

The European Union in Central Eurasia: still searching for strategy

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Abstract The foreign policy statements of the European Union (EU) have long been positioning it as a global normative power. Yet, its ability to “Europeanize” international affairs has rarely been examined outside of the EU enlargement framework. In this respect, the EU’s initiatives in Asia offer a relevant context for the consideration of its global outreach. In order to examine whether the EU has been able to catalyze the global relevance of its normative power, this study undertakes a parallel assessment of its engagement with the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan. The suggestion is that the cultural instincts of the EU’s normative power entrap its agency in Central Asia and Afghanistan and make it difficult for Brussels to develop a coherent strategy not only in the region, but also in Asia.

The EU has an interest in enhancing cooperation to address common threats and new risks to security in Central Asia and the wider region, notably as regards developments in Afghanistan.¹ Does the European Union (EU) have a strategy for Asia? This is a particularly pertinent question in the wake of the June 2016 British referendum to leave the union. In the wake of the so called “Brexit,” the EU—and, especially, its international relations—appear to be in a “critical situation” according to the German chancellor, Angela Merkel.² More often than not, conversations on the external affairs of the EU tend to take as their point of departure the novelty of its interdependent politico-economic framework and the strength of its liberal democratic institutions. Labeled as “Europeanization,” the EU’s history and framework of relations backstop its intent to

¹European Council, *EU-CADAP*, 14182/13+COR1. Brussels (2013), p. 2.

²“EU in ‘Critical Situation’, Warns Merkel,” *Gulf News*, 28 September 2016.

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promote a transformative pattern of international affairs premised on transparent forms of governance, viable market mechanisms, and strong civil society. In fact, it is these very objectives that have led many to refer to the Brussels-based bloc as not just any kind of power, but as a *normative power*—its external outreach is defined by the norms and values that believe the strategic culture of the EU. Identified through the EU's unique ability to “shape what can be ‘normal’ in international life,” the term normative power suggests that “the EU can be *conceptualized* as a changer of norms in the international system... that the EU *acts* to change norms in the international system; and... that the EU *should* act to extend its norms in the international system.”³ Hence, the EU's promotion of its own model is intimately connected to the attempts to validate its own international identity by emphasizing the value rationality of making policy choices based on EU norms.⁴

Thus, in terms of the EU's relations with the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and Afghanistan, the query is whether its normative power has been *catalyzed* (i.e., given impetus and direction) or *constrained* (i.e., subject to a process of external or self-limitation).⁵ The pertinence of such analytical enquiry derives from the apparent sense of inevitability about the normative power of the EU. Bearing in mind the experience of the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, the claim is that the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe are allegedly adjusting to the rules and norms of a continent wide “new political system.” Even in the context of the deepening Eurozone debt crisis in 2011, the accession of Croatia and the ongoing commitment to the project of membership by the countries from the Western Balkans appear to reaffirm the continuing appeal of the EU's lodestone. Thus, it seems only natural to some that such a “missionary” project will be expanded to the countries on the other side of the *enlarged EU*.

Owing to the dominant focus on enlargement, the EU's external policy has been treated largely as coterminous with the transformative potential underwriting the dynamics of accession-driven conditionality. Thereby, it was only recently that the relevance of the EU's ability to Europeanize the practices of states (outside of the purview and the prospect of membership) has been given serious consideration. It seems, however, that the bulk of popular and policy attention has been captured by the development of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP).⁶ Stretching from the former European provinces of the Soviet Union, through the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa, the ENP tends to be hailed as a novel development in the field of EU external relations. In particular, the relationship with Belarus, Moldova, and, especially, Ukraine tend to attract the limelight of commentaries on the ENP development. This

³ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40:2 (2002), pp. 238–252. Emphasis in original.

⁴ Bart Gaens, Juha Jokela, and Eija Linnell, *The European Union in Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Emilian Kavalski, “Whom to Follow? Central Asia between the EU and China.” *China Report* 43:1 (2007), pp. 43–55; Frederik Söderbaum and Luk van Langenhove, *The EU as a Global Player: The Politics of Inter-Regionalism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁵ Michael Smith, “Between ‘Soft Power’ and a Hard Place: European Union Foreign and Security Policy between the Islamic World and the United States,” *International Politics*, 46:5 (2009), p. 596; Emilian Kavalski, “Recognizing Normative State Action in International Life.” *Political Studies Review* 15:2 (2017), p. 232.

⁶ European Commission, *NSLA Strategy Paper*. Brussels (2007).

preoccupation appears to neglect the examination of the EU's agency in Central Asia and Afghanistan, which are excluded from the ENP process.

Thus, the EU's engagement in the region seems to confront Brussels with the need "to design a real foreign policy beyond the enlargement paradigm."⁷ Such framing draws attention to the EU's ability to project its normative power to "out-of-Europe" areas such as Central Eurasia.⁸ The statement by the European Council in the epigraph of this chapter attests to the shared geopolitical space that Central Asia and Afghanistan seem to occupy in the EU's strategic imagination. As the following sections will demonstrate, such a development does not reflect a deliberate engagement with the Central Eurasian region. Instead, the process-tracing of the EU's external outreach reveals reactive, inconsistent, and disconnected interactions with Central Asia and Afghanistan. In this respect, the concluding section indicates that if the EU is to catalyze the global relevance of its normative power, Brussels has to offer a meaningful operationalization of its Central Eurasian strategic discourse.

The EU'S relations with Central Asia and Afghanistan

The EU's relations with Central Asia and Afghanistan are part of the complex architecture of its external relations. On the one hand, the Central Eurasian region is involved in Brussels' interactions with Asia. As the then EU External Relations Commissioner, Chris Patten has acknowledged, "given the sprawling variety of Asia, it is absurd to think of a monolithic EU-Asia relationship."⁹ Thus, its relations with Central Eurasia should demonstrate the contextual awareness of the EU's normative power. On the other hand, while the region of Central Asia has been included in the EU's assistance for democratic transitions of the countries in the post-Soviet and post-communist space, Afghanistan has been subject to a predominantly ad hoc aid and development assistance programs until the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In this respect, in the jigsaw of the EU's post-Cold War foreign policy, neither Central Asia nor Afghanistan seem to fit neatly with the other projects of Brussels. For instance, Central Asia has been gradually excluded from the EU's approaches to the other post-Soviet states—the region is neither fully incorporated into the ENP initiatives, nor is it a partner to Brussels' relations with Russia. At the same time, both Central Asia and Afghanistan are not included in the explicitly "Asian" initiatives of the EU—such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), for instance. It would appear that Central Asia and Afghanistan emerge as ghosts in the vacuum of the EU's external affairs.

Brussels insists that the positioning of Central Eurasia on the fringes of its other initiatives reflects the region's unique role as a *bridge*, with a "centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together [because] it lies at a strategically important intersection between the two continents."¹⁰ Central Asia and Afghanistan, therefore, play an important role in the articulation of the "Europeanness" of the EU's normative power

⁷ Anna Matveeva, *EU Stakes in Central Asia* (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 110.

⁸ Emilian Kavalski, "From the Western Balkans to the Greater Balkans Area: The External Conditioning of 'Awkward' and 'Integrated' States," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 17:3 (2006), pp. 86–100.

⁹ Chris Patten, *The Relationship Between the EU and Asia: One or Many* (London: Chatham House).

¹⁰ European Council, *EU-CADAP*, p. 6

as distinct from the Islamic world and, yet, maintaining a “special relationship” with it—a stance, which requires “a highly complex geopolitical as well as geo-cultural balancing act.”¹¹ However, the nuances of this balancing act appear lost and instead a more cynical view emerges—one, which suggests that Central Eurasia is merely a bridge (if not—quite literally—a mere refueling station) between the EU’s other and strategically more important commitments. Some observers have noted that Central Eurasia emerges as either a “non-existent region, or as a merely forgotten one.”¹²

In this respect, both Central Asia and Afghanistan present idiosyncratic cases of the temporal and spatial othering implicit in the EU’s exercise of normative power. In particular, the Central Eurasian region emerges as a geopolitical locale, whose Europeanization does not seem to be positioned as the EU’s “moral obligation.”¹³ Some have argued that this context makes it “easier” for Brussels to engage Central Eurasia as it is “free from having to think where the borders of Europe lie, with all of the constraints this question imposes on EU thinking and action.”¹⁴ In particular, the seeming disconnection from the region has meant that Brussels is perceived as a serious threat by neither external nor regional actors.

In practice, however, such detachment from Central Eurasian affairs has left the EU with the option to insist on the internalization of certain norms of appropriateness by regional states (as demanded by its strategic culture), without the support of its normative power (as exemplified by its various instruments for socialization). Thus, the EU’s engagement in both the Central Asia states and Afghanistan has been spotty at best. Brussels seems to approach these countries from the point of view of its geographic distance and as such, its policies have tended to lack focus and have remained largely reactive. The following sections outline the two broad periods of the EU’s foreign policy engagements with Central Eurasia. Since Afghanistan did not figure much in the EU’s foreign policy imagination during the first post-Cold War decade, it is not discussed in the analysis of the first period of the EU’s engagement with the region.

Reticence towards Central Asia in the 1990s

There is an almost universal unanimity among observers that Central Asia barely registered on the radar of the external relations of the EU during the 1990s. The region neither had its champion among the Member States, nor attracted any significant policy innovation from the EU.¹⁵ The EU’s disregard for Central Asia during the 1990s can be explained as an instance of its general reticence during this period to dabble into what it perceived as the “Russian sphere of influence.”¹⁶ In other words, the EU anticipated that a potentially more active engagement in Central Asia might be perceived as

¹¹ Smith, “Between ‘Soft Power’ and a Hard Place,” p. 608. Emilian Kavalski, *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos: Reflections on Complexity and Global Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 23.

¹² Laure Delcour, *Shaping the Post-Soviet Space* (Farnham: Ashgate), p. 94; Emilian Kavalski and Young Chul Cho, “Governing Uncertainty in Turbulent Times,” *Comparative Sociology* 14:3 (2015), p. 430.

¹³ Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), pp. 224–227.

¹⁴ Matveeva, *EU Stakes in Central Asia*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Emilian Kavalski, “Partnership or Rivalry between the EU, China and India in Central Asia,” *European Law Journal* 13:6 (2007), pp. 839–56.

¹⁶ European Parliament, “Resolution on the Commission approach,” *Official Journal of the European Communities*, A4-0158/95 (1995), p. 0215.

threatening by Russia (and thus invite unwanted attention to issues of hard security). Hence, its assistance to Central Asia (and the rest of the post-Soviet space) has been couched under the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program.

The claim here is that the unwillingness of Brussels to extend a more assertive approach to Central Asia reflects the uncertainty and confusion about the post-Cold War character of its roles and identity. Thus, almost from the beginning of their post-Soviet transitions, the EU has insisted that it is the OSCE—rather than Brussels—that will have to function as the primary institution for the security governance of Central Asian states.¹⁷ Moreover, a significant part of the programs that it developed under the TACIS programming were implemented together not only with the OSCE, but also with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and other international actors. For many, these developments provided a clear indication that the region is “off the EU radar screen.”¹⁸

Consequently, one of the most conspicuous legacies of this period is the location of Central Asia in the EU’s strategic imagination as *outside of its area of responsibility*. This approach reflects the “*reverse-realist* paradigm” that seems to have informed EU’s foreign policy thinking at the time and which urged it to *avoid* positions of leadership.¹⁹ It is often overlooked that Central Asia was a fertile ground for the EU (and, more broadly, Western) influence. Following the shock of Soviet dissolution, regional states were eager to use their newly-found independence to limit their dependence on the vagaries of their Russian neighbor. Yet, Brussels was unable to take advantage of this opportunity. Launched in the early 1990s, the self-proclaimed objective of TACIS has been to “encourage democratization, strengthen the rule of law and the transition to a market economy in the New Independent States (NIS).”²⁰ In practical terms, therefore, it aimed to assist the post-Soviet political and economic transitions of the region.

However, despite the emphatic language, the track record of TACIS funding tells a story of underlying disinterest in the region. For instance, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, which received the lion’s share of TACIS assistance to the region, were allocated €500 million and €140 million, respectively, during the lifespan of the program (1991–2010).²¹ These amounts represent a mere fraction of what the EU spent both in other TACIS states (such as Russia and Ukraine) and, especially, on preparing the Central and East European countries for membership. At the same time, the EU funding pales in comparison to what other international actors—especially, China—were prepared to commit to Central Asia. The figures on TACIS funding to the region both confirm that Central Asia was not a priority area for the EU during the 1990s and help explain the little traction that the EU’s normative power had in the region.

¹⁷ Alexander Warkotsch, “The European Union and Democracy Promotion in Bad Neighbourhoods: The Case of Central Asia,” *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 11:4 (2006), p. 515. Emilian Kavalski, “The Complexity of Empire,” *Canadian Journal of History* 43:2 (2007), p. 272.

¹⁸ Delcour, *Shaping the Post-Soviet Space*, p. 94. Emilian Kavalski, “Whose Security: Russia in Asia? *Ab Imperio* 3:3 (202), p. 632.

¹⁹ Simon Duke, *The New European Security Disorder* (London: Macmillan), p. 94;

²⁰ European Commission, *TACIS website* (1991) <http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/ceeca/tacis/index.htm>

²¹ European Commission. *Country Progress Reports* (2013) <http://ec.europa.eu/central_asia/index_en.htm>

In an attempt to reinforce its position in Central Asia, the EU promulgated the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) at the end of the first post-Cold War decade. While intent on enhancing its visibility in Central Asia by providing regular annual fora for interaction between the EU and the Central Asian states, the PCAs did not offer a demonstrable change in the EU's framing of the region. The key innovation in terms of the EU's normative stance has been the implicit differentiation of the Central Asian states between potentially promising pupils (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and problematic cases (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). Overall, however, the PCAs made obvious that the EU did not expect to play the same role in Central Asia as it did either in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, or Ukraine. Therefore, the approaches that it extended to Central Asia during the 1990s lacked the means to provide a veritable loadstone for the region. These patterns also reassert the pervasive ambivalence of Brussels' agency in Central Asia in the first post-Cold War decade.

Looking for Central Eurasia after 2001

The terrorist attacks in the USA of 11 September 2001 (hereafter, 9/11) seem to have intensified the discussions of Brussels' engagement in "out-of-Europe" areas. There has been greater attention to the EU's interactions with regions that are not subject to enlargement initiatives (and enlargement-like projects such as the ENP). It is in this context, that the EU articulated its first ever *European Security Strategy (ESS)* and initiated a comprehensive constitutionalizing process, which concluded with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Most commentators interpreted these developments as a qualitative change in the EU's strategic outlook, which revealed a growing preoccupation with "controlling the processes by which vulnerable societies slide towards the wrong camp" and ensuring that such societies act "as protectors of the EU."²² In practical terms, therefore, 9/11 has reinforced Brussels' perception that the greatest risks to the security of an increasingly globalizing and complex world are "threats emanating from under or above the state, and enhanced by the web of interdependence among states today."²³

In this respect, 9/11 also marked a "new beginning" for the EU's relations with Central Eurasia. Perhaps, the most conspicuous shift in the EU's strategic narrative has been the explicit linkage between Central Asia and Afghanistan. It needs to be acknowledged that such shift was not unique to the strategic imagination of the EU and it has been adopted by other international actors (such as the USA, China, and India). Such geopolitical repositioning has been accompanied by a "hardening" of the EU's normative power discourse. As a result, security concerns became the focus of the EU's interactions with Central Eurasia, and seem to have taken precedence over the EU's emphasis on democratization and liberalization. These post-9/11 changes came to indicate Brussels' foreign policy pragmatism in "out-of-Europe" areas as part of the

²² Alexandra Gheciu, *Securing Civilization? The EU, NATO, and the OSCE in the post-9/11 World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 53; Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 98.

²³ Galia Press-Barnathan, "The Changing Incentives of Security Regionalization: From 11/9 to 9/11," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 40:3 (2009), p. 296.

EU's attempt to "make a special effort to apply its principled approach in ways that are realistically operational in difficult political environments."²⁴

At the same time, and far more bluntly, Robert Cooper, the then Director-General for the EU's External and Politico-Military Affairs, suggested that the post-9/11 shift in the EU's stance was demanded by the strategic imperative to compel conformity with EU-norms among actors unable to respond to other incentives, but raw power: "Among ourselves we keep the law, but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle."²⁵ Thus, the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan seems to have backstopped the EU's re-engagement with what it increasingly perceived as the Central Eurasian "jungle." According to the *ESS*,

The most recent wave of terrorism is linked to violent religious extremism. It arises out of complex causes. These include the pressures of modernization, cultural, social and political crisis, and the alienation of young people living in foreign societies. Thus neighbors who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organized crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth all pose problems. Taking these different elements together...we could be confronted with a very radical threat indeed.²⁶

In this respect, the Central Eurasian reframing of the EU's relations with the region, both indicates an acknowledgement that Central Asia and Afghanistan appear to straddle many of the root causes of such threats and demonstrates the EU's willingness to contribute to their containment. It has to be stated at the outset however that while the linking between the developments in the Central Asian states and Afghanistan reflects the complex geostrategic realities on the ground, such connection has remained largely implicit in the EU's foreign policy practice. As the following sections demonstrate, while the EU programs in the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan have been motivated by the perception of shared Central Eurasian security concerns, these are addressed through separate and unrelated initiatives. It is this failure to outline coherent strategy and vision for Central Eurasia that undercuts the EU's "ability to shape events" in both the Central Asian states and Afghanistan.²⁷

Central Asia

The events of 9/11 and, especially, the US response to them seemed to offer quantitative change not only in the patterns and practices of international relations, but also in Central Asia's place in the framework of world over—from a backwater, the region

²⁴ Michael Emerson, *Into Eurasia: Monitoring the EU's Central Asian Strategy* (Brussels: CEPS, 2010), p. 9.

²⁵ Robert Cooper, "Why We Still Need Empires," *The Observer*, 7 April (2002); Emilian Kavalski, "The Balkans after Iraq, Iraq after the Balkans... Who's Next?" *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 6:1 (2005), p. 103.

²⁶ *European Security Strategy* (2003) <<http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/european-security-strategy/>>

²⁷ Justine Vaïsse and Susi Dennison, *European Foreign Policy Scorecard* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 128; Simon J. Smith and Emilian Kavalski, "NATO's Partnership with Central Asia: Cooperation à la carte" in Emilian Kavalski (ed), *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), p. 30.

found itself in the crosshairs of a developing global war on terror. A number of international actors had to initiate an abrupt readjustment to their role and policies to the region. To that effect in 2002, the EU advanced the rudiments of a far-reaching and comprehensive policy tailored specifically to the five Central Asian states under the aegis of separate Regional Strategy Paper (RSP).²⁸ Furthermore, in terms of increasing its visibility, in 2005, the EU appointed its own Special Representative (EUSR) to Central Asia.²⁹ (European Council 2005a). Some commentators have pointed out that the appointment of the EUSR indicated the activation of the ESDP in Central Asia.³⁰ The EUSR's prerogatives are quite extensive:

To *follow* political developments in Central Asia by developing and maintaining close contacts with governments, parliaments, judiciary, civil society, and mass media; *encourage* the countries to cooperate on regional issues of common interest; *develop* contacts and cooperation with the main interested actors in the region; *contribute*, in close cooperation with the OSCE, to conflict prevention and resolution by developing contacts with the authorities and other local actors; *promote* overall political coordination of the Union in Central Asia and *ensure* consistency of the external actions of the Union without prejudice to Community competence; *assist* the Council in further developing a comprehensive policy towards Central Asia.³¹

The EUSR activities have been framed by the ongoing evolution of the RSP initiative, which is undergoing its third iteration—the first RSP (2002–2006), the second RSP (2007–2013), and the third RSP (2014–2020).³² The second and third RSPs have been administered by the new Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which came to substitute the TACIS program. In policy terms, the RSP initiative has to indicate that the EU is recognizing the idiosyncrasies of the five Central Asian states as well as the need to project distinct and contextual policies in the region. Intent on reinforcing its commitment to Central Asia, during the German presidency of the European Council (2007), the EU launched (after a protracted lobbying by Berlin) its *Strategy for a New Partnership* with the region. This new strategy reiterates the EU's "strong interest in a peaceful, democratic, and economically prosperous Central Asia."³³ Yet, as already indicated, it perpetuates the unquestioning promotion of the norms of the EU's strategic culture. Hence, Brussels is explicit that

²⁸ European Commission, "Strategy Paper (2002–2006) and Indicative Program (2002–2004) for Central Asia," Brussels, 12 October (2002).

²⁹ European Council, "Council Joint Action 2005/588/CFSP," *Official Journal of the European Union* 199 (2005), pp. 100–101.

³⁰ Matveeva, *EU Stakes in Central Asia*, p. 92. Emilian Kavalski, "Timescapes of Security: Clocks, Clouds, and the Complexity of Security Governance." *World Futures* 65:7 (2009), p. 527.

³¹ European Council, "Council Joint Action 2005/588/CFSP," pp. 100–101.

³² Georgiy Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia: Promoting Values and Defending Interests* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 60. Emilian Kavalski, "Beyond the Anthropocentric Partitioning of the World" in Erika Cudworth, Stephen Hobden, Emilian Kavalski (eds), *Posthuman Dialogues in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 278.

³³ European Council. *European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* QC-79-07-222-29-C. Brussels (2007), p. 2.

The development of a stable political framework and functioning economic structures are dependent on respect for the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and the development of transparent, democratic political structures... [Such a] task calls for the active involvement of civil society. A developed and active civil society and independent media are vital for the development of a pluralistic civil society. The EU will cooperate with Central Asian states to this end and promote enhanced exchanges in civil society.³⁴

Such articulations suggest that even though the EU does not intend the same level of integration with Central Asia as it did in other post-communist areas, Brussels still anticipates that its regional outreach will provide sufficient leverage to push for democratic reforms that would lead to political pluralism and social modernization. To that effect, the EU has explicitly indicated that 70% of its regional assistance will be directed towards programs for bilateral (as opposed to region-wide) assistance. While further reinforcing the differentiation of the region between promising pupils and problematic cases, this approach has also been criticized for its lack of “instinctive understanding” of the “systemic reality” of Central Asia.³⁵ For instance, the prioritization of stability by Central Asian state elites appears to clash with the EU’s demand for democratization. As insisted by the *Strategy for New Partnership with Central Asia*, Brussels launched regular human rights dialogs aimed at assisting the promotion of “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, sustainable development, peace and stability.”³⁶ At the same time, the EU insisted on establishing civil society seminars for the propagation of political pluralism in the region. Many of these initiatives have been funded through the specially designated Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development (NSLA) program. As a result, Central Asian elites have resisted European pressures to reform not only because they fear a “decentralization” of their power, but also because such initiatives amount to “a call for revolutionary transformation.”³⁷

Thus, the alleged shift in the EU’s attention to the region in the wake of 9/11 does not seem to have altered the “reverse-realist paradigm” of its Central Asian approach. To begin with, the office of the EUSR is notoriously understaffed and underfunded. At the same time, once Germany ceded the presidency of the European Council at the end of June 2007, no other Member State seemed interested to follow on Berlin’s commitments to the region. The inference seems to be that Central Asia is not sufficiently proximate to warrant a more focused strategic attitude by the EU. As the *ESS* makes it (bluntly) explicit, “even in an era of globalization, geography is still important. It is in the European interest that countries on our borders are well governed.” Thus, Central Asia falls outside the immediate enclosure of the explicitly defined *European* security governance and its broader (and, perhaps, fuzzier) surrounding neighborhood. Confirming this observation, the then High Representative for

³⁴ Ibid.; European Council, *Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia*. 10,387/17 COEST142 CFSP/PESC, 19 June (2017), p. 6; Emilian Kavalski, “Observing and Encountering Global Life” in Emilian Kavalski (ed), *Encounters with World Affairs: An Introduction to International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 10.

³⁵ David Lewis, *Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), pp. 25–26

³⁶ European Council. *European Union and Central Asia*, p. 4.

³⁷ Stephen Blank, “Democratic Prospects in Central Asia.” *World Affairs* 166:1 (2004), pp. 133–140; Emilian Kavalski, “The EU in the Heartland: A Normative Power Looking for a Strategy in Central Eurasia” in Kirill Nourzhanov (ed), *Afghanistan and Its Neighbours after the NATO Withdrawal* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), p. 195.

the CFSP, Javier Solana insisted that the EU's "main priority continues to be the Balkans and how to bring them closer to the EU. At the same time, we have to start rethinking our policy towards the 'Stans'. This means cooperating with *other international organizations* to tackle the huge problems facing them."³⁸ Reiterating this detached attitude, the EUSR for Central Asia, Pierre Morel has gone on record to state that: "We think that it is better to act together [through] coordination among international structures, which we consider to be the most efficient method."³⁹

Such statements lend support to the allegations of a convivial tension (if not clash) between the EU's normative values and its strategic interests in Central Asia. As one EU official acknowledged, "the EU has yet to figure out new ways to advance its interests without damaging its fundamental values and to promote its values without compromising its long-term interests."⁴⁰ The ambiguity backstopping such strategic attitudes has urged some to suggest that the EU's preoccupation with its normative power is merely a distraction from the confrontation with "the reality of Europe's provincialization in world politics."⁴¹ The very conspicuous failure to link the EU's demands for reform in Central Asian states to any meaningful dynamic for Europeanization indicates that the EU is far short of conceptualizing (let alone validating) the role of its normative power both in the region and its "out-of-Europe" areas more generally.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan appears to be the other constitutive part of the Central Eurasian strategic narrative promulgated by the EU in its post-9/11 external affairs. It has to be reminded that the discursive linking of Central Asia and Afghanistan was not merely an expedient reaction to the realities of a "global war on terror," but reflected the EU's experience with the export of insecurity from Afghanistan to the region during the 1990s—such as during the later stages of the civil war in Tajikistan and the support for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan once that group was exiled to Afghanistan. Thus, while the complex historic, political, and economic interconnections between Central Asia and Afghanistan support the strategic rationale of a Central Eurasian policy construct, this geopolitical narrative is still to transpire into actual EU policies and programs.

Regardless of its practical decoupling from Central Asia, Afghanistan's relations with the EU seem to be plagued by very similar problems—namely, policy incoherence, lack of vision, and uncertain objectives. A further complicating factor is that the EU has had to adjust its initiatives to the template provided by the US/NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In particular, since a number of EU

³⁸ Quoted in Emilian Kavalski, *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers: Contextualizing the Security Governance of the EU, China, and India* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 96.

³⁹ Pierre Morel, Statement of the EUSR for Central Asia for the Media at Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 14 January (2010).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, p. 60; Emilian Kavalski "Are There Normative Powers in the Asia-Pacific? An Inquiry into the Normative Power of China and Japan" in Yoneyuki Sugita (ed), *Toward a More Amicable Asia-Pacific Region* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016), p. 108.

⁴¹ Karoline Postel-Vinay, "The Historicity of European Normative Power," in Zaki Laidi (ed) *EU Foreign Policy in a Globalized World* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 47. Emilian Kavalski, "The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China in Context." *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48:2 (2013), p. 248.

Member States (all of whom are NATO members, too) have committed to programs that are part of the ISAF and not the EU effort, the visibility and coherence of Brussels' normative power appears to be substantively constrained.⁴² Therefore, it is easy to overlook that the EU is one of the largest aid donors to Afghanistan—contributing in excess of €3 billion since 2001.⁴³ Such dilution of the EU's prominence in Afghanistan is also affected by the poorly staffed and underfunded office of the EUSR to Afghanistan. Established in December 2001, the EUSR has been set up to demonstrate the EU's tangible commitment to the country, but with a dozen staff headquartered in Kabul, its presence is barely acknowledged.

In an attempt to rectify the visibility and credibility of its Europeanizing mission in the country, the EU launched in 2007 a EU Police Mission to Afghanistan (EUPOL-A)—its first civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation launched in an active theater of war.⁴⁴ Envisioned as a “civilian surge” accompanying the US/NATO military deployment, EUPOL-A sought “to increase the ability of the [Afghan] state to meet the range of both internal and external security needs in a manner consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of good governance, human rights, transparency, and the rule of law,”⁴⁵ by assisting “the establishment of sustainable and effective civilian policing arrangements under Afghan ownership.”⁴⁶ The focus on police reform was not coincidental and it intended to demonstrate the global relevance of the EU's normative power, by showcasing the lessons learned from its contribution to post-conflict stabilization in Bosnia and Kosovo. In fact, such civilian (as opposed to military) contribution to global peace and security was envisaged by the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, which provides the framework for the EU's involvement in unstable environments such as Afghanistan. However, with a staff of about 350 international police and 200 local officials, EUPOL-A has become symptomatic both of the EU's marginalization in the security sector reform of Afghanistan and the lackluster performance of its normative power in “out-of-Europe” areas.

As already suggested, such an outcome should not be surprising and tends to be explained either as (i) the result of the profound divergences between the EU and the US over the mandate and the aims of the mission in Afghanistan, or (ii) the lack of coordination between the different EU actors on the ground, or simply as (iii) the consequence of the EU taking a bite far bigger than its external affairs resources and experience could chew—after all, “given Afghanistan's size and population, creating a national police force represented a far greater challenge than anything the EU had attempted in its operations in the Balkans.”⁴⁷ However, an overlooked dimension of the

⁴² Chiara Ruffa, “With or Without You? A Comparison of European and US Policies in Afghanistan,” in M. Cebecci (ed), *Issues in EU and US Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 85–105.

⁴³ Michael Holtje and Ronja Kempin, *The EU in Afghanistan: What Role after NATO's Withdrawal* (Berlin: SWP, 2013), p. 2. Emilian Kavalski and Magdalena Zolkos, “The Recognition of Nature in International Relations” in P. Hayden and K. Schick (eds), *Recognition and Global Politics: Critical Encounters between State and World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 140.

⁴⁴ Maxime H.A. Larivé, “From Speeches to Actions: EU Involvement in the War in Afghanistan through the EUPOL Afghanistan Mission,” *European Security*, 21: 2 (2012), p. 185

⁴⁵ European Council, *EU SSR Concept*, 12566/5/05 (Brussels, 2005), p. 3.

⁴⁶ EU Factsheet, *EUPOL-Afghanistan*, May 30 (2007).

⁴⁷ Robert Perito, *The Interior Ministry's Role in Security Sector Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), p. 9. Emilian Kavalski, “The EU-India Strategic Partnership: Neither Very Strategic, nor Much of a Partnership” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29:1 (2016), p. 195.

current marginalization of the EU in Afghanistan is the failure to connect its initiatives in the country with its Afghanistan-related programs in Central Asia. For instance, an association between the EU-funded Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA), the Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP), and the EU-Central Asia High-Level Security Dialogue would allow for the operationalization of the Central Eurasian strategic discourse capable of demonstrating the global relevance of the EU's normative power. Both BOMCA and CADAP are programs intent on preventing the spillover of Afghan insecurity into Central Asia through the training of relevant police and security agencies. As their counterpart in Afghanistan, EUPOL-A (could and still can) become a more significant factor in the stabilization of the country—especially, in the wake of a US/NATO military withdrawal. More significantly, such a linkage could facilitate the emergence of a more focused Europeanizing strategy for Central Eurasia that can both lift the EU from its foreign policy impasse in the region and meaningfully catalyze its normative power in global life.

The suggestion here is that without a meaningful operationalization of the Central Eurasian strategic narrative, the EU's "ability to shape events" in Afghanistan will remain partial (at best, if not completely inadequate). Otherwise, the EU will remain without "the means to provide strong political or financial incentives to enhance the engagement of Afghan authorities."⁴⁸ Owing to the EU's latecomer and marginal status in Afghanistan, it is unlikely—despite its strategic rhetoric—to make the country a poster child for the global outreach of its normative power. The implication for the government in Kabul is that in the context of a US/NATO drawdown and the EU's general disinterest in the country, it has few options but keep looking for non-Western partners (such as China and India) in its struggle to keep the Taliban insurgency at bay. Even though Kabul eventually signed to the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement proposed by Washington and NATO launched in January 2015 its "Resolute Support" mission after the end of its ISAF operations, the strategic significance of Beijing and New Delhi seems to be growing. For instance, in the autumn of 2014 India finally agreed to enhance its defense commitments to Afghanistan through the provision not only of military training, but strategic materiel. Equally significantly, the first foreign trip of the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani was to China, which seems to reflect not merely a shift in strategic outlook, but a more nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's geopolitical context.⁴⁹ Such developments in Afghanistan give credence to the allegation of a power shift to the East in global life. In this respect, Afghanistan—and the greater Central Eurasian region—are becoming one of the most prominent instances of the nascent "world without the West."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Eva Gross, *Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan* (Paris: EUISS, 2009), p. 34.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Page, "As US Exits, China Takes on Afghanistan Role." *Wall Street Journal*. 4 February (2015); Emilian Kavalski, "More of the Same: An Unpredictable Trump Foreign Policy in an Unpredictable Central Asia." *Monde Chinois* 4:48 (2016), p. 112.

⁵⁰ Naazneen H. Barma, Ely Ratner, and Steve Weber, "Welcome to the World Without the West." *The National Interest*, November 12 (2014) < <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-the-world-without-the-west-11651>>; Emilian Kavalski, "Whether Power Transition and Whither If One" in David Walton and Emilian Kavalski (eds), *Power Transition in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 207.

Conclusion

The overview of the EU's relations with Central Asia and Afghanistan provided in this study demonstrate Brussels' struggle to articulate not merely a meaningful strategy for its relations with the region, but more generally an effective external affairs strategy able to project its normative power outside the framework of enlargement (or enlargement-like initiatives). Central Eurasia confronts the EU with the reality where it not only is not a magnet for regional states, but also is in a situation where Brussels has to vie for the attention of awkward states that appear spoilt for choice by the many suitors participating in the "new great game." Thus, used to the Europeanization of post-communist countries compliant with its normative power, the EU appears confused and uncertain by the lack of appeal of its values. This is a qualitatively new situation for Brussels and its normative power—one, which baffles the EU and which it is still to address convincingly.

In particular, what appears striking about the EU's agency in Central Eurasia is the consistent lack of initiatives that engage regional states in the deliberate practice of regular interactions with Brussels. Thus, in response to the question with which this study began—whether the EU's normative power in the Central Asian states and Afghanistan is *constrained* or *catalyzed*—the answer is the former rather than the latter. The EU emerges as both unable and unwilling to extend a meaningful practice for the Europeanization of the region. This, in turn, prevents it from becoming a fully fledged normative power in Central Eurasia. Instead, the EU emerges as a "bit player"—an actor with a very limited impact and leverage on Central Eurasian affairs.⁵¹ In this respect,

The status of the EU as a continental model of economic and social organization might be seen as giving a strong basis for the development of European foreign policy, but in many ways the strengths that give the EU a major role in the European order do not export easily; they are less immediately appropriate to a fluid and often chaotic world, and this means that the attempt to project "Europe" into the global arena brings with it new risks and potential costs.⁵²

The claim here is that the cultural instincts of the EU's normative power entrap its agency in Central Asia and Afghanistan and make it difficult for Brussels to develop contextual approaches to the region. Such policy trend does not bode well for the EU's influence in Central Eurasia. It seems that deprived of the lure of membership or privileged partnership, the EU's normative power cannot develop resonance in Central Eurasia. In this respect, the EU's search for a "new" strategy not only in Central Eurasia, but also in its external affairs (beyond enlargement and enlargement-like initiatives) demands a serious reflection upon the impact of its own normativity. Without such questioning, the EU is unlikely to emerge as a viable normative power beyond the geographical confines of Europe and its immediate neighborhood.

⁵¹ Gaens et al., *The European Union in Asia*, pp. 44. Emilian Kavalski, "The Shadows of Normative Power in Asia: Framing the International Agency of China, India, and Japan." *Pacific Focus* 29:3 (2014), p. 303.

⁵² Smith, "Between 'Soft Power' and a Hard Place," p. 603.