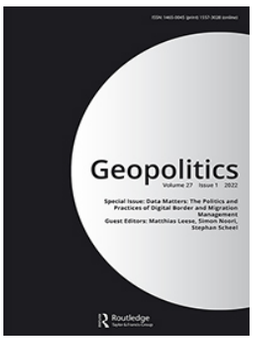

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Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

With China and Russia acting more assertively *vis-à-vis* Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have gradually moved to the core of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics – albeit to varying degrees. The European Union (EU) has purposefully sought to promote its norms and values in the region for quite some time in the past. However, considering the ongoing Western "polycrisis" exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic most recently, our paper investigates how the EU has been recalibrating its relationship towards Central Asia – within the timespan of its two EU Central Asia Strategies, dating from 2007 and 2019, respectively. We argue that the reformulation of EU policy towards Central Asia is pragmatically taking its lead from the growing constraints of EU foreign policy as well as Chinese and Russian intervention in the region; it is, in the end, geographical proximity that continues to shape geopolitics in Central Asia.

Introduction

Throughout history, Central Asia – comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – has been an important crossroads connecting Europe and Asia in terms of energy, trade and infrastructure. Yet, neither regional nor external powers paid much attention to the region in the immediate aftermath of the fall the Soviet Union which afforded the aforementioned states their independence. Over the past decade, however, Central Asia has gradually moved to the centre stage of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics. The hasty retreat of the United States (US) and its Atlantic Alliance partners from neighbouring Afghanistan in the late summer of 2021 is likely to exacerbate this geopolitical pivot to Central Asia.

Russia has already begun to act as a security guarantor for Central Asian states *via* the Collective Shanghai Treaty Organization (SCO) and maintains a strong military presence in the region. The Eurasian Economic Union (EUEA) which comprises most of the Central Asian countries further contributes to consolidate Russian hegemony in the region, which is also

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underwritten in cultural terms through the memory of a collective Soviet past and the dissemination of the Russian language. China, in turn, views Central Asia as an important cornerstone of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which unites economic and geopolitical ambitions. Finally, the European Union (EU) has shown interest in engaging with the "neighbours of its neighbours" (Gstöhl and Lannon 2015; Gstöhl 2015; European Commission 2006, 11), thus putting Central Asia at least implicitly into the fold of its *wider* European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (see e.g., European Parliament 2006). In the case of Central Asia, ENP countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were intended to function as vehicles for EU-spurred norm and policy diffusion. This is premised on the idea that EU norms and values could "travel" across the ENP sphere to lock in on a path towards Europe even those countries and regions, which lie well outside the EU's immediate vicinity.

However, considering the ongoing Western crisis and rising Chinese and Russian assertiveness in the region, the EU has carefully started to revise its foreign policy approach. Towards this background, the EU began to devise a new strategy for Central Asia in 2017, that was finally published in 2019 (Birkeland, Gänzle, and Torjesen 2021; Council of the European Union 2019; Winn and Gänzle 2017). This regional strategy which replaced the one endorsed in 2007 is amongst the first to function under the umbrella of the EU's global approach expressed in the Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) of 2016 (European Union 2016).

In this article, we analyse how the EU's foreign policy towards Central Asia has changed with the revised strategy of 2019 by drawing comparisons to the original strategy from 2007 and putting it in context with the EUGS. Going beyond this specific foreign policy area, this article seeks to contribute to a new understanding of EU external governance. In a nutshell, we argue that EU foreign policy has shifted its focus from democracy promotion in Central Asia to principled pragmatism and resilience. This is guided by changes in EU global strategy away from the perimeters of the external governance paradigm towards recognising geopolitics as being an important if not decisive determinant of EU foreign policy in the 21st century. Democracy promotion is still important in this prescription (Freyburg et al. 2015; Wetzel, Orbie, and Bossuyt 2015). But this new pragmatism corresponds with the EU recognising its role as a secondary player in the region behind other powers such as Russia, China, and the United States.

Our paper proceeds as follows: The next section first briefly reviews the core tenets of external governance literature in EU foreign policy before assessing the EU's engagement in the region and how it relates to the two other key actors Russia and China. Then, the analysis sets out the relationship between the EU and Central Asia from the perspective of the exercise of "principled

pragmatism" and resilience in EU foreign policy and how this is received in Central Asia. Finally, the paper concludes with comments on EU norms and material interests in Central Asia.

EU Foreign Policy and External Governance: recalibrating from Brussels-Centric Policy to Local Resilience

The concept of external governance has been used as an analytical tool for assessing the processes of EU foreign policymaking from "a more institutional, structural view" (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009, 794). It, thus, stands in sharp contrast to more actor-based approaches to EU external relations, rooted in traditional foreign policy analysis. According to Lavenex, EU external governance occurs "when parts of the *acquis communautaire* are extended to non-members" (2004, 683) without the (immediate) prospect of membership, thus focusing on "institutional processes of norm diffusion and policy transfer" (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009, 794). However, external governance and the ability of the EU to Europeanise extra-EU territories in Europe's vicinity has real empirical limitations (Lavenex et al. 2017; Wunderlich 2012). According to Schimmelfennig "EU market power and supranational regulation are the most important factors in making non-member states adopt the modes and rules of EU governance, either because of direct conditionality or through indirect externalization" (Schimmelfennig 2012, 656). Where the EU does not have such a regularised relationship with an external state, the Union's ability to Europeanise the state from the outside is considerably lessened.

Studies of EU external governance have become a hallmark of contemporary EU foreign policy analyses operating in a continuum between accession-driven modes of governance – involving hierarchical (EU-spurred) leadership on one side as well as network- and market-based (non-hierarchical) modes of steering on the other. Many analyses of EU enlargement processes have used the template of EU external governance to understand the conditions and impact of the EU's extension of its regulatory, transactional, and – ultimately – institutional boundaries to encompass new members. In view of significant (geo-)political and in some areas also geographical hurdles to expand EU membership, the traditional enlargement approach has become a less effective tool of hierarchical EU steering in external affairs. The EU external governance approach has, thus, been recalibrated towards encompassing local resilience, emphasising regional politics and the need for local internal capacity to deal with emerging problems. In other words, the study of external governance has started to "take into account that there is more than one institutional solution to EU-third country relations" (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009, 794). In the past, some of these alternatives have been framed as strategic or privileged partnerships. Most importantly, however, external governance approaches

have maintained not only a strong sectoral bias but also tend to de-contextualise the bilateral relationship involving the EU and the target country from its broader geopolitical environment. Even studies of EU enlargement have systematically excluded the geopolitical context from analysis. This may be because geopolitical contenders in Central and Eastern Europe for most of the 1990s and early 2000s – such as Russia and China – were not necessarily viewed as such and have not come to play a prominent role. Russia has forged its concept of the "near abroad" early in the 1990s but never mustered enough power to sustain the idea politically in the post-Soviet space. However, this has changed after Russia militarily engaged in Georgia in 2008 and, later, Ukraine in 2014. Similarly, it was only in the early 2010s when China's ascent to the world stage significantly gained momentum under President Xi Jinping's more assertive leadership, reflected in decidedly geopolitical initiatives such as the BRI.

With regard to Central Asia, the EU's capacity to exert external governance is impeded by geographical and political distance. Sharing borders, historical ties and language, Russian and Chinese geopolitics have an advantageous starting point. Russia is the key regional power in Central Asia and its influence is predicated on the Eurasian Economic Union and historically close political ties. China's influence is mainly through its aid, trade, and development regimes with Central Asian states (Fawn 2021). Within Central Asia, the states of the region are diverse and often take their lead from Russia in defining their political and security regimes (Hynek 2020). The growth of hydrocarbons in the geopolitics of Russian foreign policy has impacted the region. New geopolitical alliances around renewable energy sources have more recently been forged between Kazakhstan and Russia (Koch and Tynkkynen 2021), which have been reinforced by the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 (Hedenskog and Von Essen 2022). Kyrgyzstan is a member state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and has links with China as well as Russia. Recent political turmoil in the country has placed EU initiatives in education, sustainable development, and youth in context and highlights that the EU is doing valuable work in the social and economic sphere (European Commission 2021). Despite recent reforms, Kazakhstan is dominated by authoritarian politics (Stronski 2017); it has found markets for its energy in China and Russia, which remains its key interlocutor, but the EU has held less sway in the country. Tajikistan is also an authoritarian state that is oriented towards Russia in the main. Beyond a few infrastructure programmes, EU policy towards the country has been from an arm's length (Kabiri and Peyrouse 2021).

Still, the EU sees itself as an exporter of its own definitions of the rule of law, human rights, and labour standards that are inherent in its own foundational laws and practices (Brown 2018, 218). While the idea of normative power EU

has been successful in and immediately around the Union, the geographical remoteness of Central Asia has led the EU not to pursue its normative policies with vigour (Warkotsch 2006), but instead adopt pragmatic policies predicated on economic and geopolitical interests. In consequence, EU policies for the region lack focus and have remained largely reactive (Kavalski and Chul Cho 2018, 54). Indeed, the "ambiguity backstopping such strategic attitudes has urged some to suggest that the EU's preoccupation with its normative power is merely a distraction from the confrontation with" a resulting European provincialisation in international politics (Postel-Vinay 2008, 47; Kavalski 2013, 248 cited in: Kavalski and Chul Cho 2018, 60). The EU's half-hearted interactions with Central Asia confirm that it is not a player in the region, leaving the field to Chinese and Russian geopolitics. Perhaps, their Hobbesian approaches chime better with the authoritarian leaders of Central Asian states than the EU's rule-based conditionalities with strings attached (Yu 2018, 231). In that sense, Central Asian states' transactional costs of dealing with China are, therefore, comparably lighter, as are the levels of regulation and transparency in decision-making. Thus, it can be argued that the EU has neither the will nor the ability to challenge Chinese economic hegemony in Central Asia. Indeed:

> The very conspicuous failure to link the EU's demands for reform in Central Asian states to any meaningful dynamic for Europeanization indicates that the EU is far short of conceptualizing (let alone validating) the role of its normative power both in the region and [. . .] "out-of-Europe" areas more generally (Kavalski and Chul Cho 2018, 60).

This is partly due to different EU member state interests in Central Asia and how different EU member states interact with Chinese policy in the region. 17 states from Central Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have been engaged in a multilateral framework for cooperation with China since 2012, "which has shown significant potential for generating a strong pro-China lobby within the EU" (Yu 2018, 231–32). Pacheco Pardo highlights that certain EU member states' reliance on Beijing's '17 + 1' cooperation framework undermines the prospects for EU external governance in Central Asia (2018). However, it is worth pointing out that this framework has not been very productive and was weakened by Lithuania's exit in 2021 (Lau 2021).

In contradistinction to Pacheco Pardo, the corollary of the argument is that EU foreign policy in Central Asia is driven as much by financial policy as it is by norms/values. Pacheco Pardo's analysis presents the EU as victim of its own normative power, but this is not necessarily the case. This is used to justify the argument that China (especially) and Russia have greater economic interests and are by extension more effective/influential policy actors in Central Asia. This is not always the case, as we have identified multiple EU programmes drawn from different fields in Central Asia, which highlight a deeper engagement than the literature might always highlight. The argument in Pacheco

Pardo also assumes that the EU's engagement in Central Asia is somehow based on norms only. As we show below, EU Central Asia policy is increasingly predicated on new realist pragmatism/interests following on from the EUGS 2016 and the EU Central Asia Strategy 2019. Furthermore, the Europeanisation literature would expect that some EU member states 'upload' their own (pragmatic) foreign policy preferences onto the EU's agenda (Lavenex 2004), whereas others work through the EU to achieve a multilateral policy. These basic choices are formulated according to 'the perceived salience of the policy goals, the extent to which member states can carve out a niche, their perceived capabilities, and the level of Europeanization of their national foreign policies' (Bossuyt 2017, 441).

The EU's engagement in Central Asia is arguably not driven by power politics with Russia and China. Instead, it acts as an "honest broker" in the region predicated on pragmatism; a second-order actor in the region actor that is not wholeheartedly engaged in the regional geopolitics of "neighbours of neighbours" (Bailes and Dunay 2015; European Commission 2006). The EU seeks to balance its and other great powers' security interests in Central Asia with its internal values by projecting those values externally (Juraev 2014). The EU is relatively influential in security governance in the region but is not fully engaged in setting the geopolitical terms of the Central Asian regional security complex, which is mainly defined by Russia, China, and the states of Central Asia (Spaiser 2018). There are limits to EU external governance as a means of influencing developments in Central Asia (Makarychev 2020), and the Union only has a secondary role in the region. In a more general sense, the EU is trying to gain economic advantage in Central Asia by increasing economic and political ties in the region. But EU efforts fall behind the Chinese Belt and Road initiative and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union which are the new Great Games in Central Asia (Pantucci 2018).

Indeed, the EU has not launched its own BRI but is deeply engaged in Central Asia, especially in the area of connectivity. Connectivity is the "physical and non-physical infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas, and people can flow unhindered" (Mogherini cited in Russell 2019, 1). Such links have moved apace since the passage of the EU Central Asia Strategy of 2007. Indeed, "Transport and energy links were already identified as a priority in the EU's 2007 Central Asia strategy" (Russell 2019, 10). Developments have been slow in implementing the "Caspian-Black Sea pipeline, creating an 'e-silk highway' or integrating Central Asian energy markets" (Russell 2019, 10). It is interesting that China has been seen in the media to be more successful in implementing connectivity projects in Central Asia. Indeed, 'China's big-ticket projects such as a 19-kilometre railway tunnel in Uzbekistan and the Khorgos logistics hub have captured more media attention, creating the impression that Beijing has sidelined the EU as a Central Asian connectivity player' (Russell 2019, 10). In September 2018, the EU published its connecting

Europe and Asia strategy (Council of the EU 2018). It is inspired by the EU's own internal market as a model to promote regional integration in other parts of the world. Rather than striving to replace the BRI, the strategy recognises that "non-engagement is not an option for the EU, given Beijing's growing influence in Central Asia" (Russell 2019, 11). To this end, linked to the above comments on connectivity, the EU launched its Global Gateway plan in late 2021 to rival the Chinese BRI in terms of trade and infrastructure investment globally (Kuo 2021). The Global Gateway plan demonstrates EU ambition and pragmatism globally to project its values and interests, but it is still in the planning stage, and will lag behind the BRI for some time to come, particularly in Central Asia.

EU Priorities in Central Asia

Strategies since 2007

As is stated above, the EU has been looking at the "wider region" through the prism of its ENP. However, many EU member states perceived of the ENP as a way of compensation for these countries not to rush into a membership application. Meanwhile, Russia grew increasingly wary of the EU's objectives in its Eurasian periphery, which culminated in the "Ukraine crisis" ongoing since 2014. Russia has long viewed Central Asia and other post-Soviet states as strategic areas of interest and part of its "near abroad". Underlining this, Russian President Vladimir Putin once famously called the collapse of the Soviet empire "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Washington Post 2005). Later in 2013, China launched the BRI and forcefully began to engage in the geopolitical interface between West and East, pursuing the ultimate objective of creating and improving land-based and maritime infrastructure between European and China (Ferdinand 2016, 841–57). EU policy towards Central Asia was long dormant and only gained momentum with the "Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia" (European Council 2007).

Adopted in 2007, the strategy was welcomed at the time as one of the first attempts to define common interests and potential areas for cooperation and to provide a comprehensive stance *vis-à-vis* the region-as-a-whole. It sought to reconcile EU material interests in terms of energy security with attempts to foster human rights and democracy in the region. This approach was well documented in projects such as the "EU Rule of Law initiative" and "Human Rights Dialogue" as core instruments towards achieving that end. Fenton (2015, 171) has stressed the extent to which the EU's Central Asia Strategy 2007 was modelled along the lines of the ENP and its offspring for the East European neighbours, the Eastern Partnership. Both Eastern Partnership and the Central Asia Strategy include a multilateral prologue encouraging 'region-

building' amongst the five countries of Central Asia yet are in practice based on the principles of strict bilateralism in practical terms. They also converge on several objectives and policy priorities set for the relationship such as the enhancement of energy security (Saud and Arif 2020). Hence, it could be seen as "as the continuation of an internal process of institutionalization" (Lavenex 2004, 685) underlined by bureaucratic dynamics inside the European Commission – the key author of the policy script – as well as a legacy of enlargement-tested policies to be applied to the immediate vicinity. Interestingly, as Kassenova observed, "it was not a strategy in the conventional sense of the word, yet it served the purpose of signalling the EU's special interest" (2016, 1) in the region – albeit running short on clear-cut commitments and objectives.

The 2007 Strategy was broad in scope, covering security, trade, development aid, good governance, rule of law, human rights, democracy promotion and energy (European Council 2007). This was likely related to the division between the EU's member states on how to approach Central Asia. Some, including France, Germany and Italy have emphasised economic, security and energy interests, whereas other EU member states such as the Scandinavians and the British favoured a focus on good governance and human rights as well as specific issues related to corruption in the public sector. The EU implemented structured political dialogues, human rights structured dialogues, educational initiatives, energy and transport initiatives, rule of law initiatives and other related programmes with the states of the region. However, tellingly the states of Central Asia were not included in either the ENP or the Eastern Partnership, being seen as part of the backyard of the Neighbourhood. Interestingly, at the time of the launch of the ENP, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry expressed interest in the policy asking for potential inclusion of the country – a desire that spurred quite some deliberations in the European Parliament in 2006 (European Parliament 2006). In fact, MEP and rapporteur on the European neighbourhood policy report, Charles Tannock, admitted that he supported extending the European neighbourhood policy to the Republic of Kazakhstan. In a written personal communication, the Commission, however, rejected this on the basis that "Kazakhstan does not share a border with an EU Member State or acceding country, even though its westward extension is arguably geographically in Europe proper" (European Parliament 2006). The explanation is somewhat precarious, as Jordan also does not share such a border but enjoys ENP status (European Parliament 2006). More significantly, "Of strategic importance to the EU are, however, Kazakhstan's vast oil and gas reserves which it is anxious to sell to the EU without depending entirely on Russian pipelines" (European Parliament 2006). EU member states also seek to access Yellow Cake Kazakh uranium to help feed future energy needs (European Parliament 2006). Furthermore, ENP membership for Kazakhstan, according to Charles Tannock, "would be

an excellent way forward … to further enhance Kazakhstan's relations with the EU, consolidate its path to democracy, enhance respect for human rights, and the rule of law, and to work on a free trade agreement with the EU" (European Parliament 2006).

Ultimately, the EU Strategy on Central Asia of 2007 has failed to "Europeanize" the domestic politics of Central Asian states that remain impervious to democracy promotion, Western human rights regimes, and shared policy discourses. Instead, the EU has focused on forms of external governance that are predicated on the pragmatic self-promotion of EU material (mainly economic) interests and the protection of European homeland security around issues such as borders, migration, and counterterrorism. Therefore, EU engagement with Central Asia has been based on a transactional model of policymaking rather than one based on communities of shared ideas and discourses. This helps to explain why the emphasis on projecting normative power as prescribed by the European Security Strategy (2003) has been replaced by a focus on the EU's economic/security interests in the European Union Global Strategy (2016). Rather than exporting values into the European periphery, this more pragmatic approach influenced by realist thinking focuses on striking public and private sector deals and protecting European security via a series of formal agreements and tacit understandings with Russia and China. This approach recognises that EU influence falls behind that of other regional actors such as Russia, China, and the US – trade aside. Both rhetorically and empirically the EU has pursued self-interested policies towards Central Asia, and the region is secondary in importance for the EU to South-East Europe, the Balkans, and Ukraine plus other "nearer" neighbours to Europe. This equates to a form of "normalisation" in EU foreign policy based more on self-interest as opposed to primarily on values as Manners (2002) suggests.

The EU's 2012 progress report highlighted issues with the countries of the region five years after the implementation of the initial strategy (European Council 2012). In the intervening five years, the EU insisted on a High-Level EU-Central Asia Security Dialogue and a renewal of the EU Special Representative, currently assumed by the Slovakian Peter Burian, a former secretary of state and ambassador to NATO and the US. The revised strategy also emphasised economic development, border regions, energy, human rights, good governance, and corruption as being key issues (European Council 2012). But despite Brexit, dissent among EU member states on whether to focus on material interests or the pursuit of liberal internationalist-inspired values persists and undermines the implementation of EU bilateral and multilateral policies. As late as March 2016, the decidedly pro-normative power European Parliament highlighted: "[…] the need for an EU-Central Asia strategy that is not based on geostrategic interests but is designed to develop a participative and democratic society […]" (European Parliament

2016). Nevertheless, the EU has also had some notable successes in its cooperation with Central Asia. The Union funded Central Asian countries to the tune of €1028 million from 2014 to 2020 under the auspices of the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). Furthermore, the EU has also implemented its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) with some vigour in Central Asia, Turkmenistan excepted. The EU also maintains a range of PCAs with Central Asian states (European Parliament 2021). The EU's CADAP programme has helped drug rehabilitation programmes in Central Asia associated with addiction (EEAS 2019; Michels et al. 2017). Finally, the EU has also been relatively successful in the realm of border management through the BOMCA programme (BOMCA 2021).

The Strategy on Central Asia 2019

While the EU is traditionally not seen as a major actor in Central Asia, it has undertaken numerous programmes and investments in the region going back to the 1990s (Russell 2019). The Chinese BRI gives the impression of sidelining EU programmes, but this is an unfair reading of the situation in Central Asian states and levels of EU engagement. Yet, the regions' relative lack of visibility in EU policy, not being a priority region for the EU, and the structural weaknesses of CFSP decision-making process have militated against a coherent and effective EU foreign policy, despite the efforts made with regard to the 2007 strategy. Against this backdrop, the Council of the EU adopted the new EU Central Asia Strategy in June 2019 (Council of the EU 2019), replacing the one endorsed in 2007. Together with the conclusions for a new EU Central Asia Strategy, the Council also adopted the Joint Communication "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership", which were developed by the High Representative and the European Commission.

In a nutshell, the new strategy presents an attempt at recalibrating the bilateral relationship between the EU, its member states, and the five Central Asian republics with a focus on the promotion of resilience, prosperity and better working relationships ("working better together") between the key stakeholders. The strategy also encourages the EU and Central Asia to pursue regional cooperation as a cross-cutting priority *vis-à-vis* different policy considerations for key stakeholders. In terms of an overarching objective, the Joint Communication aims at forging 'a stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership with the countries of Central Asia so that the region develops as a sustainable, more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space' (European Commission 2019, 1). Subsequently, the Joint Communication lists: (1) the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, (2) the cooperation on border management, migration and mobility as well as addressing commons security challenges, (3)

environmental, climate and water resilience underneath the aim of the overarching goal of resilience; (4) partnership for economic reform, (5) intra- and inter-regional trade and investment facilitation, (6) sustainable connectivity as well as (7) youth, education, innovation and culture become part of the prosperity objective; and (8) partnership with civil societies and parliaments as well as (9) cooperation for high impact (at a more global level) and (10) raising the overall profile of partnership eventually inform the objective of working better together.

Core Elements of Comparison between the 2007 and 2019 Strategies

In this sub-section, we compare the strategies of 2007 and 2019 in order to trace potential changes in the EU's foreign policy approach towards Central Asia (see Table 1). Core elements of comparison can be summarised as follows:

(1) Whereas the number of key priorities has changed between the two documents, it is remarkable that there is a high degree of *continuity* in terms of what has been identified by the relevant services as being of key importance. What is perhaps more important is that priorities such as "democracy promotion" have not entirely disappeared from the agenda, but they clearly seem to be subordinate to the principle of resilience which will benefit both the EU and the individual Central Asian state. Furthermore, to speak of "democracy promotion" – as compared to "democratization" makes a difference in terms of the ambition. Interestingly, the Council conclusions de-link this objective from the overall regional approach by "reiterate[ing] that the scope of the EU's relations is linked to the readiness of individual Central Asian countries to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule

Table 1. Comparing key priorities in EU Central Asia 'Strategies' of 2007 and 2019.

European Council 2007	European Commission 2019
(1) Human rights, rule of law, good governance, and democratisation; (2) Youth and education; (3) Economic development, trade and investment; (4) Energy and transport; (5) Environmental sustainability and water; (6) Combating common threats and challenges; (7) Intercultural dialogue (see Council of the EU 2007, 7–17).	**Resilience** (1) the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law; (2) the cooperation on border management, migration and mobility as well as addressing commons security challenges; (3) environmental, climate and water resilience. **Prosperity** (4) partnership for economic reform; (5) intra- and inter-regional trade and investment facilitation; (6) sustainable connectivity; (7) youth, education, innovation, and culture. **Working better together** (8) partnership with civil societies and parliaments; (9) cooperation for high impact (at a more global level); (10) raising the overall profile of partnership (see European Commission 2019, 2–16).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernise and diversify the economy, including by supporting the private sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, in a free market economy" (Council of the European Union 2019, 2). This means nothing less than that the Central Asian countries themselves determine the scope of democratic reform.

(2) The new strategy emphasises the *non-exclusive character* of the relationship – which is relevant considering the Ukraine crisis. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (Anceschi 2020); hence, any other economic relationship, such as the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), which have been designed to replace the existing twenty-year-old PCAs, need to take account of this. For the time being, the EU has signed an EPCA with Kazakhstan and negotiations are underway with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – with Tajikistan having expressed interest in engaging in EPCA talks.

(3) Both documents – the Council Conclusions and the Joint Communication of 2019 – emphasise that commitment to balancing bilateral and regional approaches, it is ultimately so that "the EU will seek to deepen its engagement with those Central Asian countries willing and able to intensify relations" (European Commission 2019, 2). Still, the Joint Communication is quite detailed in terms of singling out activities that have the potential to contribute towards creating stronger links between the Central Asia countries. Yet, this remains a challenging task in a region that is characterised by low levels of intra-regional trade, hovering around 5% of the region's total trade in 2018 (See European Commission 2019, 19). Thus, the *region-ness* somewhat remains a construed idea for Central Asia.

(4) The Joint Communication emphasises *locality* several times: First, by relating to other organisations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and International Labour Organization (ILO), in terms of their work 'on the ground' or their field missions. This pinpoints to the EU's growing readiness to become more inclusive in terms of its external relations in the region. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the Communication relates to civil societies and the role of parliaments as drivers for reform. To give an example: "The EU will aim to include Central Asian employers' and workers associations into dialogue on issues ranging from the investment climate to education (World Bank 2020), employability (including women and girls) and labour market reform" (European Commission 2019, 9).

Comparing the 2007 and 2019 EU Central Asia Strategies has demonstrated that there has been a longstanding awareness for balancing bilateralism, multilateralism, and bi-regionalism in terms of the EU-Central Asia relationship. In terms of European external governance, we identified three key findings. 1) some of the EU-central normative ambitions, such as democratisation of its "wider neighbourhood" has been brought into perspective with other objectives as well as the changing geopolitical context. It has not necessarily disappeared altogether from the EU's foreign policy agenda though. 2) There is a greater awareness for non-exclusivity in the multi-level structure of the EU-Central Asia relationship both at the global, regional, and local levels. 3) Local-level players – such as the ones from other international organisations, civil society and parliaments are looked at as potential partners that help substantiate the relationship (Dzhuraev and Muratalieva 2020). In that sense, there is a greater "awareness" for locality of the relationship. With the opening of an EU mission to Turkmenistan the Union will also eventually be able to be more present at the "local" level, too.

A More Geopolitical EU: embracing "Resilience" and "Principled Pragmatism"

The shift in EU foreign policy from normative power to principled pragmatism/resilience is perhaps most noticeable in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. But also in a global sense, the EU appears to be targeting new markets dominated by emerging great powers such as China, India, and the BRICS, but is also developing a pragmatic approach to broader issues of the management of global security (Howorth 2016). This shift was initiated by the EUGS (2016) emphasising the impact of neighbourhood countries and their near neighbours on Europe in terms of security, migration, terrorism, and economically. The EU therefore prioritises internal and border security according to a pragmatic case-by-case engagement with external actors in the vicinity of Europe.

Relations between the EU and its nearest neighbours are now governed as much by this new pragmatic realist agenda as they are by liberal internationalist principles. Nevertheless, some have implicitly – perhaps unwittingly – criticised the EU not for being realist but for a lack of ability and ambition to implement the EUGS, particularly in the defence and security fields (Colemont 2016). Others squarely criticise the EUGS for lacking ambition, particularly in Asia, and hint that Europe freerides on the US despite being the leading trade partner with Central Asia (Grand 2016, 20). Its greater emphasis on building resilience in the political and economic systems of the (near) neighbourhood states instead of projecting "normative power", however, is lauded. As Maull

states: "Of course, the EU should engage more in strengthening the resilience of neighbouring countries to the south and the east of the Union" (Maull 2016, 35). In other words, Europe should strive to get better at state-building abroad.

In principle, the EU's economic might allow the Union to play an important role in the region. The EU is the largest trade partner with Central Asia with €13.8 billion of imports from Central Asia into the EU single market and €8.4 billion exports from the EU to Central Asia in 2016 (European Commission 2017). However, this has not leveraged into greater democratisation or the adaptation of liberal internationalist principles in Central Asia. Indeed, the most influential external influences in the Central Asia are of Russian and Chinese origin, especially as they relate to energy politics (Marantidou and Cossa 2014). The EU (and for that matter US policies) lack the impact of Russia and China. The EU and US often ineffectively channel their development policies through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), their defence policies through NATO (Peyrouse 2015, 4), their democracy promotion policies through the OSCE, and their trade policies often bilaterally between individual EU and Central Asian states, respectively. Indeed, Peyrouse presciently captures the operational and ideational environment of EU policy towards Central Asia as follows:

> Meanwhile the local governments [in Central Asia] encourage the competition patterns between external actors, as they enable the regimes to enforce 'multi-vector' strategies by pitting these actors against each other. This results in multiple uncoordinated initiatives over which they can exert greater control. Central Asian regimes are interested in having good links with Europe, which is an alternative to the more direct and substantial influence of Russia and China. Nevertheless, EU policy will remain torn between different approaches, but with an already visible trend to prioritize energy and security over the values agenda. Even dynamized, the EU Strategy in Central Asia remains without measure compared to the Eastern Partnership (directed toward Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the three South Caucasian states) (Peyrouse 2015, 6-7).

Since the end of the Cold War, EU policy towards Central Asia has been embedded in its own external governance regime. The EU has also attempted to export its *acquis* in the region with varying degrees of success in the areas of good governance, rule of law and values. The export of EU norms and values has been perhaps less impactful in Central Asia, where states are not necessarily as receptive to democracy promotion and have increasingly taken their lead from Russia and/or China (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017). Broader EU strategy since the EUGS in 2016 (European Union 2016) has also become more pragmatic, more focused on the EU itself, and less focused on the projection of norms and values abroad. In a sense, EU policy towards Central Asia recognises that there is a limit to the extent that external governance approaches to policy-making and norm diffusion tells the full picture of EU engagement in the region, or the role taken by other great powers.

Conclusion

EU policy towards Central Asia increasingly incorporates non-European perspectives from the "outside-in", rather than just projecting the EU perspective from "inside-out". Recently reformulated EU foreign policy towards Central Asia is pragmatically taking its lead from Chinese and Russian policy in the region recognising that, in the end, geography continues to shape geopolitics in Central Asia. Indeed, the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 is testament to the continued importance of geopolitics in Central Asian politics (Hedenskog and Von Essen 2022). Our analysis of the EU's recent foreign policy strategies with previous initiatives further suggests that the EU is putting more emphasis on state resilience rather than democratisation in Central Asia. This reflects also in EU policy towards Central Asia during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been determined by pragmatism and help for the states of the region to become more resilient (Bossuyt 2020). Moreover, the EU has begun to bolster engagement with other actors in the wider region. In effect, the EU is normalising its foreign policy to pragmatically serve its interests (Rezaei and Haghighi 2020) towards Central Asia.

As a consequence, the EU embraces geoeconomic and geopolitical competition in the region. The EU's traditional foreign policy towards Central Asia, focusing on institution-building and the advancement of human rights largely kept the Union out of geopolitical competition with China and Russia in the region (Murphy 2016, 6). But the shift towards a more pragmatic approach is guided as much by geopolitics and geoeconomics as it is by EU values, recognising the limited impact of the latter in Central Asia and the need to compete with China and Russia for influence in Europe's periphery.

Nevertheless, the EU is not a key actor – trade aside – in Central Asia in comparison to Russia, China, and other regionally based actors in the broader region and unlikely to gain significant geopolitical clout in the foreseeable future. Presently, the EU and its member states are more concerned with the Covid-19 pandemic, the European migration crisis, EU counter-terrorism cooperation, the aftermath of Donald Trump's presidency and its legacy, the situation in Afghanistan, Brexit, and their own domestic concerns around economic growth. Moreover, the region remains secondary in importance for the EU to South-East Europe, the Balkans, and Ukraine plus other "nearer" Neighbours to Europe. And finally, much of the exchange between European and Central Asian states occurs bilaterally, thereby undercutting EU initiatives.

Within the context of the EUGS (2016), the EU needs to develop strengthened security, economic and defence relationships with the countries of Central Asia. The EU's "comprehensive approach" to peacebuilding, security-sector reform, and stabilisation should be pursued through the "principled pragmatic" and "resilience" lens of the EUGS, with a focus on European energy security,

the protection of European security interests *as well as* the projection of human security, human rights, and associated values into the Neighbourhood. The EU's renovated reflexive multilateralism is also an appropriate policy instrument for the EU to pursue its vital interests in the Central Asia at a time when China and Russia are on the rise in the region. The past quarter century of relations between the EU and Central Asia highlights that pragmatic engagement is the most sensible means to pursue each party's interests and values together. The days of the EU pursuing its own version of "normative power Europe" externally in Central Asia are long gone (Kassenova 2016). As is stated above, reformulated EU policy towards Central Asia (Council of the European Union 2019) is indirectly taking a lead from Chinese and Russian policy in the region in that geography continues to shape geopolitics in the region. EU policy *vis-à-vis* Central Asia is also increasingly guided by its Member States interests, "principled pragmatism" and resilience predicated on an outside-in conception of international relations.

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