

# Coherency of EU Foreign Policies Towards the USCENTCOM AOR

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## Key Points

- EU's policy towards the USCENTCOM AOR is based on its 2019 Global Strategy.
- EU's Central Asia strategy addresses sustainable energy, women's economic empowerment, education, climate change effects, and reducing the impact of regional natural disasters.
- While the EU has formal agreements with individual South Asian countries such as India and Afghanistan, its engagement with the broader region remains limited.
- The EU has not published a specific policy for the Middle East region.
- Developing a common EU policy towards the Middle East is difficult because of the divergence among EU members and Middle East countries.

## Introduction

Within the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), the European Union (EU) policies towards Central and South Asia, and the Middle East are widely different and lack a comprehensive approach. While the EU published its Central Asia strategy in 2007,<sup>1</sup> it has not released specific strategies for the South Asia and the Middle East regions. EU's 2019 Global Strategy addresses all USCENTCOM AOR regions in general terms. The strategy centers on rules-based international order, international human rights and humanitarian law.<sup>2</sup> The EU primarily limits AOR activities to the trade domain<sup>2</sup> while its bilateral relations still form the basis for most of its diplomatic actions.

It is important to understand key external actors' priorities and how they attempt to influence and engage with countries in the AOR. EU strategies impact partners and adversaries inside and outside the AOR. To gain an understanding of the objectives and potential impacts, this paper examines EU strategic policies and objectives towards Central and South Asia, and the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> Przemysław Osiewicz, The EU and the Middle East: In search of a strategy, Middle East Institute, January 24, 2019

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/eu-and-middle-east-search-strategy> (Accessed January 5, 2021). <sup>2</sup> The

European Union's Global Strategy Three Years on, looking forward, The EU, June 6, 2019, page 15

[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_global\\_strategy\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_global_strategy_2019.pdf) (Accessed January 7, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Silvia Mayr, POLICY BRIEF 9 – EU-South Asia trade perspectives: State of play, South Asia Democratic Forum, February 14, 2020

<https://www.sadf.eu/policy-brief-9-eu-south-asia-trade-perspectives-state-of-play/#post-10756-footnote-ref-9> (Accessed February 3, 2021).

## EU Central Asia Policy

The EU's interests in Central Asia stem from the region's strategic geographical location as the crossroads to Europe and Asia and as an energy resource. The EU's primary objective is for Central Asia to develop as a region of rules-based cooperation and connectivity. The Union has a longstanding relationship with the five Central Asian countries based upon energy, infrastructure development, and security interests. This relationship is based upon the EU's 2010 Investment Facility for Central Asia,<sup>3</sup> the Union's eastward expansion, and its inclusion of the Southern Caucasus within the European Neighborhood Policy.<sup>4</sup> Following the 2007 EU Strategy on Central Asia<sup>5</sup> and the adoption of the 2009 Strategy for a New Partnership, the EU and Central Asia achieved greater cooperation, and reinforced bilateral relations. Such strategies included the generation of political dialogue on human rights, along with cooperation on rule of law, border management, and drug trafficking. The EU seeks to unlock Central Asian countries' significant growth potential by helping develop a competitive private sector, promoting a sound and open investment environment and by sponsoring Central Asian states' accession to the World Trade Organization.<sup>6</sup> The EU has stated it is determined to invest in new opportunities and pursue increased cooperation within the region.<sup>7</sup>

In June 2019, the EU adopted an updated Central Asia strategy. This strategy addresses sustainable energy, women's economic empowerment, education, climate change effects, and reducing the impact of regional natural disasters.<sup>8</sup> The strategy also provides a framework to jointly address mutual socioeconomic and security goals. The framework describes the value of collaborations to enhance Central Asia's efforts in reform and modernization; promotion of democracy, human rights, and rule of law; implementation of the Paris climate commitments; tackling of trans-regional environmental challenges; and increasing cooperation on migration.

Despite the EU's comprehensive Central Asia strategy, many EU engagements with Central Asian States occur on a bilateral basis between the Union and a particular country. An example of EU bilateral engagement is Kazakhstan's commitment to the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA).<sup>9</sup> The EPCA took effect March 1, 2020, and the agreement governs trade and economic relations between the EU and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup> In July 2019, Kyrgyzstan became the second country in the region to sign a similar agreement. As in Kazakhstan,

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<sup>3</sup> The European Commission, Central Asia, Web-page, [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/central-asia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/central-asia_en) (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> The European External Action Service, The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, May 15, 2019, page 1 [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf) (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> The Permanent Representatives Committee, The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, European Council, May 31, 2001, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf> (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Affairs Council, Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia, European Council, June 17, 2019, p. 2 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, page 2 (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Central Asia (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Aigerim Seisembayeva, EP approves EU-Kazakhstan enhanced partnership agreement, The Astana Times, December 14, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/12/ep-approves-eu-kazakhstan-enhanced-partnership-agreement> (Accessed January 14, 2021). <sup>11</sup> New Europe Online, EU-Kazakhstan to deepen ties, Web-page, October 26, 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/eu-kazakhstan-to-deepen-ties/> (Accessed January 14, 2021).

the Kyrgyzstan EPCA facilitates cooperation in governance, economics, and investment, and aims to promote sustainable development.<sup>10</sup>

While the EU and Central Asian States' partnerships have moved in a positive direction, not all cooperation activities have been successful. For example, projects in Kyrgyzstan have failed to reach some of the before mentioned objectives due to inconsistent approaches, uncoordinated actions, Kyrgyzstan's economic difficulties, corruption, and a lack of effective oversight mechanisms.<sup>11</sup> Also, Central Asian States do not always prioritize objectives the EU considers important, such as gender equality in foreign and security policy. In November 2020, the EU adopted a new, ambitious Gender Action Plan, which seeks to ensure by 2050 that 85% of all new EU external actions contribute to a gender-equal world.<sup>14</sup> This goal is a low priority for the governments in Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Chinese influence also hinders consistent EU policy in Central Asia. Since the Belt and Road Initiative was launched, China has invested over \$27 B in Central Asia, compared to the EU's \$1.2 B. China also dominates four out of five Central Asian countries' share of total foreign trade. Nothing in the EU's strategy addresses countering China's dominance in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The EU's strategy also considers the key role Central Asian countries play in supporting an Afghan peace process and reconstruction. The EU and Central Asian States seek opportunities to cooperate on Afghanistan issues. The EU Council has encouraged joint political and economic engagement between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan to ensure stakeholders are invested in the peace process. The EU believes that stronger connectivity between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and South Asia is needed for peace, prosperity, and broader regional stabilization.<sup>14</sup>

### EU South Asia Policy

The EU has not yet formulated a comprehensive South Asia strategy. This lack of an overarching policy has led the EU to seek bilateral agreements with a more commercial focus. Such an approach has fostered numerous perceived biases by AOR countries.<sup>15</sup> While the EU has formal agreements with individual countries such as India

<sup>10</sup> European Parliament, EU-Kyrgyzstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Web-page, July 6, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/eu-kyrgyzstan-enhanced-partnership-and-c/product-details/20200406DPU25151> (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Nazira Momosheva, EU's growing role in Kyrgyzstan: the impact of EU's Central Asia Strategy, SEEnCA, November, 2019, <https://www.seneca-eu.net/blog/eus-growing-role-in-kyrgyzstan-the-impact-of-eus-central-asia-strategy/#> (Accessed January 19, 2021). <sup>14</sup> The European Union External Action Services, Opportunities of advancing women's rights in Kazakhstan and Europe: lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, Web-page, December 10, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-centralasia/90322/opportunities-advancing-women%E2%80%99s-rights-kazakhstan-and-europe-lessons-learned-during-covid-19\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-centralasia/90322/opportunities-advancing-women%E2%80%99s-rights-kazakhstan-and-europe-lessons-learned-during-covid-19_en) (Accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Asian Development Bank, Kyrgyz Republic Country Gender Assessment, December 2019, p. xi <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/546966/kyrgyz-republic-country-gender-assessment-2019.pdf> (Accessed March 18, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Mridvika Sahajpal, Steven Blockmans, The New EU Strategy on Central Asia, CEPS, June 21, 2019, <https://www.ceps.eu/the-new-eustrategy-on-central-asia/> (Accessed February 9, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Foreign Affairs Council, Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia, European Council, June 17, 2019, p. 3. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> (Accessed January 14, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Silvia Mayr, POLICY BRIEF 9 – EU-South Asia trade perspectives: State of play, South Asia Democratic Forum, February 14, 2020 <https://www.sadf.eu/policy-brief-9-eu-south-asia-trade-perspectives-state-of-play/#post-10756-footnote-ref-9> (Accessed February 3, 2021).

and Afghanistan, its engagement with the broader region is limited. The EU's South Asia activities are still generally based on old development and technical assistance models that ignore the region's changing political reality and China's growing influence. Similar to its Middle East policy, the EU usually takes a bilateral approach which disregards the region's strategic significance.<sup>16</sup>

The EU's engagement in South Asia is challenged by Chinese influence in the AOR. Although the Union's EU status as trading partner with South Asia has decreased with China's expansion, it remains a significant donor in development and aid. The EU's South Asia trade policy focuses on unilateral human and labor rights conditions for trade concessions.<sup>17</sup>

The EU Strategy for Afghanistan was adopted in 2017 and focuses on a few priority areas. The EU's main interests in Afghanistan are to promote peace, stability, and regional security by reinforcing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan is the largest recipient of EU development funding in Asia. From 2014-2020 the EU allocated \$1.68 B to Afghanistan with some incentive funds conditional on reforms. The European Parliament supports and seeks to facilitate the Afghan peace process to safeguard democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Thus, the EU is partially and gradually incorporating Afghanistan into the EU Strategy for Central Asia.<sup>19</sup>

In 2018, the EU adopted its Strategy for India,<sup>20</sup> which unlike the Strategy for Afghanistan, mostly reaffirmed the two partners' long shared values. The strategy further aims to strengthen their partnership by focusing on sustainable modernization and common responses to global and regional issues.<sup>21</sup> In 2020, the EU and India endorsed a common roadmap, "India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025" to guide joint action and further strengthen the India-EU Strategic Partnership.<sup>22</sup>

All South Asian countries in USCENTCOM AOR have a strategic agreement with the EU. While the EU is implementing plans with Afghanistan and India, its Strategic Engagement Plan signed with Pakistan in June 2019,

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<sup>16</sup> Silvia Mayr, POLICY BRIEF 9 – EU-South Asia trade perspectives: State of play, South Asia Democratic Forum, February 14, 2020 <https://www.sadf.eu/policy-brief-9-eu-south-asia-trade-perspectives-state-of-play/#post-10756-footnote-ref-9> (Accessed February 3, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Saman Kelegama, "EU Trade Policy and Democracy Building in South Asia," IDEA, 2010, p.3 <http://ideadev.insomnation.com/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/the-role-of-the-european-union-in-democracy-building/eudemocracy-building-discussion-paper-9.pdf> (Accessed February 3, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> The European Union External Action Services, Afghanistan: new EU strategy, Webpage, October 16, 2017, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/33983/Afghanistan:%20new%20EU%20strategy](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/33983/Afghanistan:%20new%20EU%20strategy) (Accessed February 3, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament, South Asia, Webpage, November, 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/181/south-asia> (Accessed February 5, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> The European Commission, EU shapes its ambitious strategy on India, Webpage, November 20, 2018 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_18\\_6481](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_6481) (Accessed February 5, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Silvia Mayr, POLICY BRIEF 9 – EU-South Asia trade perspectives: State of play, South Asia Democratic Forum, February 14, 2020 <https://www.sadf.eu/policy-brief-9-eu-south-asia-trade-perspectives-state-of-play/#post-10756-footnote-ref-9> (Accessed February 3, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Government of India, India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025, Webpage, July 15, 2020, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/32828/IndiaEU\\_Strategic\\_Partnership\\_A\\_Roadmap\\_to\\_2025](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/32828/IndiaEU_Strategic_Partnership_A_Roadmap_to_2025) (Accessed February 5, 2021).

lacks actions. The EU is keen on collaborating with Pakistan to fight terrorism, but it objects to Pakistan's death penalty and archaic blasphemy laws.<sup>23</sup>

### EU Middle East Policy

The Middle East security situation directly affects Europeans. Many of those displaced have sought refuge in Europe, and terrorists have joined them. Islamic State attacks across European cities have aided the rise of populist nationalist parties that have shaken the foundations of Europe's political systems.<sup>24</sup> These political changes will eventually affect the EU's policy towards the CENTCOM AOR. Regional instability substantially impacts Europe on multiple areas including migration, security, energy, trade, and the threat of cross-border conflict and lawlessness. However, EU influence in the Middle East has never been weaker,<sup>25</sup> and the EU's lack of a comprehensive Middle East strategy is a major reason. The EU remains focused on the perceived centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Middle East stability, the desire to return to the Iran nuclear agreement, and a more general preference for formal and multilateral agreements. The region, however, favors the tacit, pragmatic, and bilateral.<sup>26</sup>

Regional powers pay little attention to European positions, as they are convinced that the EU is incapable of decisive and effective action.<sup>27</sup> The EU currently bases its Middle East partner policies on limited scope agreements or initiatives. This approach is represented in the European Neighborhood Policy, the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU's 1988 agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, and direct cooperation with the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such activities frame the European Middle East policy as fragmented and often inconsistent. There is no single agreement that addresses all Middle Eastern countries like the EU's strategy toward Central Asia.<sup>28</sup>

The EU's Global Strategy addresses the Middle East, but not enough to serve as a coherent, detailed, and realistic strategy for guiding members' regional interactions. The strategy is insufficient to secure the EU a place as a significant actor in the region. This appears to be due to divergent interests of key EU players.<sup>29</sup> The increased

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<sup>23</sup> The European Union External Action Services, European Union-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue 5th Round: Joint Press Release, Webpage, November 4, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/88122/european-union-pakistan-strategic-dialogue5th-round-joint-press-release\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/88122/european-union-pakistan-strategic-dialogue5th-round-joint-press-release_en) (Accessed February 5, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, Anthony Dworkin, "Promoting European strategic sovereignty in the southern neighbourhood," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 1, 2020 <https://ecfr.eu/publication/promoting-european-strategic-sovereignty-in-the-southernneighbourhood/> (Accessed March 2, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Europe and the New Middle East," EURACTIV, September 22, 2020 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/arabspring/opinion/europe-and-the-new-middle-east/> (Accessed March 2, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, Anthony Dworkin, "Promoting European strategic sovereignty in the southern neighbourhood," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 1, 2020 <https://ecfr.eu/publication/promoting-european-strategic-sovereignty-in-the-southernneighbourhood/> (Accessed March 2, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Przemysław Osiewicz, The EU and the Middle East: In search of a strategy, Middle East Institute, January 24, 2019 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/eu-and-middle-east-search-strategy> (Accessed January 5, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Middle East Institute, (Accessed January 5, 2021).

fragmentation, rivalry, and conflict between countries in the region, from the EU's perspective, has encouraged dialogue between regional adversaries.<sup>30</sup>

Despite no comprehensive regional agreement, the EU is active in countries that request support. For example, the EU supports developing solutions to the Yemen conflict. Yemen has been at war since March 2015 and the fight has spread into new conflicts with direct links to larger regional geopolitical dynamics. Throughout the conflict, the EU has provided political support, diplomacy, human rights, and humanitarian assistance. The EU's has contributed nearly \$1.23 B to assist Yemen since 2015.<sup>31</sup> Beyond Yemen, projects like the Lebanon Reform and the Recovery and Reconstruction Framework are part of a comprehensive EU response to the massive explosion in the Port of Beirut in August 2020.<sup>32</sup>

The EU's security is directly impacted by the security situation in Western Asia. Thus, Europe worked to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and sought to reduce tension between Iran and the US. Human rights concerns also substantially influence relations between the EU and Iran. One reason the EU's Middle East policy appears unclear is the disparity between what the EU and Middle East countries consider common interests. For example, the EU places willingness to engage with Iran while Iran pursues nuclear material enrichment activities, drives regional tensions and proxy support, and develops its ballistic missile program.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

When considering the EU's policy in the USCENTCOM AOR, the EU Global Strategy sets foreign policy guidelines. While the existential EU interests are consistent throughout the AOR, employment of the strategy differs by region and country. The EU's Central Asia Strategy has laid sufficient foundation for an actual partnership with Central Asian States. Under this framework, some Central Asian countries have launched national programs to support reform in the social security system, judiciary, and education system, as well as in rural and agricultural development. The EU and Central Asian States are seeking opportunities to cooperate on Afghanistan issues.

While the EU's policy is clear towards Afghanistan, it has not yet formulated a comprehensive South Asia strategy. This lack of an overarching policy has led the EU to seek bilateral agreements in the region. As more ambitious Central Asian states seek a more active role in global and regional affairs, the potential for EU cooperation increases.

The EU's Middle East activity is not noticeable in the region. The EU's policy towards the Middle East has focused on humanitarian aid. The EU could be much more active on important matters like the Iran nuclear deal, and conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The divergence between EU members and Middle East countries makes developing

<sup>30</sup> The European Union Global Strategy, The European Union's Global Strategy – three years on, looking forward, The EU, June 13, 2019, p. 18. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_global\\_strategy\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_global_strategy_2019.pdf) (Accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> The European Union External Action Services, EU-Yemen relations, Web-page, November 13, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/53984/eu-yemen-relations\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/53984/eu-yemen-relations_en) (Accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, Lebanon Reform, Recovery & Reconstruction Framework (3RF), Web-page, December 4, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/89920/lebanon-reform-recovery-reconstruction-framework-3rf\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/89920/lebanon-reform-recovery-reconstruction-framework-3rf_en) (Accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Beatrix Immenkamp, EU-Iran: The way forward - Can the JCPOA survive the Trump presidency?, European Parliament, July, 2020, p. 12. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652001/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)652001\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652001/EPRS_BRI(2020)652001_EN.pdf) (Accessed January 20, 2021).

a common policy difficult. If Middle East countries seek cooperation with European countries, they do it bilaterally. This is a barrier to the EU developing a comprehensive policy.

The EU's Global Strategy states the necessity for greater EU unity to serve as an effective player in the region. A united and consistent EU can ensure that multilateralism will remain the key organizing principle of the international order. According to the EU's Global Strategy "[w]e strive for a more autonomous Union not to act against, but rather to act in cooperation with our partners."<sup>34</sup>

**Recommendations for US/USCENTCOM:**

- Since the EU does not have a clear strategy towards the Middle East, engage the EU only on local matters in the region.
- Monitor the EU's policies towards Iran and JCPOA.
- Engage with the EU to address the FSO Safer issue and Yemeni humanitarian crisis.
- Encourage EU support of Middle East reforms through synchronized security cooperation activities, exercises, and partner nation engagements.

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<sup>34</sup> The European Union Global Strategy, The European Union's Global Strategy – three years on, looking forward, The EU, June 13, 2019, p. 29-31. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_global\\_strategy\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_global_strategy_2019.pdf) (Accessed January 19, 2021).