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Subject: Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia

Delegations will find attached Council conclusions on the New Strategy on central Asia as adopted by the Council (Foreign Affairs) on 17 June 2019.

Council conclusions on the New EU Strategy on Central Asia

1. The Council welcomes strengthened relations between the European Union (EU) and Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan since the adoption of the first EU Strategy on Central Asia in 2007. In a world characterised by growing interdependence and interconnection, the EU and Central Asia are bound by strong mutual interests and are now closer than ever. The Council underlines the significant opportunities that positive dynamics in Central Asia have created for taking the EU-Central Asia partnership forward.
2. The Council endorses the Joint Communication on "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" by the High Representative and the European Commission which, together with these Council conclusions, provides the new policy framework for EU engagement with the countries of Central Asia over the coming years.
3. The Council underlines the importance of purposeful and target-oriented implementation of the new EU Strategy on Central Asia, which is a valuable opportunity for the EU and Central Asia to forge a strong and durable partnership for the mutual benefit of their citizens. The Council invites the countries of Central Asia to work with the EU to that end.
4. The Council welcomes the new focus of the EU's Strategy on promoting resilience, prosperity and regional cooperation in Central Asia.
5. The Council reaffirms its commitment to conclude and implement ambitious, broad-based and mutually-beneficial Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with the interested countries of the region. These new-generation agreements will remain a cornerstone of EU engagement with Central Asia. The Council reiterates that the scope of the EU's relations is linked to the readiness of individual Central Asian countries 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 the economy, including by supporting the private sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, in a free market economy.

6. The Council recalls the EU's commitment to support regional cooperation. While it is for the countries of Central Asia to determine the best structures and mechanisms to promote dialogue and cooperation in the region at their own pace, region-to-region dialogue and the EU's multi-country cooperation programmes will help to advance regional cooperation in Central Asia.
7. Recognising the key role of Central Asian countries in supporting an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process and the country's reconstruction, and in line with the EU strategy on Afghanistan, the Council stresses the importance of encouraging further political and economic engagement between the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan to jointly promote an inclusive peace process and sustainable development. Stronger connectivity between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia has a key role to play for peace, prosperity and the stabilisation of the wider region.
8. The EU strategy aims to forge a non-exclusive partnership with the countries of Central Asia. The EU will continue to work with international organisations, in particular the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe, as well as with third countries, as appropriate, where such broader involvement would contribute to the general objectives of the EU and of this Strategy.
9. The Council emphasises that further EU-Central Asia cooperation should focus on promoting the sovereignty and resilience of Central Asian countries and societies as well as of the region as a whole. Efforts to promote the accountability of institutions and to combat corruption, to promote citizens' security, to tackle climate change and environmental degradation, to remediate uranium mining legacy sites and to preserve biodiversity and water resources can only succeed through increased dialogue and strengthened cooperation. The EU calls for closer cooperation on the management of transboundary water resources and welcomes in that respect the role of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea as well as the initiatives of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia.

10. The promotion and protection of the rule of law, of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and association, of an enabling environment for civil society, and of human rights defenders as well as the rights of women and the rights of the child as well as the support of the ILO Decent Work Agenda for a Fair Globalisation, must remain at the core of EU-Central Asia relations. The EU and Central Asian countries should continue to promote and act towards gender equality and promote the participation of women in social and economic life.
11. The Council underlines the importance of enhancing cooperation on migration and mobility, in particular in the framework of EPCAs, as well as the need to strengthen dialogue and to encourage continued cooperation against common security challenges, such as violent extremism, radicalisation, terrorism, cyber and hybrid threats, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. The Council stresses the importance of tackling the socio-economic root causes of radicalisation. The Council encourages cooperation on crisis management and security sector governance and reform. It considers continued cooperation on border management in the region, including Afghanistan, a priority of the EU with a view to facilitating intra-regional trade, fighting against illegal trafficking of persons, drugs and goods, and managing migration flows.
12. The Council emphasises that the EU and Central Asian countries should further cooperate to take their partnership for prosperity forward. The conclusion and implementation of EPCAs, which include comprehensive provisions on trade, and the effective use of other existing trade instruments, such as the Generalised System of Preferences, should increase trade and investment flows between the EU and Central Asian countries. EPCAs will promote regulatory convergence and compliance with EU and international standards, improve reciprocal market access and contribute to the protection of intellectual property rights and geographical indications. The promotion of an open, sound, secure and attractive climate for business and investment in Central Asia, particularly through business-to-business dialogue, is important. The Council stresses also the importance of developing services further, of modernising infrastructures as well as promoting the agricultural sector.

13. Recognising the strategic role of Central Asia in global efforts to promote Euro-Asian connectivity and stressing that these efforts should bring benefits to the region, the Council looks forward to increased cooperation with Central Asian countries to promote sustainable; comprehensive; and rules-based connectivity. In line with the EU's Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia, the Council calls for the establishment of partnerships for sustainable connectivity where appropriate with countries of Central Asia in order to promote quality infrastructure and to improve the economic, social, fiscal and environmental sustainability in and with Central Asia and ensure the smooth transit of goods. The Council supports efforts to link up Central Asia with Eastern Partnership countries and Afghanistan. The Council supports work towards connecting the extended Trans-European Network for Transport with networks in Central Asia and advancing mutual interest in the implementation of joint energy and transport connectivity projects in which the bridging potential of the Black and Caspian Seas is fully used. While transport is becoming increasingly multimodal and new opportunities for improving existing and developing new Euro-Asian transport networks are emerging, the North-South and the East-West rail connections could play an important role in the future. The Council highlights the need to cooperate in digital connectivity and e-governance. The Council underlines the importance of effective measures to address climate change, in line with the Paris Agreement, and of supporting the region's transition towards a low-carbon economy. The EU should step up cooperation with the countries of Central Asia on renewable energy and energy efficiency, as well as on facilitating electricity interconnections on a level playing field. People-to-people connections will also play a key role in the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership.

14. The Council underlines the importance of further supporting education in Central Asia to promote development, economic diversification and decent job opportunities, and to prevent exclusion and reduce the risk of radicalisation leading to violent extremism inter alia among the younger population. The Council supports reforms to increase the quality of education, higher education and vocational education and training and to promote synergies between education systems and the labour market as well as digital education. It reaffirms its willingness to further develop academic exchange programmes and to support regional cooperation and mobility in this context. The Council encourages cooperation between EU and Central Asian higher education institutions as well as exchanges of students, academics and researchers. Cooperation on culture and tourism should be encouraged to deliver social and economic benefits.
15. While several countries of Central Asia have achieved high levels of development, new economic growth models, structural reforms, economic diversification and the reduction of socio-economic inequalities are needed in the region to consolidate development gains. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Development provides significant opportunities to act together for sustainable development.
16. The Council considers that the new EU strategy on Central Asia should guide the programming of EU assistance, including sustainable investment by the European Investment bank (EIB), to the region, and that future cooperation must be able to respond to any new phases of reforms in the Central Asian countries. The Council underlines the need for appropriate funding for the implementation of the strategy in the future programming of financial and technical cooperation. The Council stresses the importance of close complementarity and consistency between the bilateral and regional programmes of the Commission and of Member States and of joint programming to maximise impact. In this context, the Council also acknowledges the important role played by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in the region.

17. The Council invites the High Representative to further enhance cooperation with the countries of Central Asia on key foreign policy priorities of relevance. The Council underlines the contribution which Central Asia can make to tackling global challenges. Cooperation on climate change should seek the full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement. In line with their shared commitment to a rules-based world order, the EU and Central Asian countries should work more closely together in multilateral fora, including the UN, OSCE and World Trade Organisation (WTO). In particular, the EU will continue to encourage and provide adequate support for the accession of all Central Asian countries to the WTO.
18. The Council encourages a stronger joint approach between the EU institutions and Member States in their respective engagement with the region. The Council welcomes the opening of an EU Delegation in Turkmenistan.
19. The EU Special Representative for Central Asia should continue to act as a channel of dialogue and communication at the highest level with the Central Asian countries to enhance the EU's effectiveness and visibility in the region.
20. The Council emphasises that the EU-Central Asia partnership extends beyond governments and looks forward to the involvement of civil societies in all its dimensions. Future relations need to build upon contributions from a broad range of stakeholders including also parliamentarians, the private sector, think-tanks and academia and youth.
21. The Council underlines the need to enhance the EU's strategic communication in Central Asia to enhance the visibility of the EU, of the implementation of its strategy and of the tangible benefits that it can bring to the region. In that respect, the Council stresses the importance of an environment for independent media free from internal and external pressures and of the EU's role in helping to support its development.
22. The Council invites the High Representative and the European Commission to take forward work on the implementation of the concrete priorities identified in the Joint Communication in close cooperation with Member States and Central Asian partner countries.