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– Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia

Delegations will find attached Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia as adopted by the Council (Foreign Affairs) on 22 June 2015.

Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia

Foreign Affairs Council, 22 June 2015

1. Considering Central Asia as a region of strategic importance, the European Union has committed to establish a strong, durable and stable relationship with the five Central Asian countries. Eight years after the adoption of the Central Asia Strategy, the Council welcomes the substantial progress achieved in developing the EU's relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as with the Central Asian region as a whole. Highlighting the significant mutual interest in increased political and economic cooperation, the Council reaffirms the EU's commitment to a relationship based on the principles of responsibility and ownership, which is aimed at fostering the stable, secure and sustainable development of the region.
2. The main objectives and priority areas of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia remain pertinent. In implementing the Strategy the EU will take into account the lessons learnt and the changes in the region as well as the altering geopolitical situation around it. The Council calls for strengthening trade and energy links between the EU and Central Asian countries and reinforcing cooperation on security and stability, including sustainable management of natural resources. It emphasises the fundamental importance of democratisation, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and socio-economic development, all of which are essential elements of the Strategy.
3. The Council welcomes the appointment of Ambassador Peter Burian as the new EU Special Representative for Central Asia. His role is to act as an important channel of dialogue and communication at the highest level with the central Asian countries, to promote overall Union political coordination in Central Asia and enhance the Union's effectiveness and visibility in the region.

4. The Council particularly welcomes the conclusion of negotiations and initialling of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kazakhstan. The Council also recognizes that the entry into force of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Turkmenistan would help develop the full potential of this relationship. The Council notes the importance of upgrading the EEAS Liaison Office in Ashgabat into a full-fledged EU Delegation in Turkmenistan as soon as possible.
5. The Council emphasises that, more than in the past, the depth of relations will also depend on the ambitions and needs of individual Central Asian countries to take forward our bilateral relationships. The EU will take full account of the growing differences in socio-economic development and ambition to engage in cooperation with Europe between the five countries. In some cooperation areas this will require re-assessing the balance between regional and bilateral engagements to achieve more concrete results and reforms. The existing regional initiatives and cooperative platforms should be continued, in particular in sectors which require common solutions. More flexibility on a demand-driven basis, not necessarily always involving all five Central Asian countries, could increase even further the impact and effectiveness of EU programmes and cooperation frameworks in the coming period.
6. The Council stresses the need to improve synergies and coordination between the actions undertaken in the region by the different EU actors, including by individual Member states. The latter should get a more prominent role in the implementation of EU projects, dialogues and platforms and in evaluating their impact and promoting their visibility. Good examples are the program for Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP), as well as the platforms for regional cooperation.

7. The Council points to the favourable conditions for further EU action, created by the substantial increase in the global envelope for EU bilateral and regional cooperation with Central Asia for the programming period 2014-20 (1,068 bn Euro; +56 % compared to 2007-2013). It welcomes the adoption in 2014 of multi-annual indicative programmes for the Central Asia region and each eligible Central Asian country. Sound and efficient implementation of these programmes based on this enlarged global envelope is of crucial importance for the continued success of the Strategy. The regular evaluation of programmes in specific areas will ensure that any necessary adjustments are made.
8. The Council reaffirms the crucial importance of good governance, in particular the need to strengthen the capacity of public administration and local authorities to promote sustainable economic and social development and the transparent management of public resources in Central Asia. Inclusive development that promotes the well-being of all layers of society, including through the empowerment of women, is an essential component of longer-term stability and resilience of the countries and the EU is committed to supporting its partners in this regard. This involves not only promoting respect for human rights in the region, including through the human rights dialogues with the five countries of the region, but also in prioritising even further the Rule of Law cooperation in the EU Strategy. In this context, synergies and partnerships should be sought notably with the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, including its Venice Commission. The EU is also determined to support Central Asian countries in their strategies to fight corruption and to link European programmes, notably budget support programmes, to specific anti-corruption measures.

9. The EU will also further enhance its efforts to address the serious challenges to human rights in the region, including by maintaining and deepening the human rights dialogues with the five countries, and by continuing to provide extensive support for reforms. Implementation of the countries' commitments regarding Universal Periodic Reviews and the situation of human rights defenders deserve special attention and support by the EU. The EU's priorities will include notably promoting respect for freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, promoting the rights of women, children and persons belonging to minorities and supporting efforts to eradicate torture. A more inclusive work with civil society should also help make EU support to human rights and democratisation more effective and result-oriented. The Council calls for a deeper involvement of civil society in the dialogues and programmes related to the implementation of the Strategy.
10. The EU has a greater role to play in promoting a reliable and attractive investment climate, together with stability of the legal framework, transparency, a functioning social partnership, interconnections with the international business community and regional integration, thus building on progress in WTO accessions. A specific dialogue with EU companies investing in Central Asia should also be organised to discuss how the Central Asian countries can become more attractive to investment from EU businesses and how the EU can promote responsible business conduct and corporate governance. The Council also stresses the need to increase exchange of experience and know-how in innovative technologies, notably in the field of energy efficiency, agriculture and rural development, to encourage the sustainable development of the region.

11. The region faces a number of emerging security challenges linked to foreign fighters and radicalisation towards violent extremism, which compound already existing threats to stability posed by water and border disputes, drug trafficking and organised crime and conflicts in the wider region, especially in Afghanistan. The Council reiterates the EU's determination to further develop both regional and bilateral security dialogues with the Central Asian countries, ensuring stronger involvement of Afghanistan, and building upon existing successful EU programmes in the areas of migration, border management, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, including strengthening cooperation across the border. The Council recognises the importance of coordination with regional partners involved in conflict-prevention and security activities such as the OSCE and the UN, in particular the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).
12. Regarding the sensitive area of shared natural resources, notably water, the Council stresses the importance of promoting regional frameworks of dialogue and increased adhesion to international conventions and legal principles governing trans-boundary resources. Underlining that Central Asia is particularly exposed to natural disasters and vulnerable to the climate change, the Council invites the Commission and the EEAS to support Central Asian countries in strengthening their capacity to address environmental challenges, promote a sustainable framework for resource-sharing and integrate disaster risk reduction, resilience, climate adaptation and mitigation in local, national and regional policies. The EU and its Member States should continue their support for regional initiatives in this sector, notably the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS).

13. EU education programmes, in particular the Erasmus+ programme, should play a key role in helping Central Asian institutions to build capacity, modernise and broaden their cooperation networks and individuals to gain international experience. Scholarships to support mobility and cooperation between Europe and Central Asia should be further promoted. Ensuring links between education, research and labour markets will further promote innovation and employment for young people and contribute to the sustainable economic development of the region. The Council invites the Commission to design, in cooperation with the Central Asian partners, strategies to respond to the dynamics of labour markets and changes in migrant worker patterns in order to minimise unemployment through the promotion of entrepreneurship and by promoting the employability and empowerment of young people, women and persons belonging to minorities.
14. In order to support better interconnections of the Central Asian countries with both their immediate neighbours and partners further afield, such as the European Union, the EU will take into account existing regional synergies and links with neighbouring countries in implementing its Strategy, thus recognising the strategic position of the Central Asian countries and possibilities to promote regional stability through stronger trade links. The Council thus encourages sharing European standards, experience and best practices in specific sectors, in accordance with the interest and level of ambition of individual Central Asian countries.
15. Regarding the energy and transport sectors, the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia should prioritise the integration of the Central Asian countries among and between each other and into international markets and corridors. The EU will continue to seek to expand the Southern Energy Corridor to Central Asia and to further promote the EU's multilateral energy initiatives. The EU also stands prepared to support the development of renewable energy and energy efficiency in Central Asia, including through the implementation of cost-reflecting energy tariffs to spur a rational use of energy. The EU is ready to offer its experience and know-how to promote the adoption of high safety, security and environmental standards in all transport modes and to facilitate links along the Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia transport corridor. Energy and transport cooperation with Central Asia should also build upon existing synergies with the relevant initiatives in the Neighbourhood programme.

16. The EU should continue to enhance its efforts to promote dialogue with the relevant regional and international organisations, in particular the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the UN and others, as well as neighbours of the Central Asian countries and other states active in the region, with a view to seeking synergies between our respective policies and initiatives on such issues as security, inter-connectivity, transport, energy and sustainable development, including possibilities arising from “silk road” initiatives.
 17. The European Union remains committed to its strategic objectives in Central Asia and as elaborated by the Central Asia Strategy, with due regard to evolving conditions and building on the achievements of the last eight years. In view of the growing differentiation in the region and in order to address the important areas highlighted in these Conclusions, the Council encourages the EEAS and the Commission to come forward with proposals for effective implementation of the Strategy in accordance with the needs for a renewed partnership with the region.
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