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Subject: Council Conclusions on the EU strategy for Central Asia

Delegations will find attached Council conclusions on the EU strategy for Central Asia as adopted by the Council on 19 June 2017.

Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia

1. The Council recognises that the countries of Central Asia have become significant partners of the EU. Ten years after the adoption of the Central Asia strategy¹, and more than 25 years after the five countries became independent, the Council welcomes the progress achieved in developing the EU's relations with Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as with the Central Asian region as a whole. The Council emphasises the importance of the current formats of cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian countries, such as the EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings, the Cooperation Councils with the individual countries and the High Level Political and Security Dialogue, and recognises the important work of the EUSR for Central Asia.
2. The main objectives and priority areas of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia of 22 June 2015 remain pertinent. The Council reaffirms its commitment to develop a strong and durable relationship, based on joint ownership and aimed at fostering peaceful, prosperous, sustainable and stable socio-economic development of the Central Asia region in line with the EU Global Strategy and the joint commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. The Council reiterates that the depth of relations is linked to the ambitions and needs of individual Central Asian countries to take forward our bilateral relationships as well as to their commitment to undertake reforms to strengthen democracy, fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and to modernise and diversify the economy. The EU will continue to take full account of the respective specificities in socio-economic development, governance and ambition when pursuing its cooperation with the five countries. Welcoming the recent trend for more regional exchange in Central Asia, the Council encourages the Commission and Member States to pursue multi-country programmes wherever appropriate to advance regional cooperation.

¹ "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership", Council document 10113/07 of 31 May 2007.

4. Given the serious challenges to human rights, including gender issues, in the region, the Council reaffirms the crucial importance of continuing a meaningful dialogue with the Central Asian countries on good governance, the rule of law and human rights. This involves promoting respect for human rights, prioritising even further the rule of law cooperation in the EU Strategy, and supporting Central Asian countries to fight corruption and promote accountability by making full use of the existing Rule of Law Initiative and its Platform. To this end, e-governance is an important tool. The Council also calls for the continued and deep involvement of civil society in the implementation of the Strategy, to permit civil society to contribute effectively to policy dialogue and development.
5. The Council recognises the security challenges faced by Central Asian countries and stresses the need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on security challenges such as prevention of violent extremism (including addressing radicalisation and foreign fighters) and counter-terrorism, with an increased focus on prevention. The Council underlines the importance of research to explore the drivers of radicalism to guide evidence based approaches and actions to reduce radicalisation. The Council recognizes the importance of effective border control in ensuring the facilitation of cross-border trade, the fight against illegal trafficking of persons and goods and for managing migration flows and is determined to continue its support to strengthening cooperation among Central Asian countries on their border management. The Council also reiterates the EU's determination to further develop a regional security dialogue with the Central Asian countries, while ensuring a stronger involvement of Afghanistan and thereby contributing to stabilization efforts in Central Asia's neighbourhood.
6. The Council recognises the need to enhance the EU's strategic communication in Central Asia, including to ensure better visibility and outreach for the EU's strategy and its outcomes. The Council also stresses the importance of an independent media environment free from internal and external pressures.

7. The Council also underlines the importance of support to education. Education programmes provided by the EU and individual Member States should play a key role in helping Central Asian institutions to build capacity to offer modern and inclusive curricula that respond to the needs of the labour market and contribute to the promotion of the values of democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms and intercultural dialogue, by making full use of the existing Education Initiative and its Platform. People-to-people contacts and international cooperation contribute substantially to this effort. Ensuring links between quality secondary and tertiary education and vocational training, as well as between research and labour markets, will further promote innovation, employment and gender equality. It will also help prevent exclusion and reduce radicalisation risks among the younger population.
8. The Council stresses the importance of promoting a reliable and attractive climate for sustainable and responsible investments in Central Asia, together with stability of the legal framework, legal certainty, transparency, involvement of the business community and regional integration. In line with this, the Council accentuates the existing correlation between rule of law, good governance and an improved business climate. The Council also stresses the need to increase the exchange of experience and know-how in innovative technologies, notably in the field of renewable energies, energy efficiency, water management, agriculture and rural development, to spur sustainable development.
9. In the energy, infrastructure and transport sectors, the Council emphasises that cooperation between the EU and Central Asia should prioritise the integration of the Central Asian countries with each other and into international markets and transport corridors. The EU will continue to seek to extend the Southern Gas Corridor to Central Asia, and to further promote the EU's multilateral and bilateral energy cooperation. The EU will also continue to promote renewable energy and energy efficiency in Central Asia by offering its expertise in the development of sound regulatory frameworks and by supporting investment cooperation with European financial institutions.

10. Regarding the sensitive area of shared natural resources and their important role for the stability of the region, the Council stresses the importance of respecting the strategic interests of all five Central Asian countries, while promoting multilateral and regional frameworks of dialogue and increased adhesion to international conventions and legal principles governing the environment, trans-boundary resource management, and the consequences of the disappearance of the Aral Sea. The Council invites the High Representative, the Commission and the Member States to support the Central Asian countries to better define approaches to the sustainable use and efficient management of natural resources, particularly water at national and trans-boundary level, and to support the region in coping with climate change impacts and ensuring the preservation of environment, by making full use of the existing Initiative for Environment and Water Cooperation and its Platform. The Council also welcomes the specific initiatives of the European Commission in close coordination with relevant international partners (IAEA, EBRD) to remediate the impact of the uranium tailings in Central Asia, as well as its support to mitigate the Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Risks in Central Asia.
11. The Council takes note of plans to streamline the European Commission's regional development assistance programmes under two broad headings: sustainable growth/jobs and security/stability, while stressing that common solutions are required, without prejudice to further discussions regarding those programmes in the relevant fora. There is a need to increase the resilience of the region as a whole, as well as the resilience of individual countries.
12. In the spirit of an integrated approach, the Council stresses the need to improve further cooperation, coordination and synergies between Member States, the EEAS and the European Commission. It is important that EU Member States continue to contribute to the implementation of the Strategy and share their national initiatives with the Council.

13. The Council stresses the importance of close complementarity and consistency between bilateral and regional programmes of the Commission and the Member States to ensure that the needs of Central Asian countries are well targeted, and that the support of the EEAS, European Commission and Member States is integrated, comprehensive and coordinated. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on a sense of common ownership by the beneficiary countries, the EU and its Member States.
14. The Council recognises the importance of dialogue and coordination with relevant regional and international organisations, in particular the OSCE, which continues to maintain a valuable field presence in all five Central Asian countries, the Council of Europe, the UN and others, as well as neighbours of the Central Asian countries and other states active in the region, with a view to seeking synergies between our respective policies and initiatives on such issues as security, inter-connectivity, transport, energy and sustainable development, including possibilities arising from “silk road” initiatives.
15. The European Union remains committed to its strategic objectives and to supporting political and economic reform in Central Asia. On the tenth anniversary of the original Central Asia strategy the Council believes that it is time to review and renew our relationship, taking into account new geopolitical realities and the evolving needs and capacities of our Central Asian partners. The Council therefore invites the High Representative and the Commission to come forward with a proposal for a new Strategy by the end of 2019 in accordance with the EU Global Strategy. The new Strategy should take stock of the achievements of EU action in support of Central Asia since 2007. It should be broadly discussed with Member States and lay the foundation for a renewed and enhanced partnership with the region and guide the upcoming EU assistance to Central Asia. The EU intends to involve the Central Asian partners in the preparation of the new strategy.

