

The European Union – Central Asia Cooperation within the Framework of the Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy

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Abstract. The Central Asian region has been recently receiving increasing attention, especially due to the war launched by Russia in Ukraine, the growing influence of China both in the region and in the world, and the EU's desire to find new trade routes with Asia, which would bypass Russia. In this case, the Central Asian states, when developing their foreign policy, claim that they use a multivector foreign policy strategy, but the understanding and explanation of the latter outside the region is somewhat limited. Therefore, this article attempts to show that the multivectorism declared by these countries essentially corresponds to the omnidirectional hedging foreign policy strategy, and the relations between the Central Asian states and the European Union can be one of the examples of the implementation of this strategy, since they are developed based on the key dimensions of the omnidirectional hedging strategy – diplomatic, economic, and security.

Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, multivectorism, omnidirectional hedging, strategy, foreign policy, cooperation.

Europos Sąjungos ir Vidurinės Azijos valstybių bendradarbiavimas taikant daugiakryptę apsidraudimo strategiją

Santrauka. Vidurinės Azijos regionas pastaruoju metu sulaukia vis daugiau dėmesio, ypač dėl Rusijos pradėto karo Ukrainoje, didėjančios Kinijos įtakos tiek regione, tiek pasaulyje ir Europos Sąjungos siekio rasti naujų prekybos kelių su Azija, apeinant Rusiją. Šiuo atveju Vidurinės Azijos valstybės, vystydamos savo užsienio politiką, teigia, kad jos vadovaujasi multivektoriaus užsienio politikos strategija, tačiau šios strategijos supratimas ir paaiškinimas už regiono ribų yra ganėtinai ribotas. Todėl šiame straipsnyje mėginama parodyti, kad

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šių šalių deklaruojamas multivektorizmas iš principo atitinka daugiakryptę apsidraudimo užsienio politikos strategiją, o Vidurinės Azijos valstybių ir Europos Sąjungos santykiai gali būti kaip vienas šios strategijos įgyvendinimo pavyzdžių, nes jie vystomi, remiantis pagrindinėmis daugiakryptės apsidraudimo strategijos dimensijomis – diplomatija, ekonomika ir saugumu.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Europos Sąjunga, Vidurinė Azija, multivektorizmas, daugiakryptis apsidraudimas, strategija, užsienio politika, bendradarbiavimas.

Introduction

The five Central Asian (CA) countries – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – have formed the fundamental hub along the historical Silk Road¹. It has been an important crossroads place connecting Europe and Asia in terms of energy, trade and infrastructure², including sharing of goods, ideas, religions and technological innovations. After declaring independence in 1991, the Central Asian states began implementing a multivector foreign policy, which became the key principle of their foreign, economic, and security relations. Although each country in the region pursued this policy in its own way and based on its own understanding, the official goal was – and still is – to balance Russia’s influence by establishing relations with other states or international organizations on a pragmatic rather than ideological basis, aiming for economic and security benefits³.

When discussing multivector foreign policy, the primary issue is that, although the term is widely recognized when analysing the

¹ Paolo Pizzolo and Andrea Carteny, “The “New Great Game” in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?”, *The International Spectator* 57, no. 2, Instituto Affari Internazionali (2022): 85, <https://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.vdu.lt:2443/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2021.2007611>

² Neil Winn and Stefan Gänzle, “Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience,” *Geopolitics* 28, Issue 3 (2023): 1342, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260#abstract>

³ Caglar Kurc, “The Puzzle: Multi-Vector Foreign Policy and Defense Industrialization in Central Asia,” *Comparative Strategy* 37, no. 4 (2018): 316, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1497352>

foreign policies of Central Asian or broader post-Soviet states⁴, but it lacks a unified definition and clearly formulated criteria⁵. Some authors⁶ interpret it as balancing among power centers, while others⁷ see it as a long-term survival strategy aimed at economic growth and security. It is related to the fact that the Central Asian states themselves pursue differing and often uncoordinated multivector foreign policies toward other actors⁸. This makes it difficult to establish a single concept, as the policy is often explained rather than precisely defined⁹, and it is generally analysed through traditional alliance theories, such as balancing or bandwagoning¹⁰, and the concept, as such, remains largely confined to the post-Soviet context. By contrast, international relations theory more commonly relies on the concept of ‘hedging’, especially in studies of Southeast Asian states’ attempts to avoid choosing between the United States and China¹¹. In particular, the concept of omnidirectional hedging accentuates diversification of diplomatic, economic, and security relations not only between two great powers, but also with secondary or even tertiary actors, thereby

⁴ Ibid., 316

⁵ Ainis Razma, “Daugiavektoriškumas Uzbekistano užsienio politikoje 1991–2011 metų laikotarpiu” (PhD thesis, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, 2017), p. 25.

⁶ For example, Ermek Chukubayev and Anatoliy Savchuk in their work “Multivectorality of the Central Asian States in the New Geopolitical Reality,” 2017 or Ainis Razma in his work “Daugiavektoriškumas Uzbekistano užsienio politikoje 1991–2011 metų laikotarpiu,” 2017.

⁷ For example, Nicola P. Contessi in his work “Foreign Policy Diversification and Intercontinental Transport Corridors: The Case of Kazakhstan’s Railways Diplomacy,” 2018

⁸ Andrei Kazantsev, Svetlana Medvedeva, and Ivan Safranchuk, “Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12(1) (2021): 58, DOI: 10.1177/18793665211998242

⁹ Razma, „Daugiavektoriškumas Uzbekistano užsienio politikoje,” 25.

¹⁰ Nicola P. Contessi, “Foreign and Security Policy Diversification in Eurasia: Issue Splitting, Co-alignment, and Relational Power,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 62:5 (2015), 300, DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2015.1026788

¹¹ For example, Olli Suorsa in his work “Hedging against Over-dependence on US Security: Thailand and Philippines,” 2016; D. M. Jones and N. Jenne in their work “Hedging and Grand Strategy in Southeast Asian Foreign Policy,” 2022; or Maheera Munir and Aiysha Safdar in their work “Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia-Pacific: Omnidirectional Hedging of Traditional Middle Powers,” 2024.

expanding strategic space of small states¹². In this case, the conceptual gap between these two theories might be seen: while multivectorism, which is under implementation in Central Asia, closely parallels omnidirectional hedging, the two are rarely linked and analyzed in the international relations literature. Existing research, for example, Sim and Aminjonov, wrote about Central Asia's relations with China¹³ or Rangsimaporn analysed Kazakhstan's and Southeast Asia relations¹⁴ (the latter applies elements of the omnidirectional hedging concept locally), but none of them propose a broader theoretical connection between these two concepts and do not analyze them as potentially synonymous structural strategies applied to various states in different regions. Besides, almost all research was mostly dedicated towards Asia where the omnidirectional hedging strategy is mainly applied, while this approach has not been used towards the West and the European Union in particular. Therefore, the main research questions are the following: *How does the multivectorism of Central Asian states correlate with the omnidirectional hedging strategy, and can the EU's policy towards the Central Asian region and relations between both sides be presented as an example of implementation of an omnidirectional hedging strategy?* This would enable us to expand the field of discussion so that to compare both strategies, and, at the same time, to compare their applicability to different geographical and political cases.

For this purpose, the aim of the article is to compare multivector foreign policy with omnidirectional hedging, by describing their concepts, by defining what elements they have, how they correlate

¹² Olli Suorsa, "Maintaining a Small State's Strategic Space: 'Omnidirectional Hedging'," *International Studies Association Hong Kong* 10 (2017): 183, <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/f40db849-cb90-4826-9b7a-e449b602f398.pdf>

¹³ Li-Chem Sim and Farkhod Aminjonov, "Statecraft in the Steppes: Central Asia's Relations with China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 148 (2024): 618–633, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2136937>

¹⁴ Paradorn Rangsimaporn, "Southeast Asia in Kazakhstan's Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 3 (2023): 277–289, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1969250>

between themselves, and empirically analyze whether EU–Central Asia relations and the EU’s policy towards the region correspond to the key dimensions of omnidirectional hedging. This example of cooperation is especially relevant in the current geopolitical context. The consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic, along with growing China’s influence, Russia’s invasion into Ukraine¹⁵, or Russia’s verbal attacks targeting Central Asian statehoods and regimes, which made it as an unpredictable and potentially dangerous neighbour¹⁶, and which forced the countries involved to start looking for other partners, as well as trade routes that could connect Asia with Europe while bypassing Russia. In the year 2025, the Samarkand Summit was held, where a strategic partnership was announced between the EU and the five Central Asian states, focusing on transport, energy, and digital projects to enhance regional cooperation¹⁷ as well as commitment to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity; the participants expressed wish to ensure water, energy, border security while addressing shared security threats and strengthening multilateral ties¹⁸, providing a background for empirical research whether omnidirectional hedging could be used to analyse EU – Central Asia relations, and seeking not only to evaluate if the EU might be treated as a hedger for Central Asia, but also expanding the adaptability of an omnidirectional hedging strategy in a broader international context.

The article applies a qualitative case study approach and combines theoretical analysis with empirical examination. It engages in

¹⁵ Liga Andresone, “EU Cooperation Programmes for Central Asia: New Challenges and Responses,” *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs* 1-2024 (2024): 248, <https://journalse.com/pliki/pw/1-2024-Andersone.pdf>

¹⁶ Anna Jordanova, “Escaping Russian War: Central Asia Pursues its Own Agenda,” *New Eastern Europe*, analysis, 22.12.2022, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/12/22/escaping-russian-war-central-asia-pursues-its-own-agenda/>

¹⁷ Bojan Brkić, “Central Asia-EU Summit in Samarkand Marks Historic Regional Unity,” *Euronews*, 04.04.2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/04/central-asia-eu-summit-in-samarkand-marks-historic-regional-unity>

¹⁸ Aygerim Sarymbetova, “EU Unveils \$13.2 Billion Investment Package for Central Asia,” *Caspian News*, 06.04.2025, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/eu-unveils-132-billion-investment-package-for-central-asia-2025-4-6-0/>

a review of academic literature on multivector and omnidirectional hedging foreign policy strategies, by identifying their similarities and differences; whereas, for the empirical part, analysis of primary documents (official documents, cooperation agreements) and secondary documents/sources (peer-reviewed academic literature; press announcements) as well as statistical data (trade, investment, and aid flows between the EU and Central Asia, drawn from Eurostat, ITC, working papers) are used. Analysis is structured according to the three omnidirectional hedging dimensions – diplomacy, economics, and security. Such a methodological approach allows us to collect sufficient information about the topic, its contributing factors, and the impact to the theory it might have¹⁹. In this case, it becomes possible to explain the idea formulated in the work that multivectorism can be described through the principles of an omnidirectional hedging strategy or even use both strategies synonymously. Furthermore, presented empirical case empowers us to verify whether the EU-Central Asia relations might be described through the lenses of multivector or omnidirectional hedging strategies and whether it is possible to name EU as hedger or a “target” of multivector foreign policy for Central Asian countries. Having in mind the fact that the European Union is geographically distant from the region and is not a single state which might be treated as a traditional guarantor of security or economically dominant power.

The article is divided into 4 parts: the first part is dedicated to a description of omnidirectional and multivector foreign policy strategies; the second part describes diplomatic dimension; the third part discusses economic cooperation; the fourth part describes development and security ties between both sides, and this paper is finished with conclusions.

¹⁹ D. E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Method Approaches* (3rd ed.) (Routledge, 2020), 244, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.4324/9781003103141>

1. Description of Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy and Multivectorism in the Foreign Policy of States

As it was mentioned above, the term ‘hedging’ began to be used to describe a foreign policy strategy as an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning, aiming to explain the actions of small Southeast Asian (including Pacific²⁰) states after the Cold War²¹. These countries did not fit into any of the previously introduced strategies, as most of them, for example, maintain military ties with the West while simultaneously developing economic and diplomatic relations with China. In this case, neither bandwagoning, balancing²², nor neutrality (hiding)²³ fully explains such behaviour. This, in turn, led to the identification of yet another strategy. However, it is important to note that the concept of hedging is most commonly used to define relations of country X with two global powers that have interests in that particular country X. Nevertheless, there are situations in which the country in question is not inclined to choose only one side, as doing so could lead to a disproportionately long process of significant economic, diplomatic, or strategic losses. In such cases, the term ‘omnidirectional hedging strategy’ is employed²⁴.

1.1. Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy

The concept of an omnidirectional hedging strategy was first introduced into international relations theory by Dr. Olli Suorsa in 2016. He argued that the disproportionate losses associated with choosing

²⁰ Jones and Jenne, “Hedging and Grand Strategy,” 206.

²¹ Alexander Korolev, “Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, Issue 4 (2016): 375, <https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article/9/4/375/2528288>

²² T. Y. Wang and Alexander C. Tan, “Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan’s Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China,” *Political Science* 73 (2021): 68, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00323187.2021.1967765>

²³ David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, “Hedging and Grand Strategy,” 208.

²⁴ Olli Suorsa, “Maintaining a Small State’s Strategic Space,” 183.

between two major powers encourage states to expand their cooperation beyond this binary choice. Instead, they prioritize the development of economic, diplomatic, and security relations with secondary or even tertiary states in the region²⁵. This approach not only increases their strategic space within the regional system but also reduces tensions in the strategic environment²⁶. This is referred to a ‘win-win’ situation, as diversifying partnerships and resources in economic, security, and diplomatic spheres delays or even eliminates the need to choose between two major powers²⁷, thereby reducing asymmetric relationships with them²⁸.

According to Suorsa, the omnidirectional hedging strategy protects middle and small powers from several key issues:

- *Avoiding entrapment* – by increasing the number of balancing actors, it becomes more difficult for a single major power to impose its will²⁹ and turn a state into a ‘pawn’ in great power rivalries³⁰.
- *Preventing abandonment* – by diversifying relationships with other countries and involving several emerging or re-emerging regional and extra-regional powers – secondary or tertiary – helps the actor secure broader regional and international support with common strategic interests, thus providing mutual

²⁵ In his work, the author spoke about the countries of Southeast Asia or ASEAN, where the interests of the United States and China mainly intersect; therefore, he named Japan and India as countries playing a secondary role, and included Russia and the South Korea as third.

²⁶ Olli Suorsa, “Maintaining a Small State’s Strategic Space,” 183.

²⁷ Sylvia Masri, Syaiful Anwar, S., and Surachman Surjaatmadja, “Thailand Seeking to Reengage Myanmar Junta with Asean: National Interest or Political Ambition?,” *Jurnal Birokrasi & Pemerintahan Daerah* 5, no. 4 (2023): 221, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15575/jbpd.v5i4.28956>

²⁸ Stephen Nagy, “Japan’s Proactive Pacifism: Investing in Multilateralisation and Omnidirectional Hedging,” *Strategic Analysis* 41(3) (2017): 225, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2017.1295607>.

²⁹ Olli Suorsa, “Hedging against Over-dependence on US Security: Thailand and Philippines,” *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 317-16 (2016): 3, <https://hdl.handle.net/10356/84840>

³⁰ Olli Suorsa, “Maintaining a Small State’s Strategic Space,” 183.

assistance and avoiding pressure from the remaining stronger side³¹.

- *Reducing interdependence in security* – diversifying bilateral security and military ties decreases reliance on a single supplier for military technology and equipment³², thereby giving the state greater flexibility in manoeuvring.

Suorsa defines omnidirectional hedging as the diversification of a state's strategic relationships, providing small states with a strategic alignment tool that, compared to bilateral hedging, makes it easier to manage their relative strategic space. This becomes even more important for states experiencing recurring shifts between democracy and non-liberal governance, especially following military or peaceful coups, as it allows them to diversify diplomatic support and avoid isolation in the international arena. This, in turn, ensures strategic autonomy at both the systemic and unit levels³³.

Munir and Safdar simplified the definition, describing omnidirectional hedging as a strategy that allows traditional middle powers to expand their strategic space and avoid the traps of great power competition through economic, diplomatic, and security diversification³⁴. Drawing from the works of Suorsa and Nagy, they summarized the key characteristics of the strategy (see Table 1). According to the authors, by assessing these dimensions and indicators, it is possible to determine whether a state's foreign policy aligns with omnidirectional hedging³⁵. However, they limited the application of this strategy to middle powers, overlooking small states, which were discussed by Suorsa and Nagy. From an objective standpoint, Munir and Safdar's proposed model should also be applicable to small states, as they also engage in hedging strategies. Moreover, the model itself is built on

³¹ Ibid., 183.

³² Olli Suorsa, "Hedging against Over-dependence on US Security," 3.

³³ Olli Suorsa, "Maintaining a Small State's Strategic Space," 183.

³⁴ Maheera Munir and Aiysha Safdar. "Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia-Pacific: Omnidirectional Hedging of Traditional Middle Powers," *Strategic Studies* 43, no 2(2) (2024): 23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.043.02.00310>

³⁵ Ibid., 28–29.

theoretical frameworks designed for a broader range of states, and not just middle powers. Therefore, based on this model, the following discussion will examine the foreign policy of Central Asian states, attempting to prove that their proclaimed multivector foreign policy is nothing more than an omnidirectional hedging strategy.

*Table 1. Dimensions and indicators of omnidirectional hedging*³⁶

Dimensions	Indicators
Diplomatic	Greater diplomatic support, joining new institutions/organizations, strategic engagement with adversary, neutrality and soft power
Economic	Free trade agreements, joining financial institutions, participation in regional economic frameworks, expanding trade partners, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)
Security	Joint exercises, security/defense pacts, arms trade, internal balancing

1.2. Multivector Foreign Policy and Its Connection to the Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy

After gaining independence, the Central Asian states began implementing a multivector foreign policy. The choice of such a broad, non-unidirectional foreign policy strategy – which is unlike that of the Baltic states, which oriented themselves towards the West – is explained by the fact that these countries lacked a clear and functioning fiscal, military, political, or economic system, as well as technological and diplomatic expertise, to successfully govern their states. It is emphasized that Central Asian countries had only a handful of trained senior diplomats, most of whom had previously worked in the Soviet Union’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, despite the shortage of professional diplomats, the most pressing issues for the ruling elite at the time were not so much strengthening the foreign policy, but

³⁶ Munir and Safdar, “Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia-Pacific,” 28.

rather maintaining power, consolidating one-party systems, and eliminating opposition (which could potentially threaten their rule) while securing public support, given potential external threats³⁷. These actions reflect the decisions made, as these states avoided full-fledged, clearly oriented foreign policy cooperation with Russia, the EU, or other states³⁸, and instead pursued external goals that would provide benefits in terms of reinforcing domestic public support or that of influential elite groups and ensuring a survival strategy for the ruling elites³⁹. On the other hand, the decision to choose a multivector foreign policy is also explained by the fact that Central Asian states are landlocked, there are national and ethnic differences within them, the countries had border disputes, concerns over sovereignty, etc.⁴⁰ Besides, this kind of strategy enables countries to use the competition between Russia, China and the United States to serve their own interests by keeping their attention to region, as well as receiving benefits and assistance, but not becoming fully reliant on any one of them⁴¹.

When discussing a multivector foreign policy, the primary issue is that, although the term is widely recognized when analysing the foreign policies of Central Asian or post-Soviet states⁴², but it is less known for the broader international relations analysis sphere; it also lacks a unified definition and clearly formulated criteria⁴³. This leaves sufficient room for interpretation and varying understandings of what

³⁷ Kurc, "The Puzzle: Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," 317.

³⁸ Elena Gnedina, "Multi-Vector Foreign Policies in Europe: Balancing, Bandwagoning or Bargaining?"; *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (2015): 1008, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1066313>

³⁹ Kurc, "The Puzzle: Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," 318.

⁴⁰ "Global Strategic Trends. Out to 2055," UK's Ministry of Defence, 2024, p. 121, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68dba439dadf7616351e4bf8/GST_7_Final_post_pic_change_WEB.pdf Accessed: 08 November 2025.

⁴¹ Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F. Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva, "Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers," *International Affairs* 96, Issue 4 (2020): 975–993, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa061>

⁴² Gnedina, "Multi-Vector Foreign Policies in Europe," 1007.

⁴³ Razma, „Daugiavektoriškumas Uzbekistano užsienio politikoje,” 25.

such a policy entails, or how it should be implemented. Furthermore, the number of international actors – including Russia, China, the U.S., India, the EU, Turkey, Iran, and others – directly involved in regional affairs are also contributing to political pluralism⁴⁴.

Multivectorism is presented as a highly complex foreign policy strategy which focuses on defending a country's interests and sovereignty by placing emphasis on cooperation with political alliances, financial corporations⁴⁵, and developing mutually beneficial partnership with all countries, and this partnership is based on pragmatic⁴⁶ grounds with a minimal impact on ideological⁴⁷ foundation. In this case, multivectorism can be understood as a policy which is based on maintaining diplomatic relations with all states, including international organizations, what helps to ensure the security of the state – which is another important component of the foreign policy.

Chukubayev and Savchuk define multivectorism as “a policy aimed at developing advanced and balanced relations with existing centres of power and key global and regional actors, attempting to gain the greatest possible political and financial benefit from relations with each of them”⁴⁸. These authors emphasize not only diplomatic relations, especially with neighbouring countries and those influencing the international system, but also the importance of the economy for the existing regime.

Ainis Razma, in his dissertation, defined multivectorism as “the aspiration of a regional or lower power-level state to maintain constructive, equally intense relations with geopolitically competing major powers, avoiding becoming part of the sphere of influence of any

⁴⁴ Ermek Chukubayev and Anatoliy Savchuk, “Multivectorality of the Central Asian States in the New Geopolitical Reality,” *International Relations and International Law Journal*, no. 4(80) (2017): 30, DOI: 10.26577/IRILY-2017-4-747

⁴⁵ N. Nyshanbayev, K. Bekov, Z. Baizakova, and A. Amangeldy, “The Republic of Kazakhstan’s Multi-Vector Foreign Policy,” *New Perspectives* 33(1), (2024): 43–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X241308432>

⁴⁶ R. Vanderhill et al., “Between the Bear and the Dragon.”

⁴⁷ N. Nyshanbayev et al., “The Republic of Kazakhstan’s Multi-Vector Foreign Policy.”

⁴⁸ Chukubayev and Savchuk, “Multivectorality of the Central Asian States,” 30.

one of them, as well as refraining from forming alliances or other integrative associations with states of its level”⁴⁹. This author provided a more abstract definition based more on diplomatic activity in a broad sense, which, theoretically, should encompass economic, security, and political issues as well as public opinion and interest group representation.

Whereas, Contessi defines multivectorism as a strategic, long-term state governance method aimed at promoting economic development and ensuring state security in the long term. The use of multivectorism allows a weaker state to generate relative power by attempting to maintain autonomy in asymmetric relations with stronger global or regional countries seeking to draw it to their side against other rivals. As a result, smaller states receive certain dividends⁵⁰, which they can use to shape their future domestic and foreign policies. In this case, the author distinguishes that multivectorism encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security issues and is directed toward domestic policy, which should provide support for the regime.

In this case, looking at the definitions of the multivector foreign policy provided by different authors, very clear parallels can be seen with the omnidirectional hedging strategy, as both strategies use the same variables and factors influencing or justifying their implementation (see Table 2).

Considering the evaluation presented in Table 2, it can be assumed that both the omnidirectional hedging strategy and the multivector foreign policy are based on the same principles. Moreover, both are used and applied to explain the behaviour of small and medium-sized states which do not have significant influence on the international arena and are dependent on the actions of great powers or superpowers. The fundamental difference is that the concept of the multivector foreign policy is more commonly used and presented when

⁴⁹ A. Razma, “Daugiavektoriškumas Uzbekistano užsienio politikoje,” 29.

⁵⁰ Nicola P. Contessi, “Foreign Policy Diversification and Intercontinental Transport Corridors: The Case of Kazakhstan’s Railways Diplomacy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 763–764, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1473342>

discussing the foreign policy of Central Asian and other post-Soviet states, whereas, the omnidirectional hedging strategy is introduced as another term explaining the foreign policy pursued by states, alongside the already established balancing and bandwagoning strategies in international relations theory and practice.

*Table 2. Main elements of the omnidirectional hedging strategy and multivector foreign policy*⁵¹

Foreign policy Elements	Omnidirectional Hedging Strategy	Multivector Foreign Policy
Expansion of Diplomatic Relations	Yes	Yes
Efforts to Expand Economic Relations	Yes	Yes
Ensuring National Security	Yes	Yes
Involving as Many Actors as Possible	Yes	Yes
Avoiding Dependence on a Single Actor	Yes	Yes
Most Effective in a Multipolar International System	Yes	Yes

Nevertheless, considering the similarities between the two policies, it could be argued that multivectorism, as used in Central Asia, is essentially the same concept as omnidirectional hedging, by virtue of sharing the same goal – i.e., to involve all major global powers in regional affairs, thereby creating complex exchanges and mutually beneficial relationships. At the same time, it diversifies security, political, and economic partnerships to avoid excessive dependence on a single state⁵². Therefore, the further study will be conducted with

⁵¹ Table compiled and prepared by the author.

⁵² Paradorn Rangsimaporn, *Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 8, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10112-0>.

the intent to demonstrate that Central Asia and EU relations might be covered by omnidirectional hedging strategy dimensions: diplomatic, economic, and security, and that omnidirectional hedging might be named as a foreign policy strategy of the presently discussed Central Asian countries.

2. Diplomatic Dimension: EU's and Central Asia's Political Relations

The European Union has been engaged in the region since the early 1990s⁵³, when the countries in the region declared their independence. At that time, the EU generally extended the most-favoured nation status to the new independent countries and granted preferential tariff treatment to most of them under the Generalized System of Preferences; development assistance was provided for the Central Asian countries by the European Commission under the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) and the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia (TRACE-CA) programs. The source of the problem was the fact that the EU external economic policy and political treatment distinguished between Russia, six “Eastern Partnership Countries”, and five Central Asia countries⁵⁴. The latter were named as “neighbours of its neighbours” by Winn and Gänzle, and this division was based on the idea that EU norms and values could travel through the ENP sphere to the countries and regions which lie further than the EU's direct neighbourhood⁵⁵, and that ENP countries could become the ‘ambassadors’ of the spread of norms. This negative differentiation is supported by

⁵³ Rosamund Shreeves, Angelos Delivorias, and Anna Caprile, “The EU Strategy on Central Asia: Towards a New Momentum?”, *European Parliamentary Research Service* (EPRS), Briefing, PE 762.300 (2024): 2. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762300/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762300_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762300/EPRS_BRI(2024)762300_EN.pdf)

⁵⁴ Richard Pomfret, “The European Union and Central Asia: Economic Development and Trade,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 14(2) (2022): 49–50, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol14.iss2.15833>

⁵⁵ Winn and Gänzle, “Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia,” 1343.

the fact that the CA countries and the EU signed Partnership and Cooperation Agreements in 1999, which provided a legal framework for the EU cooperation with the Central Asian countries, but were weaker than the Eastern Partnership agreements. What is more, the EU had no clearly outlined policy towards five Central Asia countries from 1992⁵⁶ up to 2007, when the EU strategy called *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* was adopted, and the main cooperation principles were framed.

The newly adopted strategy focused on security and stability; bilateral and regional cooperation; human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization; youth and education; promotion of economic development, trade and investment; strengthening energy and transport links; environmental sustainability and water; combatting common threats and challenges; and building bridges: inter-cultural dialogue⁵⁷. Even though the Strategy was welcomed at the time as one of the earliest attempts to define common interests and potential areas for cooperation, but ultimately it failed, because of its normativism – as Central Asian states are simply immune to democracy promotion⁵⁸ – since they achieved almost no progress in this regard, especially in the development of democratic institutions and human rights⁵⁹. Furthermore, the EU had difficulties to maintain presence in the region (even the EU representative post was created in 2005⁶⁰), and there was a lack interest from the member states⁶¹.

⁵⁶ Pomfret, “The European Union and Central Asia,” 50.

⁵⁷ “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership,” *The Council of European Union*, 2007, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf>

⁵⁸ Winn and Gänzle, “Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia,” 1348–1350.

⁵⁹ Azimzhan Khitakhunov, “New Phase of the European Union – Central Asia Cooperation: Temporary or Strategic Rapprochement?,” *Eurasian Research Journal* 5(1) (2023): 28, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2023.1-02>.

⁶⁰ Shreeves, Delivorias, and Caprile, “The EU strategy on Central Asia,” 4.

⁶¹ Ana-Maria Angheliescu, “European Union and Central Asia – Past Directions and Future Perspectives,” *CES Working Papers* 10(3) (2018): 284. Available at: https://ceswp.uaic.ro/articles/CESWP2018_X3_ANG.pdf.

When discussing the European Union's diplomatic activities in the region, it has been acknowledged that it did not show significant interest in Central Asia prior to 2019, when a new strategy was adopted, marking a new phase in relations. The second strategy became more pragmatic rather than normative, particularly regarding democracy norms and the rule of law (though these points remain in the strategy). At the same time, it also focuses on economic aspects (energy resources, investments, trade, etc.), security issues (Afghanistan), and similar concerns. Furthermore, this Strategy is one of the first which functions under the umbrella of the EU's global approach expressed in the Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) adopted in 2016⁶². At this time, Central Asian countries were offered to sign Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCA), which "envisage wide-ranging cooperation in areas such as trade and investment, energy, transport, environment and climate change, education, research, foreign policy, democracy and human rights"⁶³, and which were met quite positively⁶⁴ by the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, in recent years, the region has received more visits from high-ranking EU officials, and C5 + 1 format is enforced. For example, the President of the European Council and the EU's foreign policy chief discussed the impact of sanctions on Russia on the region, and how new transport corridors connecting Asia with Europe, bypassing Russia, could be developed (the former interest is a consequence of the war between Russia and Ukraine). Additionally, alongside the new strategy, the foreign policy initiative *Global Gateway* and Joint Roadmap for Central Asia have been announced, aimed at strengthening digital, energy, and transport connections⁶⁵.

⁶² Winn and Gänzle, "Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia," 1348–1350.

⁶³ Shreeves, Delivorias, and Caprile, "The EU Strategy on Central Asia," 4.

⁶⁴ EPCA agreements have already been signed with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; negotiations with Uzbekistan are over, and the agreement is expected to be signed in the near future; Tajikistan is still in the process of negotiations, while Turkmenistan has signed the protocol to the PCA, and negotiations are expected to begin.

⁶⁵ Anna Matveeva, "A New Opening for EU–Central Asia Relations?," *Carnegie Europe*, 2023. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/04/13/new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations-pub-89454>

It can also be used as a platform for closer cooperation with Central Asian countries, which, in turn, seek not only economic partners but also opportunities to ensure security. Given that the EU's policy is more pragmatic in this regard, it could be an attractive model of cooperation for the countries in the region⁶⁶.

Probably one of the most important diplomatic events and results in the context of Central Asia–EU cooperation might be identified the first-ever meeting between the leaders of both sides on April 4, 2025 in Uzbekistan, at the Samarkand Summit, where a strategic partnership was announced⁶⁷. This event and agreement elevated the EU-Central Asia relations to the highest level of collaboration and demonstrated the region's importance for Europeans. The partnership entails a focus on common work on the development of sustainable transport corridors between Central Asia and the EU, cooperation on critical raw materials, the green transition, digital connectivity⁶⁸ as well as commitment to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity. It also reflects a shared desire to ensure water, energy, and border security; to address shared security threats (such as drug trafficking, illegal migration, spread of radical ideology, etc.); and to strengthen multilateral ties⁶⁹.

Summarising this diplomatic relation development between Central Asia and the European Union, it might be stated that both sides are demonstrating an interest in mutual cooperation. The recent breakthrough in collaboration can be seen as a fulfilment of omnidirectional hedging diplomatic dimension, which is based on greater diplomatic support or strategic engagement. In this case, signing strategic partnership agreement enables the EU to become more deeply involved in regional affairs, while also providing Central Asian countries with an additional tool to strengthen their credibility and

⁶⁶ Assima Aubakir, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: History, Vision, Prospects," *Central Asia & the Caucasus* 21(4): 7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.4.01>

⁶⁷ Brkić, "Central Asia-EU Summit."

⁶⁸ "The Meaning of the EU's Strategic Partnership with Central Asia," *The Institute of International & European Affairs*, webinar, 2025, <https://www.iiea.com/events/the-meaning-of-the-eus-strategic-partnership-with-central-asia>

⁶⁹ Sarymbetova, "EU Unveils \$13.2 Billion."

position in international arena – which is especially important while discussing further economic and security engagement.

3. Economic Dimension: EU – Central Asia Economic Cooperation

Turning to economic ties, the EU was one of the first entities which, in the early 1990s, established trade ties between both sides, started energy investments and granted preferential tariff treatment, what helped the newly established Central Asian economies. The EU’s economic power allows the Union to play an important role in the region, and the EU stays one of the largest trade partner and export markets for Central Asia⁷⁰ (see Table 3). This illustrates that CA countries are working on diversification of their economies and trade routes.

*Table 3. Main export markets of Central Asia*⁷¹

Importers	Exported value (EUR) in 2020	Exported value (EUR) in 2021	Exported value (EUR) in 2022	Exported value (EUR) in 2023	Exported value (EUR) in 2025
EU (27)	13,210,345	18,776,316	31,399,690	32,549,782	35,143,122
China	9,757,250	10,354,914	21,933,362	24,545,321	24,802,317
Russian Federation	5,839,075	7,902,226	11,978,846	12,730,451	13,857,124
Türkiye	3,222,111	4,765,257	6,114,640	6,688,764	5,833,914
Uzbekistan	2,421,078	3,188,078	3,256,851	4,194,243	4,512,260

Whereas the economic ties are developing and cooperation is increasing, this might be seen from the facts that the Central Asian countries had an increase of their goods export volume to the EU from 8 bln. EUR in 2004 to 35.1 bln. EUR in 2024, and the EU export

⁷⁰ Winn and Gänzle, “Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy *Vis-à-vis* Central Asia,” 1355.

⁷¹ Source: the author’s calculations based on using the ITC Trade Map (<https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>) and Eurostat data (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). Sums are provided in thousands EUR.

to the region increased from 4 bln. EUR in 2004 to 19 bln. EUR in 2024, thus demonstrating almost fivefold growth (see Table 4). The most noticeable rise is observed in the year 2022, when the war in Ukraine began, and both sides started looking for new markets and trade routes. The main export products from the Central Asian countries to the EU are mineral fuels and oil, inorganic chemicals, rare earth metals, fertilizers, iron, steel, cereal, and cotton. In turn, the EU exports boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances, vehicles, pharmaceutical products, electrical machinery and equipment, etc.⁷²

Table 4. Increase of Central Asian import and export from/to EU⁷³

Importers from EU (27)	Imported value (EUR) in 2004	Imported value (EUR) in 2024	Exporters to EU (27)	Exported value (EUR) in 2004	Exported value (EUR) in 2024
Central Asian Republics	4,060,577	19,094,089	Central Asian Republics	8,063,386	35,143,122

Nevertheless, it looks that the Central Asian countries export raw materials or agricultural products and imports finished products and semiconductors, but the trade balance stays in Central Asia's favour (see Table 5). What is more interesting is the fact that almost all Central Asia's export to the EU – 95%, as well as more a than a half of the region's imports belongs to one country – namely, Kazakhstan (see Table 6). This shows that Kazakhstan is the EU's key partner in the region, and that energy products play the main role in bilateral relations. Furthermore, the EU supported Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organization, this country remains the first trade and investment partner in the region⁷⁴ as well as the first to sign EPCA between the European Union and its Member States on the one part,

⁷² Data retrieved by the author according to the information provided by the ITC Trade Map data (<https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>)

⁷³ Source: calculations made by the author by using the Eurostat data (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>)

⁷⁴ Khitakhunov, "New phase of the European Union," 28.

and the Republic of Kazakhstan as the other. The document was signed in 2015 (it entered into force in 2020)⁷⁵

Table 5. Trade balance between Central Asia and the EU⁷⁶

Partners	Balance in value (EUR) in 2020	Balance in value (EUR) in 2021	Balance in value (EUR) in 2022	Balance in value (EUR) in 2023	Balance in value (EUR) in 2024
Central Asian Republics	4,149,734	9,649,596	15,250,417	12,335,806	16,049,033
Kyrgyzstan	-158,922	-189,291	-1,023,461	-2,613,483	-2,615,179
Kazakhstan	6,687,376	12,060,991	19,514,958	18,161,716	22,049,274
Tajikistan	-98,722	-77,393	-117,021	-151,008	15,304
Turkmenistan	-255,772	-323,016	-204,192	534,733	-313,967
Uzbekistan	-2,024,227	-1,821,695	-2,919,867	-3,596,152	-3,086,408

Table 6. Central Asia's and EU's export and import⁷⁷

Importers from EU (27)	Imported value (EUR) in 2022	Imported value (EUR) in 2023	Imported value (EUR) in 2024	Exporters to EU (27)	Exported value (EUR) in 2022	Exported value (EUR) in 2023	Exported value (EUR) in 2024
Central Asian Republics	16,149,272	20,213,976	19,094,089	Central Asian Republics	31,399,690	32,549,782	35,143,122
Kyrgyzstan	1,170,906	2,729,553	2,730,232	Kyrgyzstan	147,445	116,070	115,063
Kazakhstan	10,347,144	12,112,832	11,441,890	Kazakhstan	29,862,102	30,274,548	33,491,165
Tajikistan	261,276	325,459	276,082	Tajikistan	144,255	174,451	291,385
Turkmenistan	603,992	669,484	714,462	Turkmenistan	399,801	1,204,218	400,495
Uzbekistan	3,765,954	4,376,648	3,931,422	Uzbekistan	846,087	780,496	845,014

⁷⁵ Liga Andersone, "EU Cooperation Programmes for Central Asia," 253.

⁷⁶ Source: calculated by the author by using the Eurostat data (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>)

⁷⁷ Source: calculated by the author by using the Eurostat data (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>)

Even though economic cooperation is increasing, but the Central Asian countries' dependence on the raw materials export may put them at a risk. First, price fluctuations may substantially reduce CA exports in value terms, thus making their imports from the EU complicated. Second, the EU's green policy and its aim to reduce dependence on fossil fuels is an important challenge for CA countries. However, this policy can become an opportunity for the CA states as the EU is looking for new energy suppliers, preferably green ones, and this region might be a right place for the development renewable energy projects. Third, transportation of fossil fuels remains complicated due to the geopolitical situation putting CA exports at an additional risk⁷⁸, because the main pipelines go through the territory of Russia. On the other hand, this situation could change because, in 2024, the EU committed to provide €10 billion for the development of the *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route* (TITR, the so-called Middle Corridor), which connects Europe to China via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus or Turkey, thus bypassing Russia⁷⁹. This corridor should reduce dependence on the Northern Corridor via Russia, and, although container traffic increased by around 30 percent in 2022, the lack of a modern transport infrastructure, coordination and harmonization between the numerous players involved have so far made transport expensive, risky, and not competitive⁸⁰. Consequently, the EU's attention and support might be a facilitator for further development. Fourth, the political dependence on the EU may lead the EU to reconsider its CA policy by putting more pressure on the countries of the region to reach the

⁷⁸ Khitakhunov, "New Phase of the European Union," 34–35.

⁷⁹ Marcin Popławski, "Crisis as an Opportunity: A New Stage in EU-Central Asia Relations," *OSW Commentary* (591) (2024): 5, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-04-26/crisis-opportunity-a-new-stage-eu-central-asia-relations>.

⁸⁰ Stefan Meister and Judith Heckenthaler, "Upgrading EU-Central Asia Cooperation. How to Leverage Common Interests Amid Geopolitical Turmoil," *German Council on Foreign Relations*, Policy brief publication, 2024.08.02. Available at: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/upgrading-eu-central-asia-cooperation>

EU's political and economic goals⁸¹. Fifth, there is a chance that secondary sanctions will be applied to Central Asian companies for their attempts to counterweight sanctions applied to Russia. Some experts suggest that this trade increase between the EU and Central Asia in recent years may be due to reselling goods to Russia, as direct sales are hindered by sanctions. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development reports that EU exports to Russia experienced a significant decline, at around 80%, for sanctioned goods, whereas exports of sanctioned goods to Central Asia increased by an additional 30%⁸². This seems to be indicating a potential correlation. However, more research is needed to determine the exact product groups driving this trend. Even though Central Asian countries emphasize their commitment to respecting and taking the necessary actions to avoid violating international sanctions on Russia, nonetheless, it is challenging to prevent individuals or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from engaging in cross-border trade with Russia, particularly for goods such as consumer appliances or electronics. Given that some Central Asian countries belong to the Eurasian Economic Union, goods easily move between member states, thus making it difficult to enforce strict controls⁸³. And, it is worth to note, several companies from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have already been blacklisted by the USA, the UK and the EU⁸⁴.

Central Asia's dependence on raw material exports, weak economic diversification, along with the still existing dependence on

⁸¹ Khitakhunov, "New Phase of the European Union," 35.

⁸² Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik, and Alexander Plekhanov, "The Eurasian Roundabout: Trade Flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia," *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, Working Paper No. 276 (2023): 1, <https://www.ebrd.com/publications/working-papers/the-eurasian-roundabout>.

⁸³ Johannes Voltri, "Estonia's Trade with Central Asian Countries Explodes," *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, 15.03.2023. Available at: <https://news.err.ee/1608915485/estonia-s-trade-with-central-asian-countries-explodes>

⁸⁴ Catherine Putz, "US Puts Additional Central Asian Companies on Russia Sanctions List," *The Diplomat*, 28.02.2024. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/us-puts-additional-central-asian-companies-on-russia-sanctions-list>

the sanctioned Russia (labour migration, trade, pipelines, etc.) and balancing for not receiving secondary sanctions make this region economies vulnerable. In this way, the European Union represents an important economic actor in the region as it remains one of Central Asia's largest trade partners and export markets, which, in 2024, committed financial resources to the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and other logistics infrastructure, and which has also supported Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organization. These developments indicate the EU's engagement in the region and contribution to the diversification of the trade routes by, at least, partially reducing the dependence on the Russian transit corridor. At the same time, the EU investments, preferential trade arrangements and institutional support have strengthened the economic dimension of the Central Asian countries' omnidirectional hedging foreign policies, creating new opportunities for them to balance between different external actors and relations with them.

4. Security Dimension: EU's Development and Security Assistance for Central Asia

Yet, the EU is not treated as a hard security actor, but it might use its soft power instruments and projects for security and development assurance in the region. The EU cooperation programs for Central Asia place emphasis on cross-regional cooperation, creation of favourite environment for business development and investments as well as sustainable development as such⁸⁵, including financial and humanitarian aid to democratic state building expertise, but, at early stages of cooperation, the EU refrained from any political engagement to avoid confrontation with Russia⁸⁶.

⁸⁵ Andersone, "EU Cooperation Programmes for Central Asia," 247.

⁸⁶ Ernst M. Felberbauer and Frederic Labarre, "Building Confidence in the South Caucasus: Strengthening the EU's and NATO's Soft Security Initiatives," *7th Workshop of the Study Group "Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"* (2013): 25, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/170000/pfpc_7th_rssc_study1.pdf.

As it was mentioned above, in the early 1990s, assistance was provided under the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) and the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia (TRACECA) programs. The first one mostly pertained to agriculture and was involved in rural development, whereas, the second one was dedicated for the development of an efficient and integrated transit transport system between Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Even though the allocated sums were quite impressive for that time (TACIS: 944 million EUR for the decade from 1992 to 2002, and over 121 million EUR for TRATECA) and the objectives were quite high, neither of these programmes succeeded, and their impact was not significant enough⁸⁷. Besides, the TACIS programme was closed when the EU's the first strategy for Central Asia was adopted.

Even though the EU's involvement in the region was limited, but the EU as an entity and its Member States have been one of Central Asia's main sources of development aid – notably, between 2014 and 2020, the EU provided €1.1 billion in grant funding⁸⁸, and this number shall increase for about 30% for the period from 2021 to 2027⁸⁹ for the regional and bilateral programmes, which will focus on *Resilience*: water and energy, environmental challenges, human and labour rights and gender and LGBTIQ+ equality, rule of law and support to civil society, and regional peace and stability; and *Prosperity*: digital connectivity, support for intra-regional trade and human development, including a focus on 'building back better' after the COVID-19 pandemic⁹⁰.

Central Asia is a key partner in the EU's Global Gateway strategy launched in 2021. This strategy shall work as the EU's equivalent to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Strategy aims to promote investment in infrastructure in a broad sense: including not only trans-

⁸⁷ Pomfret, "The European Union and Central Asia," 54–55.

⁸⁸ Shreeves, Delivorias, and Caprile, "The EU Strategy on Central Asia," 5.

⁸⁹ European Commission, *IFCA-AIF-IFP Operational Report 2020*. Luxembourg (2021), p. 14, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/19e059db-d67b-4a32-a003-1780748f3947_en?filename=ifca-aif-ifp-operational-report-2020_en.pdf.

⁹⁰ Shreeves, Delivorias, and Caprile, "The EU Strategy on Central Asia," 5.

port, energy and digital spheres but also areas such as education and health, initiatives on water, energy and climate change, and on digital connectivity⁹¹. For example, in 2024, a 10 billion Euros commitment to invest in the Trans Caspian Transport Corridor was announced at the Investors forum, which is part of Global Gateway strategy⁹².

Furthermore, security issues related to terrorism, drugs trafficking, poverty, human rights, social exclusion, climate risks and water conflicts, are the questions where the EU also plays an important role for assisting and providing help. For instance, the European Union's role in ensuring security in the region is highlighted through its *Border Management Programme in Central Asia* (BOMCA), which is aimed at supporting cross-border cooperation between countries and improving the quality of life for people living in these areas⁹³, and which can also encourage proactive measures to protect against terrorist groups, and the trafficking of weapons and drugs from Afghanistan⁹⁴. And in 2025, for the very first time, there was a meeting dedicated to the counterterrorism, held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, where representatives from Central Asia and European Union participated. They discussed areas of cooperation on the fight against radicalisation; the prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees; and actions against violent online propaganda⁹⁵. And, as the EU's special representative for Central Asia stated, there is something we could learn from them (i.e., from Central Asia) too in this area⁹⁶.

⁹¹ Ibid., 5.

⁹² “Global Gateway: €10 Billion Commitment to Invest in Trans Caspian Transport Corridor Connecting Europe and Central Asia Announced at Investors Forum,” *European Union Press Release*, 29.01.2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/mt/ip_24_501

⁹³ BOMCA-EU, Border Management Programme in Central Asia. Available at: <https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/what-we-do/objectives>

⁹⁴ Matveeva, “A New Opening for EU–Central Asia Relations?”

⁹⁵ “EU-Central Asia: First Counterterrorism Dialogue in Dushanbe,” European Union External Action, EEAS Press release, 10.07.2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-central-asia-first-counterterrorism-dialogue-dushanbe_en

⁹⁶ “The Meaning of the EU’s Strategic Partnership with Central Asia,” *The Institute of International & European Affairs*, webinar, 2025, <https://www.iica.com/events/the-meaning-of-the-eus-strategic-partnership-with-central-asia>

What is more important to mention is the fact that the EU launched a Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate Change in Central Asia, which aims to help countries in the region improve their management of limited water resources and increase their resilience to climate change⁹⁷. The EU has started two water projects according to the Investment Facility for Central Asia (IFCA) programme in Kyrgyzstan's Nookat and Tajikistan's Kulob regions with an aim to solve water supply issues by upgrading and renewing the infrastructure⁹⁸. While bearing in mind that these two countries fought bloody water wars (in 2021 and 2022) and have just recently (2025) solved territorial disputes, the EU's investments might help the governments of these countries and reduce some tensions boiling within their societies.

On the one hand, the EU's assistance has been instrumental in various reform processes in the region and in individual countries, but the principles of applying the EU standards, norms and regulations are very slow⁹⁹, or they are not implemented at all. For instance, human rights organizations are urging the EU and its Member States to achieve specific advances for human rights, particularly in the light of increasing restrictions on civil society and media freedom across the region. One of the reasons why such a problem arose is the adoption of the 'foreign agents law'¹⁰⁰ in Kyrgyzstan in 2024¹⁰¹. On the other hand, the EU's position regarding Central Asia and treating it as a homogenous region without the adoption of a country-specific approach and trying to artificially reshape this region by linking it with Afghanistan, shows the EU's limited efforts to understand these countries and makes these countries stay at a distance. Furthermore, the EU's institution-building and human rights policy in Central Asia kept it out of geopolitical competition with China and Russia in the re-

⁹⁷ Meister and Heckenthaler, "Upgrading EU-Central Asia Cooperation."

⁹⁸ European Commission, IFCA-AIF-IFP Operational Report 2020, p. 18-19.

⁹⁹ Andersone, "EU Cooperation Programmes for Central Asia," 248.

¹⁰⁰ The law requires local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding and engage in broadly defined 'political activities' to register as 'foreign representatives', entailing burdensome reporting obligations and inspections.

¹⁰¹ Shreeves, Delivorias, and Caprile, "The EU Strategy on Central Asia," 7.

gion¹⁰² because these two countries do not have any comparably soft policy attributes. Nevertheless, the EU remains an attractive actor, as it creates space for additional cooperation and provides an opportunity to counterbalance the influence of the two large neighbours in at least soft security and development areas.

Conclusions

This article has explored whether the multivector foreign policies of Central Asian states correspond to the omnidirectional hedging strategy, and whether EU–Central Asia relations can be interpreted as an example of this strategy in practice, and the analysis leads to several key findings in this area.

Theoretically, both the omnidirectional hedging strategy and the multivector foreign policy are based on the same principles – diversification of diplomatic, economic and security relations – which are mostly used to explain the behaviour of small and medium-sized states that do not have significant influence on the international arena and are dependent on the actions of the great powers or superpowers. The main difference lies not in their ideas presented, but, instead, in the discursive and regional context, in which, each of the concepts is presented: multivector foreign policy is more commonly used and presented when discussing the foreign policy of Central Asian and other post-Soviet states, whereas the omnidirectional hedging strategy is more common when talking about foreign policy strategies of states in general. Therefore, it becomes quite logical to treat these two strategies not as a conceptually distinct, but synonymous frameworks applied to different regions.

Empirically, the European Union's policy towards the Central Asian region and these relations reflect the three dimensions of omnidirectional hedging. In the diplomatic field, the EU has been a relatively active actor in the political agenda of Central Asian countries since their independence declaration in the early 1990s, and this cooperation

¹⁰² Khitakhunov, “New Phase of the European Union,” 37–38.

was elevated to a strategic partnership agreement in the 2025 Samarkand Summit, which placed foundations for deeper political cooperation between both sides and allowed the EU to get more politically involved in the region. Whereas, in the economic field, the European Union remains one of the leading trade partners and investors, as well as a potential partner for economic diversification of the region, especially bearing in mind the fact that both sides seek alternatives to dependence on raw materials and trade routes through Russia. In the security sphere, although the EU cannot assure hard security assistance and it does not act as a hard power in the international arena, but its soft instruments – such as BOMCA or the Global Gateway provide Central Asia with valuable alternatives, which might help to cope with the consequences of climate change and social tensions as well as terrorism, illegal migration, and drug transportation.

In this case, it can be argued that the omnidirectional hedging strategy can be applied when analysing foreign policy processes in Central Asia, and the terms can be used synonymously with the concept of multivectorism used here. This not only allows us to expand the geographical boundaries of the applicability of both concepts, but, at the same time, it shows that non-state actors can also play a role in a multilateral environment – in this case, the European Union. It can be successfully used as an example of a ‘hedger’ in Central Asia by being one of the leading trading partners and investors. The EU could become the ideal diversification channel for those countries of the region that want to reduce their dependence on their two large neighbours – i.e., China and Russia, but which do not have the necessary resources and opportunities to completely distance (having in mind geography) themselves from the two mighty neighbours. Such a situation corresponds to the idea of omnidirectional hedging – i.e., increasing strategic room for manoeuvring by involving new partners, which would reduce asymmetry in relations with the stronger powers. In this way, the scope of application of both concepts can be expanded and, in addition to the accent on the foreign policy of individually acting states, include their coalitions, institutions or regional organizations. And this, in turn, creates the basis for further theoretical and empirical research.

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