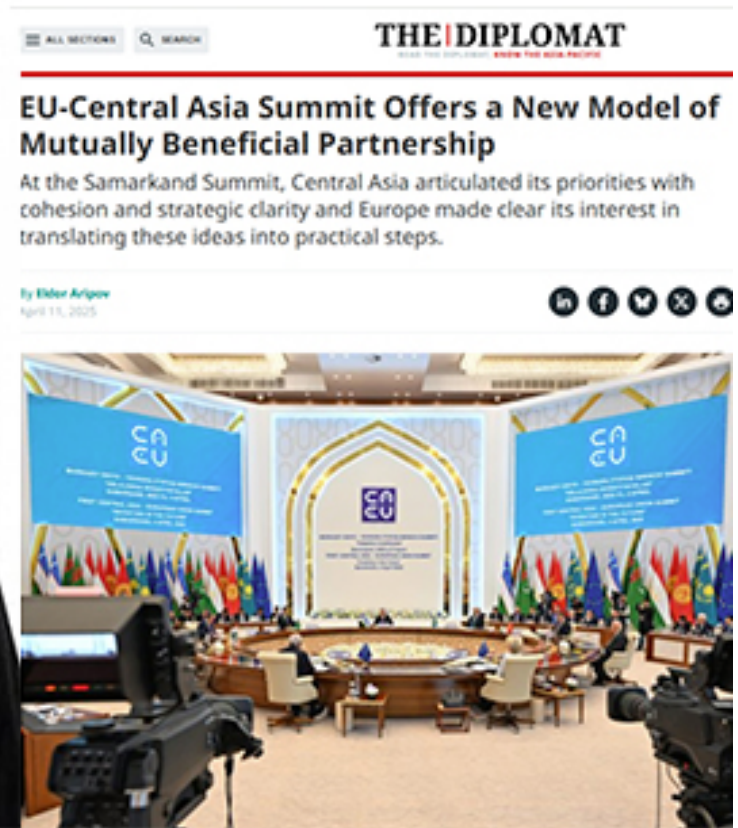


EU-Central Asia Summit Offers a New Model of Mutually Beneficial Partnership



At the Samarkand Summit, Central Asia articulated its priorities with cohesion and strategic clarity and Europe made clear its interest in translating these ideas into practical steps.

The inaugural Central Asia-European Union Summit and the International Climate Forum – held in Samarkand last week and attended by EU leaders António Costa and Ursula von der Leyen alongside the heads of the five Central Asian nations – stood out as a significant moment amid today’s turbulent global context.

At a time when the international system is strained by crises of trust, conflict, and economic fragmentation, Uzbekistan, at the heart of Central Asia, demonstrated that an alternative agenda is not only desirable but increasingly achievable: one anchored in mutual respect, constructive cooperation, and joint efforts to address development challenges.

Central Asia – a region bordering Russia to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan to the south – was, just a decade ago, widely seen as a zone of unresolved conflicts and sealed borders. Today, it is gaining recognition as a region marked by increasing stability, connectivity, and openness.

A recent illustration of this transformation was the signing of the historic Agreement on the Junction Point of State Borders and the Declaration of Eternal Friendship by the leaders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, just prior to the Central Asia-EU summit. These agreements helped resolve longstanding territorial disputes and opened new opportunities for regional cooperation.

According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Central Asia’s GDP is projected to grow by 6 percent this year – well above the global average. The region is gaining economic traction: intra-regional trade has increased 4.5 times, mutual investments have doubled, and the number

of joint ventures has grown fivefold over the past few years.

At the core of this progress is the foreign policy vision of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, who early in his presidency declared a “zero problems with neighbors” approach. Sharing borders with all other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been instrumental in promoting regional engagement and dialogue. Principles of openness and good-neighborliness have become the foundation of a new model of cooperation.

As a result, Central Asia is acquiring growing strategic relevance. The region offers a potent combination of human capital and untapped natural resources. It is estimated to hold 7 percent of the world’s proven reserves of oil and gas, as well as a large share of rare earth elements essential to green technology and digital transformation. Central Asia is believed to possess up to 39 percent of the world’s reserves of 10 critical minerals: including 38.6 percent of manganese ore, 30 percent of chromium, 20 percent of lead, and 12.6 percent of zinc.

Against this backdrop, the region is seeking to recalibrate and strengthen relations with external partners. Europe, with its long-standing ties to Central Asia, is well-positioned to play a leading role. Over the past seven years, trade turnover between Central Asia and the EU has quadrupled, reaching 54 billion euros. The relationship is increasingly viewed not as a donor-recipient dynamic, but as a mutually reinforcing partnership.

As Mirziyoyev has emphasized, cooperation with the European Union should be reciprocal and based on shared interests. In this context, the Samarkand Summit produced a landmark decision to establish a strategic partnership between the EU and Central Asia. Rather than being driven by geopolitical competition, this partnership is underpinned by practical goals: investment, innovation, and human development.

A key development was the signing of an agreement to open a regional office of the European Investment Bank in Tashkent. This move signals the EU’s commitment to deeper, long-term engagement in the region, with Uzbekistan emerging as a key partner.

The EU increasingly sees Central Asia as a priority destination for investment in green energy, infrastructure, and innovation. On the sidelines of the summit, a substantial investment package was announced, covering areas such as transport connectivity (including the Trans-Caspian “Middle Corridor”), modernization of digital infrastructure, water supply and waste management systems, support for women’s and youth entrepreneurship, and the expansion of renewable energy – solar, wind, and green hydrogen

The EU also expressed its intention to support the development of a carbon market in Central Asia and welcomed Uzbekistan’s proposal to establish a “Central Asia-EU Partnership for Clean Energy.”

These developments reflect a growing recognition that Central Asia may play a critical role in the global green transition. Uzbekistan, for example, has already commissioned 14 solar power plants and is planning 50 additional renewable energy projects with a combined capacity of 24,000 megawatts. The share of renewables in the country’s energy mix is expected to rise to 54 percent within the next five years.

Notably, Europe is also investing in human capital. Plans include expanding access to Erasmus+ for Central Asian students, creating new academic exchanges in artificial intelligence, big data, and space technologies, and aligning the region more closely with the EU’s digital education and innovation agenda.

One of the most meaningful takeaways from the Samarkand Summit is the recognition of a new regional dynamic: Central Asia is increasingly articulating its priorities with greater cohesion and strategic clarity.

Samarkand served as a platform where this regional voice could be expressed and engaged with. The countries of Central Asia put forward concrete mechanisms, proposals, and collaborative platforms.

Europe's response reflected a shared interest in translating these ideas into practical steps. What emerged from the summit is not just a political declaration, but a framework for ongoing cooperation with tangible and strategic objectives.

Source