institute*, January 2025, p. 69. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/central-asia-emerging-from-the-shadows/> (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Quid Pro Quo Replacing Conditionality

The EU’s pragmatic approach has led to a clear quid pro quo dynamic, replacing previous normative conditionality. This shift from classic conditionality (demanding internal reforms for aid) toward more transactional quid pro quo arrangements was illustrated during the Samarkand Summit. The summit combined, on the one hand, EU and Central Asian leaders’ reaffirmation of UNSC Res. 541 and 550 on Cyprus and, on the other, the announcement of a €12 billion investment package. This sequence could be seen as suggestive of a quid pro quo logic within the EU’s pragmatic recalibration. Accordingly, this situation was perceived as Central Asia’s endorsement of the EU stance on Cyprus in return for the EU’s pledge of €12 billion in investment, which was a significant geopolitical development.²⁰ This shows that the EU is now willing to exchange, via quid pro quo transactions, economic or political incentives for Central Asian cooperation on strategic matters, without pushing for domestic reforms. In general, in this pragmatic quid pro quo dynamic, both sides exchange strategic assets to meet mutual geopolitical and economic needs. Central Asia offers the EU access to CRMs and energy resources – including major uranium, rare earth, and oil deposits – as well as vital geostrategic positioning along the Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, allowing trade routes to bypass Russia. In return, the EU delivers substantial investment and diversification support, notably through the Global Gateway initiative and project financing via the EBRD and EIB, which strengthens infrastructure without creating debt traps. The EU’s high-profile engagement also lends international legitimacy and geopolitical balancing power to Central Asian regimes.

What Central Asia Offers the EU	What the EU Offers Central Asia
<p>- Critical resources and energy: Uranium, rare earths, 30% of the world’s chromium, 20% of lead, oil and gas (Kazakhstan: 13% of EU oil; Turkmenistan’s gas reserves) – which would support the EU’s diversification away from Russia.</p>	<p>- Investment and economic diversification: €10 billion and €12 billion investment packages for infrastructure, energy, climate; EBRD/EIB support; helps diversify economies, avoids unsustainable debt.</p>

²⁰ Qoraboyev, I., “Understanding Central Asia’s position.”, *op.cit.*

What Central Asia Offers the EU	What the EU Offers Central Asia
<p>- Strategic location: Land bridge for Europe–Asia trade (Middle Corridor); enables routes bypassing Russia; buffer for Afghanistan; helps contain terrorism/migration.</p>	<p>- Connectivity and market access: Integration into transport corridors; EU as a major trade and technology partner; access to European markets; support for WTO accession/trade preferences.</p>
<p>- Geopolitical alignment and stability: Supports rules-based order; diplomatic backing in international fora; moderate Islamic voice; regional stability helps EU security.</p>	<p>- Political legitimacy and balanced diplomacy: Strategic partnership status boosts international legitimacy; supports sovereignty and ‘multi-vector’ policy; EU offers cooperation without requiring a break from other partners.</p>
<p>- Climate and energy transition: Solar and wind potential, green hydrogen, hydropower; rare metals for renewables (e.g. nickel).</p>	<p>- Technical expertise and governance support: Capacity building, modern tech, regulatory advice; sustainable management (water, energy); support for education, rule of law, and public administration reform.</p>

Table 1: What Central Asia and the EU bring to their partnership. Prepared by the authors.

The four dynamics outlined above converge on a single conclusion: while values remain in the EU rhetoric, material and strategic priorities now drive the Union’s engagement with Central Asia. This is especially evident in the EU’s two largest financial commitments to the region: the €10 billion and €12 billion investment packages pledged under the Global Gateway initiative. The €12 billion ‘Team Europe’ package, announced at the 2025 Samarkand summit, focuses almost entirely on infrastructure, energy, and resource security, and virtually no funding is earmarked for governance reform, civil society, or human rights. Similarly, the €10 billion package pledged in early 2024 for transport infrastructure underscores the EU’s focus on ‘hard connectivity’ and strategic access. These allocations underline that, despite continued normative language, the EU’s real actions in Central Asia are dominated by geoeconomic concerns – energy security, raw materials, and logistics – rather than normative transformation. Values remain in the discourse, but investment flows where strategic returns are clearest.

That said, the EU has not entirely abandoned its traditional normative agenda – at least not in words. Long-standing EU rhetoric about human

rights, rule of law, and democratic reform continues to appear in official discourse, largely by inertia or habit, albeit with diminished intensity and few enforcement mechanisms. Virtually every high-level EU–Central Asia communiqué still references these values. For instance, the joint press release of the Samarkand Summit dutifully affirmed that leaders are committed to “the promotion and protection of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The EU Council’s President, António Costa, similarly emphasized that the new strategic partnership would be “built on common values and interests,” and that the EU will remain a “reliable, forward-looking partner... investing in [Central Asia’s] long-term sustainable development.”²¹

In practice, however, such references are largely symbolic, and the EU avoids directly confronting Central Asian states on human rights issues. The EU officials often explain this pragmatism by arguing that overt criticism would only alienate partners, insisting instead that the EU prefers to push for incremental normative change in private. Central Asian leaders also understand this dynamic, recognizing the EU’s need to maintain a normative façade while appreciating its decision to avoid public pressure. As a result, both sides tacitly agree that any progress on norms will come slowly, and only within the bounds of their deepening strategic partnership.

Parallels with China’s BRI

Paradoxically, the EU’s deepening geopolitical engagement in Central Asia highlights an unresolved tension within European foreign policy: its growing assertiveness in a distant strategic theatre stands in contrast to its persistent struggles to achieve strategic autonomy in its own neighbourhood, particularly in relation to the United States. This paradox mirrors, in many ways, the logic underpinning China’s March West strategy. First articulated in the early 2010s by scholars such as Wang Jisi, March West emerged as China’s response to intensifying strategic rivalry with Washington in the Asia-Pacific region. At the time, China interpreted the U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia’ (later rebranded as the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’) as an effort to encircle and contain its rise, especially through deepened security ties with Japan, South Korea, India, and Southeast Asian partners. Confronted with this challenge, Chinese strategists urged China to look westward – to South Asia,

²¹ European Commission, April 3, 2025, *op.cit.*

Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caspian region – where U.S. influence was comparatively limited and geopolitical competition less acute.²²

This westward reorientation subsequently provided the intellectual and strategic foundations for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. Central Asia, in particular, became the keystone of China’s westward push, enabling this country to project economic power, secure access to vital energy and raw materials, and stabilize its own western frontier, especially Xinjiang. Unlike the Asia-Pacific region, defined by sharp strategic confrontation, Central Asia was seen by China as a zone of opportunity rather than conflict – a space where it could expand influence through infrastructure, finance, and diplomatic engagement rather than direct military rivalry. In this sense, the March West embodies a broader geopolitical logic: invest resources where resistance is low and returns are high.²³

The EU’s recent recalibration toward Central Asia follows a similar rationale. Constrained by the entrenched security order in Eastern Europe and by the limitations of its influence in global governance forums, the EU has turned to Central Asia as a strategic arena where it can assert geopolitical actorness in a comparatively less contested environment. Much like China’s March West, this approach enables the EU to pursue its geoeconomic priorities – energy diversification, connectivity, and CRMs – while presenting itself as a stabilizing partner in a region still open to multipolar engagement.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the European Union’s transformation into a more pragmatic and interest-driven actor in Central Asia manifests across four key dynamics: the elevation of Central Asia’s centrality in EU strategic discourse; the prioritization of material interests, with a focus on CRMs; the shift from globalization to connectivity; and the emergence of quid pro quo diplomacy in place of traditional conditionality. In a region defined by strategic balancing and resource competition, the honest acknowledgment of mutual geopolitical

22 Jisi, W., “Marching westwards: The rebalancing of China’s geostrategy”, in S. Baogang (ed.), *The World in 2020 according to China: Chinese foreign policy elites discuss emerging trends in international politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 45–67.

23 *Ibid.*

interests now provides a firmer and more sustainable foundation for EU–Central Asia relations than the EU’s earlier reliance on normative conditionality. The EU’s current shift toward pragmatic engagement, anchored in critical minerals, energy security, and connectivity, can deliver more tangible results for both sides than previous attempts to induce democratic reform, which often generated only superficial compliance or quiet resistance from regional governments. By prioritizing strategic deliverables over prescriptive reforms, Brussels may be trying to reposition itself as a credible geopolitical actor in a region long accustomed to transactional diplomacy.

That said, the EU’s growing dependence on a quid pro quo logic also carries inherent risks. The Northern Cyprus episode is a striking example of how transactional diplomacy can trigger unintended consequences, including friction with important partners such as Türkiye. In a region where external alignments are finely calibrated and every move is closely scrutinized by competing powers, narrowly framed quid pro quo arrangements may limit the EU’s ability to manoeuvre in future negotiations and risk entangling it in disputes that complicate its broader strategic agenda. This underscores the need for the EU to complement its transactional approach with a more anticipatory strategy that accounts for the long-term geopolitical ripple effects of such deals.

Moreover, while the EU increasingly presents itself as a defender of the rules-based international order, it is not the only power articulating this language in Central Asia. China, too, has consistently invoked the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in its dealings with the region – albeit from an entirely different normative and discursive standpoint. This convergence, despite profound differences in political systems and governance models, has allowed Central Asian states to continue practising multi-vector diplomacy, skilfully balancing their relationships with external actors to avoid dependence on any single partner. As a result, the EU’s narrative of rules-based partnership resonates only insofar as it can coexist with, rather than displace, these parallel frameworks promoted by other powers.

In sum, the EU’s material presence in Central Asia has never been stronger, but its normative influence is now more symbolic than operative. The long-standing language of values persists in official discourse largely by inertia, while the bulk of investment and political attention flows toward geostrategic and economic priorities. The challenge for the EU, moving forward, will be to reconcile these

two dimensions: to sustain its pragmatic, interest-driven engagement while embedding it within a credible long-term framework that preserves the values and principles that remain central to the European project. Striking this balance will determine whether the EU's current momentum in Central Asia represents not merely a tactical adjustment, but the emergence of a durable European geopolitical strategy. If the EU succeeds in integrating strategic realism with principled long-term commitments, it may yet transform its deepening partnership with Central Asia into a cornerstone of its emerging geopolitical actorness.