

Central Asia: At last Europe may be getting its act together



The German presidency is setting its sights on a new EU strategy for relations with the five central Asian republics. **Hedi Wegener**, who chairs the German-central Asian group in the Bundestag, assesses the difficulties and sets out a roadmap

Now that it's on watch as EU president, Germany is hoping to transform Europe's patchwork of relations with the five central Asian states into a more strategic one that could help to stabilise this volatile region. The stakes are high; regional oil and gas reserves are coveted by China and Russia as well as by Europe, and security threats from Islamist extremists and from the narcotics trade have now spilled from adjacent Afghanistan into these former-Soviet republics.

Germany's initiative is long overdue. When Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the USSR 15 years ago, these nations barely registered on Europe's political radar. European activity in the region was rather aimless, unplanned and uncoordinated. Even in Germany, the only EU country with a diplomatic mission in all five states, bilateral relations with them were the preserve of specialists. America, initially

welcomed in the region as an alternative to "big brother" Russia, soon alienated its new allies through its heavy-handed insistence on democracy and human rights, allowing Russia and China to revitalise their contacts with the autocratic regimes.

The five republics were left under the rule of autocratic presidents who, according to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), hold neither free nor fair elections although there has been a little progress in the last years. National parliaments are powerless to scrutinise government actions or control budgets; in all five, the state distrusts the citizens and paralyzes civil society through restrictive bureaucracy.

Despite vast reserves of raw materials in the region, economic development has been patchy, with only the oil-rich Kazakhs sharing in the national wealth. Growth elsewhere has been stunted by widespread

dirigism and an absence of the rule of law that hinders both foreign investment and home-grown enterprise. No more than lip-service is paid to regional cooperation, and the infrastructure that was built in Soviet times is today being dismantled.

But after a decade of international neglect, the West's strategic interest in central Asia was abruptly rekindled by 9/11. The terrorist outrages in New York and Washington, along with subsequent bombings in Madrid and London, pushed the threat of Islamist extremism to the top of the international security agenda and brought the central Asian republics into sharp focus. As neighbours of Afghanistan, they too have to contend with drug trafficking and Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, soaring global energy prices have in recent years made central Asian oil and gas reserves all the more valuable, with secure access to these supplies increasingly a political and economic priority for EU countries.

Now that the strategic importance of central Asia is so abundantly clear, it is crucial that EU members should pull together to safeguard their shared security and energy interests in the region. This means, first and foremost, promoting peace and stability which, from a European perspective, requires the working democracies, the rule of law and efforts to improve the economic well-being of each of the states' population. A joint EU strategy for cooperation with the five republics is of critical importance if progress is to be made toward these policy goals. A new joint strategy is scheduled to be developed and adopted during the German presidency.

COMMENTARY

By **Svante E. Cornell**

So far, Europe's approach to central Asia has been moralistic and counter-productive

Europe not only has identifiable interests in central Asia but also the potential to influence the region. Yet Europe has also been conspicuously absent from central Asia as to most European policymakers central Asia has been seen as an underdeveloped and largely authoritarian backwater. Until 9/11 Europe kept its political distance from the region.

Since late 2001, Europe has acquired a security interest in the region, mainly because of European countries' involvement in NATO military operations in Afghanistan, together with their interest in the energy resources of central Asia as pressure mounts to diversify Europe's energy suppliers. But European politicians' attempts to engage the central Asian states has also led to accusations that Europe is selling out its values and interacting with "dictatorial" regimes.

Criticisms of this sort have done much to brake the development of relations with central Asian countries, since they introduce political risk while the benefits of closer relations are not clear to all. There is now a vocal human rights lobby that seeks the isolation of the central

The EU countries' own history of growth and stability through regional integration is the best example that central Asia could follow. Of course, Europe's development couldn't be adopted wholesale, but many of its building blocks could be adapted to local conditions. Supporting regional cooperation over water supply in the five republics could be a first step for the EU's new central Asian strategy, given water's enormous potential for conflict there. We Europeans believe that a functioning democracy is the best guarantee of long-term social and political stability. And the central Asian republics need help to meet what we would see as the minimum requirements of a democracy – free elections, freedom of opinion, a free press and an independent judiciary. The EU's support could therefore begin with advice

on drafting legislation for political parties, encouraging civil society, training journalists and highlighting the legitimate role of opposition politicians. Germany is already actively promoting democratic developments through such political foundations as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Bundestag friendship groups, and these examples could usefully be built upon.

EU programmes should also reinforce the rule of law as yet another essential pre-condition for a fully-fledged democracy. Governments in the region need to understand that only an independent judiciary can guarantee respect for human rights, and that only a functioning legal system can protect property rights and so attract foreign investment.

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Respect for human rights must also be part of the joint EU strategy, but it is worth repeating that only dialogue will bring about positive change. EU governments are constantly being called on to sever contacts with central Asian governments because of human rights violations, and this is particularly true of Germany's links with Uzbekistan in the wake of Tashkent's violent suppression of a demonstration in the eastern city of Andijan in 2005. But it would be wrong to stop talking, because only dialogue can contribute to positive change.

Promoting the rule of law will, though, help to tackle the sort of everyday corruption that fosters injustice and hampers economic growth. Economic measures that support pro-market reforms are also an indispensable way of ensuring long-term stability and growth, and they should include a new emphasis on commercial cooperation with European companies and on better business training.

The EU's programmes also need to be aimed at developing basic education in all five republics, helping to extend education to 10 years of schooling as the very minimum, while also encouraging skills training and access to modern media. Improved higher education and university cooperation would not only enhance economic and political development within the region, but could also serve EU strategic interests if tomorrow's central Asian leaders were educated either in Europe, or a curriculum analogue to a European.

Ethnic and religious conflicts also present deep-rooted problems that central Asia

Asian states and argues loudly for sanctions to be imposed on them for failing to comply with democratic standards. European business activities in the region have also been routinely blamed for giving support to corrupt practices.

Europe's tendency to point the finger of political disapproval at these new and weak states for their shortcomings has yet to generate any positive results. On the contrary, the break in 2005 between Uzbekistan and the West led to the dramatic worsening of an already problematic situation in that country, and the EU's decision to slam sanctions on Uzbek officials has since proved immensely counter-productive.

Russia, and to some extent China, eagerly exploits ideological western policies as a means to steer the central Asian states away from the West. Moscow's ambition is clearly to minimise the western presence and influence in the region, and so reassert its own dominance. Its aim also seems to be to gobble up the region's energy resources at low prices to resell to Europe at great profit, in what looks like a neo-colonial form of exploitation.

As Hedi Wegener rightly concludes, Europe's policies have been counter-productive. Isolating central Asia only aggravates the problems there. That is not to say these problems should be ignored; the democratic deficits and human rights violations in the region make dealing with it politically delicate.

Wegener therefore correctly argues that Europe must develop a long-term strategy. To be successful, this must be based on the conviction that Europe's energy and security

needs help to overcome. The region's historic divisions have been largely exacerbated by attempts at nation-building in the 15 years since independence, and more recently by the harsh security measures that have been widely imposed.

Although the overwhelming majority of their populations are Muslim, especially in southern areas, all five central Asian governments have been pursuing secular policies, at times rather aggressively because fears of losing power have led officials to brand all religious and political activity as Islamist extremism. The result is that alienation is growing among minority communities. Centuries of forced displacement, resettlement and flight

within the region have resulted in multiple ethnic groups in the central Asian states, while official emphasis since independence on "national identity" has fed mistrust, isolationism and feelings of discrimination among these minorities.

It would be absurd to deny that Islamist extremists sometimes present a very real security threat, but repression of all semblances of religious activity or political opposition violates basic human rights and breeds support for enemies of the state. If we Europeans believe that fundamental liberties and human rights are indivisible, then terrorism can never be used as an excuse to suppress these rights. We must therefore give our support to central Asia in opening a dialogue with Islamic forces that would strike a balance between religious needs and security interests, while also helping minorities to overcome discrimination and improve their own integration.

These six topics – regional cooperation, democratic institutions, dialogue over human rights, market reforms, improved education and resolution of ethnic and religious conflicts – could usefully form the framework of a coordinated EU approach in the region. The EU's strategy should focus on Europe's strengths, making clear to regional partners the particular advantages of cooperation with Europe rather than, say, Russia, China or the US. Europe should avoid presenting itself as an opponent of these great powers, while nevertheless emphasising the special qualities and opportunities that collaboration with the EU would bring – not least the economic benefits of trading with our single market.

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To succeed, there are two steps that Europe must first take. We need to explain how the EU operates, because, at the moment citizens of all five central Asian republics find the EU's institutions and decision-making incomprehensible. At the same time, we Europeans lack a coherent overview of our own fragmented activities in the region; we must therefore take stock of our actions and decide which programmes are competing and which are complimentary, where improvement is needed and who is best suited to the task. Vital European interests depend on the stabilisation of this fractious region. If the EU can sort out its confused approach to the five republics, and agree a joint strategy based upon a common understanding of our security and energy needs, then the German presidency's initiative on central Asia could herald a brighter future for us all. □

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ADDITIONAL READING

"Central Asia: What Role for the European Union?", Asia Report N°113, 10 April 2006, Bishkek/Brussels (<http://www.crisisgroup.org>)

"Turkmenistan: Change through Trade?", Daniel Caspary, MEP in the EurAsia Bulletin, July-August 2006, (<http://www.eias.org>)

"Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia", Kathleen Collins, 2006, Cambridge University Press

"Economic Cooperation in the Wider Central Asia Region", by William Byrd, Martin Raiser, Anton Dobronogov and Alexander Kitain, April 2006, World Bank, ISBN: 0-8213-6601-7

interests are fundamentally compatible with its desire to see positive political developments in central Asia. The view that these interests conflict with democratic ideals is fundamentally flawed. Only by engaging the central Asian states in the areas of security and energy can Europe build a relationship that will enable it to influence the region's political systems.

Two factors could be added to the useful set of principles for a European strategy that Hedi Wegener outlines. First, Europeans must take the weakness of these states into account. These are new states with institutions that are either weak or virtually non-existent. Their civil servants are underpaid, under-trained and under-equipped, with the result that power is wielded by informal networks based on region, clan, kinship or economic interest – including, in the poorest areas especially, organised crime and drug traffickers.

Democracy cannot take root without the rule of law. The western focus so far on elections and civil society has been excessive, while ignoring the reality that functioning state institutions are a sine qua non for the development of democracy. Europe must invest much greater energy in working with these countries to build state institutions. An important element of this will be to redouble interaction with central Asian parliaments to help strengthen their autonomy. □

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