On 17 June 2019, the Council adopted a new EU strategy on Central Asia, adapting the EU policy to new opportunities which have emerged in the region.

Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together. Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have renewed this role for the region since attaining independence. EU-Central Asia relations have developed significantly over recent years, as illustrated by the new-generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements signed with Kazakhstan and under negotiation with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan calls EU’s new Central Asia strategy ‘visionary’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tusk tests the waters in Central Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The new EU Strategy for Central Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran-US tensions dominate two Central Asia summits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The EU is a natural partner for Central Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kazakhstan welcomes the EU’s new vision for a stronger partnership with Central Asia, particularly as it took into account the country’s proposals, its deputy foreign minister told EURACTIV and called the document, due to be adopted next month, “visionary”.

On 15 May, the European Commission and the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security adopted a Joint Communication setting out a fresh vision for a stronger partnership with the five countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Roman Vassilenko said that, possibly due to the upcoming presidential elections in Kazakhstan on 9 June, no official reaction has been published yet, but Kazakhstan welcomed the adoption of the Communication and was looking forward to its adoption on 17 June by the Foreign Affairs Council.

“We think that this is a very visionary document. Indeed, we have been consulted, we have provided our contribution to the strategy and we do find reflected there some of the proposals that we have suggested”, Vassilenko told EURACTIV in an interview.

He focused more specifically on Continued on Page 5
Continued from Page 4

one element at the very end of the strategy, item 3.3, about the “regional visibility” of the European Union and its strategy in Central Asia.

“This is something we have argued for a long time and it’s proposing to establish a portal which is in fact mentioned there, which will be serving as a home for the strategy, but also as a platform for interaction between the EU and Central Asia”, the diplomat said.

He explained that such an online tool would serve to facilitate interaction among European countries, the European Commission, the EEAS and Central Asian stakeholders, including businesses.

FLEXIBILITY, TAILORED ASSISTANCE

From the details back to the bigger picture, Vassilenko said this strategy would “stand the test of time”. He said the Strategy should not be a tactical document, detailing step by step what the EU and its member states should be doing in the next 10-year period but rather an instrument of tailored assistance to the region in a flexible way.

“Flexibility is another key aspect of this new strategy, which will allow the European Commission in being flexible to choose whether to go through a bilateral track and have a bilateral project with, say, Kirghizstan or Tajikistan, or to do regional projects with all Central Asian states and maybe even include Afghanistan. And that Strategy allows them to do that,” Vassilenko said.

The strategy has three pillars: “partnership for resilience”, “partnership for prosperity”, and “working better together”.

Asked about the “prosperity” element, which is also a key word in Kazakhstan, where the authorities are aiming to improve living standards, Vassilenko said that indeed, the “Kazakhstan 2050” strategy sets the goal for the country to become one of the top 30 most competitive and developed nations by the middle of the century.

“It’s a very tall order, we are moving towards that goal”, he said, adding that by various ratings, the country was making progress, being ranked 28th position in the World Bank’s Doing Business Rating for 2019.

He said that in the next 30 years, the expectation is that the incomes will significantly rise, and the economy will get diversified so that the country no longer depends only on raw materials and exports of oil, gas, metals. Instead, it should become a more service-oriented economy.

In this context, Vassilenko highlighted the establishment of the Astana International Financial Center in the country’s capital Nur-Sultan, sometimes called the financial hub of the New Silk Road.

COMPETITIVE ELECTIONS

This vision, put forward by the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is supported by the current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who is a candidate for the presidential election on 9 June, he said.

The diplomat added that several of the seven candidates running for the presidential office support this long-term vision of raising competitiveness. However, he said, some candidates had different ideas, and one of them even suggested nationalising all the companies.

“It’s a very interesting situation now in Kazakhstan with this election taking place in less than two weeks. It’s a true competition of ideas: Very great variety of candidates, including a woman. So, for us it’s a very interesting and certainly the most competitive election”, Vassilenko said.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Asked about regional cooperation among the five Central Asian countries, he highlighted the very positive trends in the past two and a half years. But he also said that in such a short period of time it was impossible to solve all issues that have accumulated in the 25 years of independent development of the five countries.

In particular, he mentioned water management and fair and effective use of rather limited water resources in Central Asia, which is another big component of the EU strategy for Central Asia.

“Water management will be perhaps one of the defining issues for the future of the regional cooperation,” Vassilenko said. He explained that Central Asia’s population of 60 million is expected to grow to 90 million people by 2050, according to UN estimates, so more water will be needed.

The problem, however, is that the glaciers which feed the Syr Darya and Amu Darya – the two largest rivers – are melting because of global warming, he explained and added that “we will certainly need to address this together”.

The diplomat said that after the regional summit last year in Astana, as the capital was called then, the next meeting is planned for this year in Tashkent, in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is hoping that this meeting can be arranged and that an agenda can be agreed upon, to advance this cooperation.

Vassilenko stressed that this was not about “integration, creating a union of sorts”, but regional cooperation which was lacking for a long time.

The Commission’s Central Asia Strategy blueprint makes mention of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline. The EU is interested in a gas pipeline that would link Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan.
Continued from Page 5

as Turkmenistan is very rich in gas reserves but has no other choice than to selling its gas to Russia.

Last year in Aktau, a city on Kazakhstan’s Caspian coast, a summit with Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran agreed on the delimitation of the Caspian Sea. EURACTIV asked Vassilenko if this project was now realistic.

The diplomat said that the Convention signed in Aktau creates the legal ground for the laying of the Trans-Caspian pipelines but needs ratification from all parties.

Vassilenko stressed that such gas and oil pipelines would be based on economic considerations and all would depend on the feasibility and profitability of such projects.

Lacking the legal ground, the convention, Kazakhstan has developed a more costly system of transport by tankers across the Caspian Sea, he said.

Asked about two organisations mentioned in the Commission’s strategy, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the diplomat said his country has always been in favour of cooperation and dialogue among various regional organizations, including these two.

The interaction among these organizations can have very practical meaning, he argued. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been now equipped with a regional anti-terrorist structure, based in Tashkent, and instrumental in coordinating the work of special services of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

In Vassilenko’s words, this structure has contributed to preventing around 500 terrorist attacks in the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

“So, naturally, interacting with for example Shanghai Cooperation Organization on this matter and in this particular structure can be quite useful and interesting for the European Union and European authorities”, he said.

EURACTIV asked Vassilenko if Kazakhstan, an ardent advocate of the Belt-and-Road initiative, had plans for how to improve the image of this initiative, which is not unanimously supported in the EU.

“Obviously, for us it’s a no-brainer that we need to participate in the Belt-and-Road initiative and we do so, in fact, it was launched in Astana, our capital, in 2013 by president Xi Jinping”, Vassilenko said, adding that Kazakhstan is the first country along the straight way from China to Europe.

The diplomat said that Kazakhstan’s first president Nazarbayev recently proposed a dialogue at three levels, which he called 3D. One is the dialogue among the four big players: United States, EU, Russia and China.

The second level of dialogue was between the OSCE and its Asian counterpart, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building measures in Asia – CICA.

This organization was launched by Kazakhstan in 1992, on the same principles as the OSCE. It now unites 26 countries, from Israel, and Iran, to Vietnam and China.

The third level is a more economy-focused dialogue between the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN.

Despite the usual hesitations, there is progress, the diplomat said, with the OSCE and CICA planning to meet, first at expert levels and then higher levels, to exchange best practices and to establish dialogue, hopefully this year.

Asked if such cooperation would become the political backbone of the New Silk Road, he said: “Why not?”
European Council President Donald Tusk did a tour of three Central Asia countries last week, including Tajikistan, where the melting Pamir Glaciers illustrate the impact of climate change and the difficulties of water management in this part of the world.

Tusk visited Tajikistan on 30 May, Kazakhstan on 31 May and Uzbekistan on 1 June. The visit comes two weeks after the Commission tabled its new strategy for the region, setting out a fresh vision for a stronger partnership with the five countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

An important element of this strategy, which is expected to be adopted at the ministerial level this month, is water resilience.

Central Asia is facing increasingly severe environmental challenges. The combined impact of climate change, which has started to reduce water flows by shrinking the glaciers that feed Central Asian rivers, and rapid population growth is likely to exacerbate some of the region’s problems, with implications for economic development, security and migration.

The EU is offering help to the region to turn these challenges into opportunities.

Tusk is the first Council president to visit Tajikistan, a mountainous country bordering Afghanistan.

Continued on Page 8
The Council president praised his host, the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, for his role in the political stabilisation of Tajikistan and the whole region. “Because of geography, your efforts are much more important than only in this local, regional context. In fact, today, your efforts, your activities, impact also in a global context,” Tusk stressed.

After a visit to Sarez lake, Tusk said he was impressed by the beauty but also by the visible impact of climate change.

“This is not only a major concern for your country, but for the region and the whole world. The EU remains committed to fighting climate change. And I am sure Tajikistan will be the best partner in this,” the Council President said.

Tajikistan, just like Kyrgyzstan, is an "upstream" country, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are “downstream” countries. Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most populous country, depends on the rivers that rise in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to irrigate farmland.

Under the former leader of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, the Rogun dam in Tajikistan was seen almost as a “casus belli”.

But under the new leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, regional cooperation in the region was resuscitated. In Tashkent, Tusk praised Mirziyoyev for playing “a big role in the much-improved cooperation in the region”.

In Kazakhstan, which is preparing for a presidential election, Tusk discussed with the incumbent President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev the ongoing political transition, since the first Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, stepped down last March.

The country has concluded with the EU an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which is soon to be ratified by all EU member states and which the EU is already implementing.

“This is also a good basis to address regional challenges, like violent extremism or environmental issues”, Tusk said.
Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together. Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have renewed this role for the region since attaining independence. EU-Central Asia relations have developed significantly over recent years, as illustrated by the new-generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements signed with Kazakhstan and under negotiation with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Central Asia’s strategic geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia against the backdrop of renewed efforts to promote Euro-Asian connectivity, its share in EU energy imports and the market potential of seventy million inhabitants, as well as the EU’s interest in regional security, have made Central Asia an increasingly important partner for the European Union. In May 2019, the EU has set out a fresh strategic vision for its partnership with Central Asia.

New EU Strategy on Central Asia

Stronger, Modern & Broad Partnership

Investing in Regional Cooperation

- Moving towards common rules and a more integrated regional market
- Tackling common challenges such as environmental degradation and terrorism
- Stepping up cooperation with Central Asian partners to promote peace in Afghanistan

Partnering for Resilience

- Strengthening Central Asian countries so they can overcome internal & external challenges
- Supporting the delivery of successful reforms
- Closer cooperation on promoting human rights and the rule of law
- Turning environmental challenges into opportunities
- Sharing know-how on renewable energy and energy efficiency

Partnering for Prosperity

- Developing a competitive private sector and promoting an open investment environment
- Fostering research and innovation with a focus on skills development for youth
- Promoting sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity
- Supporting economic modernisation
- Leading supporter of the accession of Central Asian states to the World Trade Organization
The EU has allocated €1.1 billion to development cooperation with Central Asia for 2014-2020, including over €454 million for regional programmes, of which €115 million is for Erasmus+. These regional programmes promote cooperation in the areas of sustainable development and regional security. The new EU Strategy will also guide the programming of EU development cooperation and assistance.

**KEY DATES**

- **1990s**: EU’s engagement with Central Asia has significantly expanded since the early 1990s. EU adopted its first Strategy on Central Asia that established a regular political dialogue and enhanced cooperation in key initiatives including the rule of law, education and environment.
- **2007**: EU and its Member States reaffirmed their commitment to develop a strong and durable relationship with Central Asia. Joint Communication on “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” was adopted by the European Commission and the High Representative.
- **2019**:

**FOCUS OF CURRENT SUPPORT**

- Cooperating on energy, water, environment and the use of natural resources
- Supporting socio-economic development
- Addressing the needs of a rapidly growing young population through new jobs
- Enabling a better response to climate change
- Strengthening the rule of law and legal capacity
- Building cooperation through integrated border management
- Intensifying the fight against organised crime and trafficking
- Supporting drug demand reduction, prevention and health aspects of drug use
- Stimulating regional exchanges on competitiveness and the business environment
- Growing intra-regional trade and linking up with the global value chain
- Promoting job creation through the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises

**SUPPORTING EDUCATION IN PARTICULAR**

- **Since 2015**, 5,544 short-term EU placements have been awarded to students and staff from Central Asia.
- **Between 2014-2018**, more than 250 two-year Master-level scholarships were awarded to students from Central Asia under the Erasmus Mundus programme.
- **69 projects** have so far been selected since 2014 involving Central Asian higher education institutions focusing on curriculum development and modernisation.
- Providing substantial support to Vocational Education and Training.

The EU’s engagement with Central Asia has significantly expanded since the early 1990s. EU adopted its first Strategy on Central Asia that established a regular political dialogue and enhanced cooperation in key initiatives including the rule of law, education and environment.

EU and its Member States reaffirmed their commitment to develop a strong and durable relationship with Central Asia. Joint Communication on “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” was adopted by the European Commission and the High Representative.
Iran-US tensions dominate two Central Asia summits

By Agata Palickova | EURACTIV.com

Two regional summits held in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan last week had a common denominator: the support from Russia and China to Iran in the face of US threats after two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping and the other leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan – attended the annual summit of this organisation in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on 14 June.

The eight-member group is a political, economic and security alliance led by China and Russia, which represents 43% of the global world population. Their members create strategic alliances and are supposed to support each other.

The group is open to forge new trade ties in the Central Asian region and build a common counter-terrorism strategy. But there are continued differences that cause rivalry in the group – between India and Pakistan or between China and Russia, which are both trying to reinforce their influence in Asia.

The outcome of the summit was a declaration calling for greater cooperation and sustaining security in the region.

**ROHANI: US IS “A SERIOUS RISK TO STABILITY”**

Iran has observer status in the Shanghai group whose summit was attended by the country’s President, Hassan Rohani.

In his speech, Rohani refuted US allegations that Iran was involved

Continued on Page 12
in the attacks on a Japanese and a Norwegian oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman. He then described the USA as a threat to global stability.

“The US government over the last two years, is violating all the international structures and rules. Using its economic, financial and military resources, it has taken an aggressive approach and presents a serious risk to stability in the region and the world,” Rohani said.

Rohani found support from China and Russia, which both have heavy agendas with the USA. The US military released a video with poor resolution, which showed a crew allegedly from an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) patrol boat removing an unexploded mine from the side of one of the ships. Rohani denied any connection with the attacks.

Russia takes over the SCO chairmanship and the next summit will be held in Chelyabinsk on 22-23 July 2020.

Central Asian leaders then flew to Dushanbe, the capital of neighbouring state Tajikistan, for the 5th summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), on 15 June. The CICA is an Asian regional grouping for enhancing cooperation, promoting peace and common development. Currently, the organisation has 27 members.

In presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Rohani repeated the ultimatum he made in May: Iran will continue to pull back from its nuclear commitments unless other countries protect it from American sanctions.

“It is obvious that Iran cannot unilaterally remain committed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and it is necessary that other countries contribute to the survival of this important agreement,” Rohani told participants at the summit.

“With our good will and strategic tolerance on one hand and the US lawlessness on the other hand, [Iran] has decided to reduce its obligations under the plan of action to restore a balance,” he said.

This nuclear agreement restricts Iran’s ability to enrich uranium in return from relief from US-led sanctions, but the Trump’s administration unilaterally withdrew from the deal last year.

The CICA summit addressed issues of security, including counter-terrorism and the situation of Palestine, which was highlighted in the final declaration. CICA questioned its own possible role on the matter, referring to the UN’s long history of failure in finding a solution to the conflict.

“We see it as necessary to resume negotiations on the Middle East peace process in order to achieve a two-state solution based on international law, the relevant UN resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative, for two sovereign states to live side by side in peace, harmony, comfort and security,” the declaration says.

**ERDOĞAN: RUSSIAN MISSILE ISSUE “IS SETTLED”**

Several bilateral meetings were also held after the summit, where Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan talked with Vladimir Putin about the purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. US-Turkey tensions have mounted in recent months because the Russian missiles are not compatible with NATO’s own defence system.

“We discussed the S-400 subject with Russia. Indeed, the S-400 issue is settled,” said Erdoğan on his way from Tajikistan to reporters. He also expects the first missiles will arrive in July.

US acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan this month outlined how Turkey would be pulled out of the F-35 fighter jet program unless Ankara changed course from its plans to buy the Russian missile system.

The summit in Dushanbe coincided with the birthday of China’s President Xi Jinping, to whom his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin offered boxes of Russian ice cream.
The EU is a natural partner for Central Asia

By Federica Mogherini and Neven Mimica

In our highly interconnected world of today, Europe and Central Asia have never been so close, and neither have the potential benefits of working even more closely together been so evident, write Federica Mogherini and Neven Mimica.

Federica Mogherini is the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy & Vice-President of the European Commission and Neven Mimica is the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development. This opinion article was first published with The Astana Times.

We are witnessing a time of important change for Central Asia. Central Asian states are opening up, implementing reforms, and advancing regional cooperation among themselves. They have become stronger through increased independence and inter-dependence. In short, Central Asia’s political importance is now reflecting its geographical place as pivotal partner for the East and for the West, although many challenges still remain.

In this new, positive political context, the European Union – with all EU member states behind it – has...
Continued from Page 13

devised a new approach to its relations with Central Asia. Our new strategy focuses on supporting the region’s resilience and prosperity, building on our extensive existing cooperation, to create a modern EU-Central Asia partnership for the benefit of our citizens.

The European Union is a natural partner for the region. We have a history that has convinced us of the benefits of cooperation and integration with our neighbours, and we can share this experience without playing political games.

We want to support the countries of Central Asia in becoming more resilient, whether societally, economically, or environmentally. This means strengthening independent media, opening space for civil society, reinforcing the rule of law and good governance, combating corruption, and empowering youth.

We also want to contribute to the region’s prosperity. The EU, as the largest source of private investment worldwide, has the potential to bring significant quality investment in sustainable connectivity projects in Central Asia, provided a sound business climate is in place. To that end, the EU will continue to support the reform and modernisation of the economies of the region, including the development of a strong private sector. The EU also remains a key supporter of the accession of all Central Asian states to the World Trade Organisation.

Besides these two pillars, the European Union and Central Asia will look to work together more closely to connect our two regions, as well as to enhance links within Central Asia itself, making sure that this is done in a sustainable, open and rules-based way that avoids indebtedness or poor quality infrastructure.

Similarly, the European Union will partner with Central Asia to face the many challenges that no single country can address alone, ranging from the environment, including water management, border management to the fight against terrorism and trafficking of illicit drugs.

Peace in Afghanistan is another challenge that requires the active support of the international community, including Central Asian partners. Integrating Afghanistan as appropriate in relevant regional meetings and programmes, and supporting more regional and trilateral cooperation projects with Afghan and Central Asian partners, will therefore remain a priority in our joint work.

This weekend in Bishkek, the European Union and the Central Asian states will hold our annual regional meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers. The European Union’s message will be that our cooperation can bring real, tangible benefits to citizens in the region and in the EU, from stronger and diversified economies, more opportunities for students to experience Europe, more job opportunities, and a more peaceful, secure region for all. In today’s world, we need a stronger partnership between our two regions. Let us work together to achieve it.