

The University of World Economy and Diplomacy

Institute for Advanced  
International Studies

**IAIS Policy Compass**

Volume 1. Issue 6

# A Rift in the Transatlantic Strategy Towards Central Asia

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# A Rift in the Transatlantic Strategy Towards Central Asia

*Darius Riazi & Alexander Schrier*

The coordinated approach from the [“transatlantic alliance”](#) that once characterized European and American engagement in Central Asia has splintered in the wake of the election of President Donald Trump’s administration. While the United States (US) and European Union (EU) previously operated with aligned strategic objectives in the region, Trump has accelerated a divergence that has profound implications for Central Asian states navigating great power competition and preserving their multi-vector foreign policy.

Since the independence of the Central Asian Five (C5), the US and EU pursued largely complementary foreign policy strategies in Central Asia. Despite tactical differences — with EU countries emphasizing transportation and connectivity while the US played a larger security role — their strategic objectives remained fundamentally aligned: hedging against Russian and Chinese influence, securing access to the region’s natural resources, and the promotion of democracy and human rights.

The 2024 US presidential election marked a seismic shift in this coordinated transatlantic approach. President Trump’s inauguration in January 2025 has not only strained transatlantic relations broadly but altered America’s strategic posture toward regions where it had long-standing engagements. Even Dr. Frederick Starr, one of the most distinguished American scholars of Central Asia, acknowledged in his 2025 report that the US must reimagine its approach to the C5. He advocates for a [“Greater Central Asia”](#) strategy — one that includes Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Mongolia — while urging the US to promote private-sector development, support national elites, emphasize security, and adopt a region-wide focus. Thus, Central Asia, once viewed through a similar strategic lens by Washington and Brussels, has now become a region where divergent transatlantic approaches play out.

What are the emerging US and EU strategies in Central Asia? How do they differ from past approaches and from each other, and where do they converge? This report addresses these questions by examining contemporary EU and US strategies toward Central Asia, analyzing their similarities and differences, assessing global implications, and recommending a C5 response.

## THE EU'S APPROACH TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA: FROM MODEST ENGAGEMENT TO THE ADVENT OF A MATURED AND CLEAR COOPERATION ROADMAP

In 1995, the EU released its first policy [document](#) outlining its relationship with the newly independent C5, signaling its geopolitical and economic interest in the region. Thirty years later, the geopolitical context of 2025 is markedly more volatile. What also defines the present moment, however, is a shared determination — both from the EU and the Central Asian states grouped under the C5 format — to forge a diverse and effective partnership. Anchored in the EU's 2019 Strategy on Central Asia, the current cooperation roadmap prioritizes a broad range of [sectors](#), including transport infrastructure, raw materials and rare earth development, green transition projects, and agriculture.

### *The Imperative of Connectivity*

Located strategically between Europe and China, connectivity is a priority for the C5 in their ambition to become a trade hub and connect East to West. In support of this goal, Brussels has pledged €10 billion to develop the [Trans-Caspian International Transport Route \(TITR\)](#) — also known as the Middle Corridor — which connects China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. For the EU, this [corridor holds significant strategic value](#), enhancing links with Central Asia while bypassing Russian territory — a critical consideration given its own efforts to diversify away from Russia. The expansion of the TITR may also benefit China, which remains deeply economically engaged in Central Asia and eager to expand trade with [Europe](#) amid American protectionism.

### *EU-Central Asia Cooperation on Critical Minerals and the Green Transition*

As with connectivity, the energy and green transition sectors are of strategic importance to both the EU and Central Asia, which view each other as complementary partners in efforts to diversify import and export markets. Brussels is working to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and is actively pursuing alternative sources of rare earths and [critical](#) raw materials — resources essential to the green transition and found in abundance across Central Asia. In turn, the C5 seek to strengthen their domestic industries by leveraging European technology and expertise. Key EU members, [including France](#), have already launched cooperative initiatives with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The EU's leadership in low-carbon energy technologies positions it as a credible and capable partner for Central Asia.

### *Samarkand Summit 2025: The EU's "Third Way" Approach*

The EU's strategy in Central Asia reached a new milestone with the landmark April 3 EU–Central Asia summit, which underscored the growing strength of this once-nascent partnership. Long [anticipated](#) and preceded by high-level visits from the heads of state and government of France, Italy, and Germany, the Samarkand Summit produced tangible outcomes: the two sides elevated their ties to a “strategic partnership,” and EU leaders pledged €12 billion to advance cooperation across key sectors — including



[connectivity](#), energy, the green transition, education, and regional security. As part of its broader Global Gateway initiative, the European Investment Bank signed additional bilateral agreements totaling €135 million for infrastructure and environmental projects. Shortly after the summit, Uzbekistan announced it would host the next Central Asia–EU Economic Forum this [November](#).

The summit was also timely for another reason. Just one day prior on April 2, US President Donald Trump unveiled his sweeping round of [reciprocal tariffs](#) — marking an escalation of his protectionist economic agenda and dealing a potential blow to the multilateral trading system. Against this backdrop, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen used the Samarkand stage to draw a sharp contrast. “As we meet here today,” she declared, “we are at another turning point. [New](#) global barriers arise, investments are being re-directed or cut. Powers around the world are carving out new spheres of influence. But here in Samarkand, we show there is another way.” Her remarks encapsulate the EU’s emerging strategy in Central Asia: one grounded in multilateralism, open connectivity, and in preserving a liberal international order. This is also supported by the EU’s Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus program, which incentivizes developing countries to pursue sustainable development and good governance through reducing the EU’s own tariffs and import restrictions — benefits that have been extended to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the “third way” offers a clear divergence from the increasingly transactional approach emanating from Washington — raising critical questions about the direction of US-C5 relations.

## THE US AND “AMERICA FIRST”

While the future of US-C5 relations remains uncertain, Trump’s first 100 days have given hints at what the relationship may look like in the next four years. Thus far, Trump has underscored his desire to pursue transactional, bilateral relations, and de-emphasized the role of American liberal-democratic programs, such as [suspending](#) nearly all of USAID’s programs in the region. These new facets of US foreign policy have already produced mixed outcomes for the C5 and prompted a swift shift in their foreign policy toward the US.

### *Transactional Diplomacy*

Bilateral transactionalism is the centerpiece of Trump-style US foreign policy. In other words, Trump prefers to conduct relations on a state-to-state basis and come out with deals, which in his eyes are concrete foreign policy wins. This alternative style of diplomacy may reduce the role of the multilateral C5+1 format in US-C5 relations, which under then President Biden played a much larger role. Biden was in fact the first US president to meet with all C5 leaders under the [C5+1](#) format. Although Secretary of State Marco [Rubio](#) has expressed interest in advancing the C5+1, the forum is more likely to be used for cooperation on rare earth extraction — such as the 2024 C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue — and for business initiatives through the B5+1 format, rather than for diplomatic issues like security and trade.



Today, there are already several examples of bilateral transactionalism on display in Central Asia which do away with the C5+1 format. On April 2, Trump announced “reciprocal” tariffs on nearly all countries, including a sweeping 10% tariff on all C5 albeit [Kazakhstan](#), which was hit with a 27% tariff. Since then, Trump has imposed a 90-day suspension on the 27% tariff in order to negotiate new trade deals with all countries. Such negotiations are traditionally supposed to be handled via the World Trade Organization, or in the C5 case the C5+1 forum. Instead, Kazakhstan announced that it was sending its own trade delegation to Washington to negotiate a deal, likely leveraging its abundant rare earth minerals to entice the Trump administration to grant them more [favorable](#) terms.

In a separate instance, the Uzbek [government](#) recently financed the full deportation of 131 citizens of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan from New York to Tashkent to demonstrate its role in tackling immigration — a crucial piece to Trump’s domestic agenda. Illegal immigration to the US is a C5-wide issue, one in which Uzbekistan’s unilateral action suggests that responses will be handled bilaterally rather than regionally.

Overall, bilateral transactionalism has not altered the C5 relationship with the US to a significant degree. The US still expresses great interest in Central Asia’s rare earth deposits, seeks to hedge against Russia and China through the C5+1 forum — even though the forum itself may be more focused on business — and will continue collaboration on migration. The C5 response has been prompt; they have been largely non-confrontational, especially with respect to tariffs, and has taken shape through bilateral engagement with the US, primarily on rare earth production and migration. Thus, while bilateral transactionalism may have a larger impact on other regions, its impact on Central Asia will not severely alter current relations downward.

### ***The Decline of US Liberal-Democratic Programs***

Bilateral transactionalism may yield some positive results in Central Asia, but cuts to American liberal-democratic programs in the C5 are already producing adverse consequences. Including funding NGOs and civil society groups, the US [mainly](#) advanced its liberal-democratic agenda through USAID, which as of 2023 had over \$225 million of projects in Central Asia ranging from health programs to peace and security, to education and social services, to democratic/human rights governance programs. According to [Sandefur and Kenny](#), the Trump administration has cancelled all of the USAID programs in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while 78% and 69% of funds are cut to programs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively.

[Some](#) of the major projects to be severed include regional water management projects, combating tuberculosis in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and civil society development in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. As development remains a key focus for the C5, losing US support could seriously hinder their progress. Moreover, as US support diminishes, the C5 may be compelled to increase their reliance on China to address development gaps, building on existing Belt and Road Initiative projects. China has already begun filling the [void](#) left by reduced USAID funding in countries such as Rwanda and Cambodia.





In an interview with [gazeta.uz](https://gazeta.uz), US Ambassador to Uzbekistan Jonathan Henick pushed back against accusations of reduced US support for human rights and democracy promotion, stating that instead “there will be a different approach to those issues,” likely framed through the lens of national security and economics. However, he acknowledged that the USAID cuts are part of a broader global reduction by the US and may be reversed, as they are currently under review. Still, this shift away from the traditional US liberal-democratic agenda represents a significant restructuring of US foreign policy in Central Asia and could result in losses for both the US — as China is poised to fill the empty space — and the C5, which may face greater challenges advancing their development goals.

## **IS THERE STILL A COMMON TRANSATLANTIC STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA?**

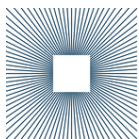
The diverging strategies from the US and EU complicate selling a case for a transatlantic strategy in Central Asia. While some facets of the US-EU agenda overlap — rare earth cooperation, counter Russia and China, and business deals — there are many large differences that separate the US from what used to be a transatlantic agenda. The US now practices bilateral transactionalism under a realist prism of diplomacy; the EU seeks to promote cooperation under a region-to-region framework, stick to the promotion of the liberal-democratic agenda, and increase connectivity.

We recommend that C5 governments recognize that the US and EU maintain distinct regional agendas and should not be approached as a unified transatlantic bloc. The C5 states have already begun adapting their engagement strategies to address US and EU priorities on separate terms. Continuing this differentiated diplomatic approach would be advisable as a means of preserving both US and EU influence within the broader C5 multi-vector foreign policy framework, which strategically balances competing state interests.

Central Asia is not the only region where the notion of a common transatlantic strategy has fragmented. In Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, EU and US diplomatic approaches are increasingly deviating. Countries in these regions may find it advantageous to adapt their foreign policy frameworks to the current geopolitical landscape while also reinforcing regionalism as a hedge against an emerging multipolar order marked by great power competition over spheres of influence. The geopolitical paradigm has shifted, and nations will likely need to recalibrate their diplomatic strategies to accommodate this new international order.

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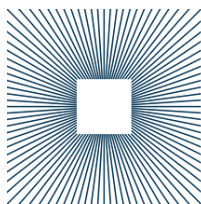
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