**EU’s Central Asia Initiative**

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December 31, 2022

Ukraine conflict has certainly posed tougher geopolitical and economic challenges to Europe and the world. However, it has also provided some opportunities in the process, which, if tackled judiciously, can go a long way to foster regional and global unification.

As soon as the war broke out, Russia blocked its energy supply to Europe, causing enormous trouble to regional economies. That forced the European Union and other stakeholders to explore alternative energy sources. In the Caspian oil reserves, they found the nearest, most economical and safest solution to their woes. Simultaneously, the conflict also put extra pressure on traffic through the Northern Corridor from Europe to China via Russian Siberia.

Hence, a rethinking ensued in Europe to explore – besides the energy – some shortest, easiest and safest transport routes in the region. The post-Soviet openness of the Central Asian and South Caucasian regions had already created opportunities for intra-regional interactions.

Being a vast unexplored region in its backyard, the Central Asian republics also offered opportunities to Europe to utilize its technological advancement for the digitalization of local societies and economies, besides promoting the pressing causes of climate change.

For their part, the cash-strapped Central Asian states have also been in search of foreign investment. For them, strengthening transport means boosting economic relations, reforms and liberalization. To achieve those ends, their direction is naturally toward the economically and technologically advanced Europe, which is in its immediate proximity and is equally interested in reciprocal cooperation.

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All these dreams naturally fitted in the EU’s Global Gateway Strategy, launched in 2021 to boost smart, clean and secure links in energy, transport and digital sectors, besides strengthening health, education and research systems across the world.

“Accelerating green transition and shaping digital economy are at the heart of EU’s policy agenda and foreign policy,” observed Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in one of his recent articles. All this was not possible prior to exploring an alternative transport route that could provide the easiest, safest and most economical access to the whole of Central Asia.

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Hence the Middle Corridor, the Trans-Caspian Route, passes through Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan and China. This rail-road project was found not only the shortest and most transport-worthy route for many countries in Asia and Europe but also promised to integrate the vast steppes of South Caucus and Central Asia with Europe in the west, China in the east, South Asia in the southeast and Middle East in the southwest.

European Union’s cooperative relations with regional countries had already created favourable circumstances for such integration. Ever since 2014, the EU is the number one donor in Central Asia. Up to 2020, It has provided euro 1.1 billion or $1.14 billion to the Central Asian republics in aid. It has also sanctioned a grant of euro 390 million between 2021 and 2024 covering both bilateral and regional programs.

The European Union is also the largest investor in Central Asia. European companies have contributed more investment in the region than any others. By leveraging the investment power of the European private sector, the EU leadership plan to promote a new green economy in Central Asia. The European Council President Charles Michael’s visit to the region several months back was designed to give further impetus to these initiatives.

In November, the ‘EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference: Global Gateway’ was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, to carry ahead these ideals. The instant objectives of the conference were to help overcome mainly two challenges i.e. climate change and digitalization of economies and societies in Central Asia. The task was to identify investment opportunities and highlight reforms for closer connections.

In his address on the occasion, Vladimir Norov, the Foreign Affairs Minister of Uzbekistan proposed the Samarkand Conference be made “a regular feature to create coordinated strategies to enhance EU-Central Asia cooperation.”

He proposed meetings between the two sides to address customs practices, the adoption of tariffs and the development of an integrated digital network along the Trans-Caspian Route.

Norov also urged the need for cooperative investment initiatives for the development of data infrastructure. He announced that Uzbekistan will host a Central Asia Tourism Forum next year.

The EU side proposed new projects to improve digital connectivity in Central Asia, besides furthering work on water resources, electricity and climate change.

The most promising aspect of the EU’s Central Asia Initiative is the equal interest of the United States and China in it. As the Central Asian republics are already in search of linkages with Pakistan and the Indian Ocean states, this project can create a win-win situation for countries across Eurasia.

However, peace and stability in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, are poised to remain the central condition for carrying ahead such projects of regional cohesion and integration. “In the European Union, we are building up ‘Open Strategic Autonomy,’ upholding freedom to make our own strategic choices, avoiding excessive dependence and having alternatives, all within a global system built on international law, sound rules and global standards. Naturally, we understand the wish of our partners to likewise build their autonomy and their freedom of choices,” observed Josep Borrell, quite in tandem with the emerging needs of convergences in the geo-economic cohesion of the world.

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