DEFINING EURASIA

While originally Eurasia has been a geographic concept denoting the landmass of Asia and Europe, it is often used as a geopolitical concept reflecting different national interests with regard to this huge landmass. From a Western-European perspective, Eurasia is generally used to describing Russia as both a European and an Asian country at the same time. Therefore Eurasia is also described as the link between Europe and Asia. Culturally it stands for values that are different to European or Western ones. At the same time, Kazakhstan views itself as a Eurasian country and uses this term as a geopolitical and identity-establishing concept. In this context Kazakhstan adapts and promotes itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Today’s EU-member states are not thinking about Eurasia as such, but about Europe and Asia as separate entities. The EU as a regional union is mapping the world into regions and develops its policies towards other regions and areas even if they do not share a common identity. Additionally, Brussels builds regions more or less successfully: it has for example successfully established the Baltic Sea area as a region whereas this has not really been the case for the Black Sea. This is different to Russia, which prefers bilateral relations with other big powers than creating regions as such. Even if we are observing in the Russian policy the building of an Eurasian Economic Union, the bilateral relations with the participating states are more important than the multilateral framework.

The renaissance of Eurasia is linked to globalisation and growing economic interdependence. Emerging security challenges, global economic competition and demand for economic growth often need regional answers. For instance China’s economic activities in Eurasia in the context of the Silk Road project have shifted attention to the region. At the same time, growing security risks are spreading in this region from the conflict zones of Afghanistan-Pakistan and Syria-Iraq as well as a number of weak states in the region, which are not able to create economic welfare. These security challenges threaten China, Russia, and the EU at the same time. Central Asia is in the very heart of Eurasia. It is another region where the EU has tried to combine bilateral with multilateral approaches but with limited success. Regional identity in the region is weakly developed, and the Central Asian states are mainly interested in exclusive bilateral relations with international partners while Kazakhstan sees itself as the regional leader. The EU’s core concept for its external relations is organized in concentric circles reaching at its outermost point Central Asia. Because Central Asian states are not direct neighbors of the EU, they — like Russia — are described as “neighbors of the neighbors”. The conflict with Russia over Ukraine shows that the EU has ignored the geopolitical implications of its neighborhood policy and the interests and impact of other states in this particular region. Michael Emmerson has coined the term “greater Eurasia”, which includes Europe, Russia, Central Asia as well as Asia. He also poses the question whether China is part of Eurasia.

Using this term in such a comprehensive way may help to understand how Eurasia can link different regions, and how it can play a role in developing economic cooperation and solving regional problems. However, by including so many different countries in the definition of Eurasia the concept becomes so broad that it loses all meaning. In this essay, I therefore define Eurasia in a more traditional way placing Russia and Central Asia at its core.

The focus of this paper will thus lie on the Central Asian states. In the context of this publication, I will address the different views and activities of the EU, Russia, and China in this region. All three are part of this regional concept and try to shape Eurasia in their own way. However, the main aim of this paper is to analyze the European view on the opportunities and challenges which are linked to Eurasia.

DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF DEVELOPING EURASIA

The EU, Russia, and China have different interests, strategies, and concepts towards Eurasia. For the EU Eurasia is not a relevant concept as such since it mainly focuses on cooperation in the context of its Central Asian strategy, which aims at stabilizing the region, building up platforms for economic and security cooperation, as well as exporting the EU’s norms and standards. Russia, in the context of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), approaches Eurasia with a mixed policy of assertive cooperation and integration where Russia sets the rules and acts as the regional hegemon. With the EEU Moscow tries to dominate the partner countries and isolate them from outside influences. China seeks to penetrate the region with its Silk Road Economic Belt project, which is vague and very flexible at the same time, opening several channels for other countries to cooperate or participate. One could therefore argue, that while China’s Silk Road project like the EU’s Central Asia cooperation in the region are inclusive and open to multilateral cooperation, Russia’s policy in the region is exclusive while pushing other powers from the region away.

The question of who is setting the rules has always been the key to any form of cooperation and integration. China, on the one hand, sets no clear rules, as it is very flexible. It mainly has business interests and does not ask political questions while it promotes a narrative that every interested party can join the project with its business interests. Neither China nor Russia ask questions on human rights or governance structures, which, on the other hand, are the main focus of EU policy. For Moscow and Beijing informal rules and deals are part of their policy, which also entails comprehensive corruption not as an exception but as their attribute of the political and economic system.

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The EU's focus with regard to its economic interests in the wider Eurasian region is China, because it is much more important as a trade partner for the EU member states than Russia or Central Asian countries. At the moment China is the second biggest trade partner for the EU after USA (followed by Russia) and the EU is the biggest trade partner for China (as well as for Russia). With regard to Central Asia, the US has more or less withdrawn from the region. The US led New Silk Road project is somehow forgotten and was first of all focused on integrating Afghanistan into the region. Contrary to the Russian and Chinese concept, the US government promoted a North-South transit and trade route instead of an East-West link. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shift of attention to Iraq, Syria, Iran, this initiative is no priority anymore. For the EU it is difficult to deal with political systems, which are not democratic. The member states are split on the question whether the EU should follow more a value-oriented policy or an interest-oriented economic policy. This weakens the EU's role in Eurasia. Therefore in Central Asia we observe a two-track approach of the EU: EU institutions are responsible for political relations and the difficult questions on rule of law, democratic standards and human right, while member states prefer to do business without asking the difficult questions.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS OF EURASIA FROM THE EU PERSPECTIVE?

Basically the European interests in Eurasia are limited and focused on the EU's neighbors. The EU is still a weak foreign policy player and limits its foreign policy either to interactions with immediate neighbors or to promoting economic interests of its member states. Russia is a direct neighbor and an important trade partner...
of the EU but Central Asian states are not. Economically this
region is interesting because of its natural resources. At the same
time there is competition with Russia and China in the region,
whereas the EU is in many terms the weakest player in this “New
Great Game”. It is a huge landspace that links Europe with China
and Russia as important economic partners. The whole region is
often described as a huge empty space, which needs investment
in infrastructure and gives access to Russian and Central Asian
resources and the Chinese market.

WHAT ARE THE WEAKNESSES OF EURASIA?

Main hindrances for investment and more activities in the
region are the underdeveloped infrastructure, authoritarian
types of governance, lack of interregional cooperation and a
limited market. The small population limits investment
attractiveness. A huge weakness from the EU perspective are
the authoritarian regimes which stand for a weak legal
framework, lack of rule of law, and widespread corruption
among a clientelistic economic and political systems. The 2014
corruption perception index of Transparency International
lists Kazakhstan in 126th place, Russia and Kyrgyzstan — in
136th, Tajikistan — in 152nd, Uzbekistan — in 166th, and
Turkmenistan — in 169th, out of a total 175 countries.65 This is
a huge hindrance for investment in the region.

The EU prefers to develop its policy and support towards
multilateral cooperation in greater regions. Central Asian
states have limited interest in regional cooperation and their
relationships with neighboring countries are based mainly on
conflict and competition. As a result, there is a lack of common
standards and cooperation, which makes market access more
difficult, and the EU’s approach less successful. The Eurasian
Economic Union could change this situation because it would
create an area of common standards and regulations. But as
long as the EUU is mainly an instrument to create barriers for
coopetition and trade of the participating countries with the
UE by increasing custom tariffs and introduce new barriers for
external trade, this benefit will not become a reality. Russian
President Vladimir Putin’s idea to develop a common economic
space from Vladivostok to Lisbon has become a project of the
remote future, as a result of the current crisis between Russia
and the West and the war in Ukraine.66

The EU’s policy for Central Asia has the fundamental goal to create stability and growth
in the region and to develop regional states into security providers, not security risks.

WHAT ARE OPPORTUNITIES
FOR THE EU IN THE REGION?

The underdeveloped infrastructure in nearly all areas is a huge
chance for investment and export of technological know-how
by European companies. In this context, the Chinese Silk
Road project is often seen as a big chance for investment
where European companies can also participate and benefit.
Furthermore the improvement of infrastructure in the whole
region could give better access to Asia, and particularly the
Chinese, market. Economic growth in the region could improve
the security situation in the entire region in the long-term. EU
member states can supply what the countries of the region
need most of: machinery, technology in many areas, high
quality goods. On the other hand, the EU can benefit from
the resources of the region. The EU’s policy for Central Asia
has the fundamental goal to create stability and growth in the
region and to develop regional states into security providers,
not security risks.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN
THREATS FOR THE REGION?

Seen from a European perspective, the main threats of the
region are security risks like terrorism and drug trafficking
coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Arab world into
these countries. This is linked to the fact that many countries in
Central Asia and the wider region are weak states which are not
able to provide security and economic and social demands of
their societies. Bad governance, weak economic performance,
huge social discrepancies within the countries are typical trends
in the region. Growing competition for fundamental resources
like water and changing societal dynamics will increase the
challenges for local governments and clans. Russia’s deep
economic crisis and lack of a sustainable growth model have
negative consequences for Central Asian countries. This will
weaken any attempt to fight against external and internal
threats and will undermine economic prosperity and investment
perspectives. Further more, because of the geopolitical location
and the huge extent of resources, the geopolitical competition
in the region will grow.

Russia is the main security provider in the region, but at the
same time Moscow uses conflicts to secure its influence. The
combination of low oil and gas prices, coupled with Western
sanctions over the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea,
Russia will have less resources to provide security for the entire
region. This will have consequences for the stability in post-
Soviet countries, Russia included. China was very successful in
the last years increasing its economic influence in many regions
of the world including Central Asia, Russia, and the European
past-Soviet countries. At the same time, this policy has a weak
security pillar. China is not willing to fill the security gap since
the US has withdrawn from many regions. Its Silk Road project
sounds impressive by numbers and ambitions but does not
include answers to the urgent social and security challenges in
the different targeted countries and regions even if it can create
economic growth and stability in the long run.

Also as the US is focusing on other regions of the world like
Asia and the Arab world, Eurasia is of limited importance. Russia
and China will not fill this gap and cooperation in the context
of the Shanghai Organization or the Russia-led Collective
Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are not able to find
adequate answers to the security, social, economic and political
challenges of the region. The European Union is preoccupied
by its own economic, political, and institutional crisis, which will
not be solved in the foreseeable future. That means there are
no ambitions and resources to play a key role in Central Asia
and its neighborhood in the next years even if the budget for
Central Asia has increased to 1.03 billion euros for the period of
2014-2020.67

EUROPE AND EURASIA —
FUTURE PROSPECTS

According to the Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for
Central Asia from June 2015, the EU will strengthen its trade
and energy links with Central Asian countries in the next
years and improve cooperation on security and stability in
the region.68 The EU has all the instruments to support good
governance, rule of law, human rights, capacity building
in public administration, and promote sustainable economic
and social development in the region. These are preconditions
to stabilize the region, improve security, and achieve
prosperity. But Brussels is not able or willing to expand its
activities to have more impact in the region. On the other
hand this policy stands in opposition to many interests of the
local elites and in direct competition with Moscow’s policy.

Particularly, Russia has a much greater interest in the region
than the EU and can manipulate it with its policy approaches.
While the EU should not ignore Russia’s role in the region
and follow a cooperative approach, it should more extensively
explore the common interests with China and possibilities
to cooperate in the region.

The EU has all the instruments to support good
governance, rule of law, human rights, capacity building in public administration, and promote
sustainable economic and social development in the region.


Ibid.


Ibid.