

**Uzbekistan and its International Partners:
Thirty Years of Independent Statehood, Energy Cooperation, and
Openness towards Reform and Investment**

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Central Asia is recognised as a strategically important region by the EU

- The **EU recognised the strategic importance of Central Asia**, which is situated at the intersection of Eurasia, South Asia, and the Wider Middle East, and links up China and East Asia with Europe through the Wider Black Sea area. In 2019, the EU updated its Central Asian strategy to focus on resilience (human rights, border security and the environment), prosperity (with a strong emphasis on energy and lines of communication connectivity) and regional cooperation.
- For years, relations between Central Asian countries were generally poor, owing to border and resource disputes. Nevertheless, **the situation has changed rapidly following the change of leadership in Uzbekistan in 2016, opening up new possibilities for regional cooperation**. A common matter of concern is the risk of expanding Islamic extremism and fighters returning from Syria and Iraq. The region also continues to be adversely affected by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Renewable energy sources are another particular focus of attention in view of the enormous potential for regional cooperation and investment.
- All the **Central Asian countries follow multi-vector foreign policies**, seeking to balance ties with Russia, China, the EU and the US in particular. Relations with Turkey and Iran are also important for them. EU trade, mainly in mineral resources, is noteworthy with Kazakhstan, and is on the rise with Uzbekistan, not least following the adoption of an EU-Uzbekistan Textiles Protocol in 2016.
- According to the website of the MFA, the main goal of the foreign policy of the **Republic of Uzbekistan** is strengthening of the independence and sovereignty of the state, further enhancing the role and place of the country in international arena, joining the ranks of the developed democratic states, creating security, stability and a good neighbourliness belt around Uzbekistan. At the core of Uzbek foreign policy is the

adherence to the policy of non-alignment with any military-political bloc, preventing the deployment of foreign military bases and facilities on its territory and the non-participation of the country's servicemen in peacekeeping operations abroad, and resolving all contradictions and conflicts only by peaceful means.

- **Uzbekistan's policy in Central Asia** is aimed at ensuring peace and stability in the region, addressing the key problems of regional security, including contribution to the settlement of situation in Afghanistan. The state is committed to strengthening regional trade and economic cooperation, developing regional transport and transit infrastructure, ensuring fair and rational use of water resources of transboundary rivers in Central Asia and the ecologic sustainability of the region.
- **Uzbekistan attaches great importance to the development of mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU and European states.** The key areas of cooperation with European countries are development of trade, investment and financial cooperation, transfer of high technologies, partnership in science, education, ecology, health and culture, as well as strengthening of regional security.

Challenges Ahead for Uzbekistan and its Central Asian Neighbours

- **Ensuring regional stability at a time of rising regional powers' rivalries and of strategic shifts within the global structure of power** will be critical to creating a most favourable security environment for foreign direct investment and for pursuing regional and global trade in Central Asia.
- I'd like to close this presentation by highlighting two of the key challenges facing Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbours from this perspective:

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 - **Internal dimension:** Pursuing comprehensive and resilient socio-political reforms aiming to enhance governance and increase the transparency on how the states manage their limited resources. Therefore, it's not surprising that the scope of the EU's relations with Central Asian states has been linked to their readiness to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernise and diversify their economy, including by supporting the private sector and SMEs in particular, in a free market economy. We have recently published on the EGF website a comprehensive study written by an Uzbek expert who outlined the

main guidelines and achievements of Uzbek socio-political and economic reforms over the last five years.

- **Afghanistan:** In the aftermath of the imminent US/NATO withdrawal, Afghanistan is most likely to become again a “geopolitical vacuum” at the “heart of Asia”. This is likely to impact all regional powers who maintain economic, political, security, or ethno-cultural interests in Afghanistan: China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan, as well as the neighbouring Central Asian post-Soviet republics. A large question mark is looming on whether the regional powers and the Central Asian states would be willing and able to establish a kind of Consortium aiming to manage a joint diplomatic framework to facilitate and guarantee the intra-Afghan peace process. Afghanistan should be better helped to turn itself into a stable neighbour, that would leverage its geo-economic potential as a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, rather than being left again to transform itself into another “blackhole” brewing terrorism and other transnational security threats.

