

Samarkand Summit: A new stage of strategic partnership between Central Asia and the European Union



Tashkent, Uzbekistan — Central Asia's foreign policy vector towards Europe has gained new momentum following the summit held in Samarkand. Importantly, this was not just another routine event in the diplomatic calendar of Central Asian states and the European Union.

As the first high-level collective gathering in over three decades of relations, the summit marked a breakthrough in interregional partnership.

In the capitals of Central Asia, the summit is regarded as a significant milestone and a new phase in strengthening the region's role in the international system. Calling the meeting a "historic opportunity for Central Asia," President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted, "It was once hard to imagine that in the near future we would be jointly representing our region in negotiations with European leaders."

In response, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, expressing gratitude to the Uzbek leader for organizing the forum, emphasized, "The countries of Central Asia are reliable partners for Europe. We are united by a long-standing friendship based on active trade, exchange of ideas, and innovation."

This sentiment was echoed by President of the European Council António Costa, who described the summit as "symbolic" and said, "We look to the future with optimism and fully share its motto: 'Investing in the Future.'"

Brussels is confident that the summit will not remain a one-time event but rather serve as a starting point for regular high-level meetings between the EU and Central Asian countries. The outcomes of the summit confirmed both sides' mutual commitment to deepening long-term, multifaceted cooperation envisioned to last for decades.

A key result of the summit was the signing of the Samarkand Declaration, which elevates the relationship between the two regions to the level of a strategic partnership. This enhanced form of cooperation is characterized by several core elements.

First and foremost, mutual trust and openness are the foundation of successful collaboration. Over the past thirty years, relations between Central Asia and the EU have been distinguished by a spirit of trust, mutual understanding, and a practical approach to working-level contacts. In recent years, the dynamic development of these ties has led to today's tangible outcomes: a stable and structured multifaceted partnership.

This progress is largely driven by active political dialogue at the highest levels. Two notable meetings between regional leaders and the President of the European Council took place in Astana in October 2022 and in Cholpon-Ata in June 2023, where both sides reviewed promising areas of cooperation and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the partnership.

Bilateral visits between Central Asian states and the EU have also intensified with increasing confidence. A series of ministerial-level meetings have taken place, focusing on the expansion of targeted cooperation programs. At the 19th such meeting, held in Luxembourg in 2023, a joint Roadmap for Strengthening EU-Central Asia Relations was adopted. The most recent gathering, held in Ashgabat in March of this year, placed special emphasis on expanding connectivity within the framework of the EU's Global Gateway strategy.

Second, mutual benefit and the alignment of strategic interests play a central role in fostering constructive cooperation. This alignment underpins the long-term nature of the relationship and is geared towards achieving shared objectives.

The Samarkand summit comes at a time of increasing global uncertainty, marked by geopolitical tensions, economic volatility, and escalating climate challenges.

These pressing global issues present challenges for both regions, but they also fuel a shared determination to find solutions—further drawing the two sides closer together.

The European Union is actively working to diversify its network of international partners, and Central Asia holds a key position in this context, largely due to its rising significance in the global geopolitical landscape. Today, the region is emerging as a critical link in global production and transportation chains. It boasts a sizable consumer market, significant investment and export potential, a skilled labor force, abundant natural resources, and energy assets.

As a result, Central Asian countries are expanding mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU on both bilateral and multilateral levels, contributing to the achievement of sustainable regional development goals.

Third, the partnership is reaching a new level, broadening traditional areas of engagement and covering a wide range of strategic directions.

The growing mutual interest is fueling development in forward-looking sectors such as energy security, diversification of economic models, the creation of sustainable transport corridors, and digital connectivity. These shared priorities are shaping the path toward deeper, multidimensional interaction between the EU and Central Asian countries.

This direction was clearly reflected in the documents signed during the summit.

In particular, within the Global Gateway initiative, a financial package totaling €12 billion was approved for infrastructure projects across Central Asia. This includes €3 billion for transport and logistics, €2.5 billion for the mining sector, €6.4 billion for climate initiatives, and €100 million for digital development.

Additionally, the Joint Declaration of Intent on Critical Raw Materials aims to deepen investment cooperation in the mining and processing of raw materials. As Ursula von der Leyen noted, "Minerals are the lifeblood of the global economy of the future. That's why they attract major global players, and Europe seeks to be a reliable partner for Central Asia."

New projects in digital technology are also being launched in parallel.

In particular, during European Commissioner Jozef Sikela's visit to the region in March this year, the TEI Digital Connectivity project was launched, aimed at developing satellite communications, ensuring affordable broadband internet access, supporting digital innovation, and strengthening cybersecurity.

These initiatives contribute to building a more inclusive and sustainable model for the region's development.

In summary, the summit proved to be highly productive. The signed agreements and achieved understandings are expected to infuse the EU-Central Asia partnership with a concrete agenda, reinforcing its foundation. This will provide a solid basis for further expansion of the partnership, focused on addressing today's most pressing global challenges, such as sustainable development, climate change, and energy security.

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