



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Countries at crossroads: UK engagement in Central Asia

Tenth Report of Session 2022–23

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to the report*

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Summary

The deepening of UK engagement in Central Asia not only has the potential to be mutually beneficial but also should be seen as a geopolitical imperative. The UK's response to the manoeuvring of Russia, China and others can have a significant impact on the economic and political independence of Central Asian countries. There are also important implications for the economic resilience of the UK as well as the five countries of Central Asia. Relationships with each of the five Central Asian countries (CA5), Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, carry potential opportunities for mutual benefits. Each country is working to find solutions to the changing geopolitical, demographic, economic and ecological challenges we all face. For too long UK engagement has been characterised by reactivity and short-termism. When immediate geopolitical preoccupations cease to be in focus, involvement has waned and Central Asian countries have been left unsure of the UK's long-term commitment. Despite this, diplomats and organisations have managed to cultivate significant influence for the UK through responding to the needs of governments and the people. This influence can be invested in and capitalised on. We urge the Government to be considerably bolder and more ambitious in approaches to trade, human rights, regional cooperation, cultural exchange, and the environment.

The UK should aim to be both a reliable long-term partner and a critical friend. The UK's high-level engagement with Central Asian governments has been woefully inadequate and needs to improve. A CA5+UK format would be an appropriate way of taking forward specific issues at a government level and should be backed up with the offer of practical support to make this happen. However, the UK Government should remain conscious that these are young countries with governments that continue to fall short of their international obligations to their own people and operate in an environment where their foreign policy is constrained to a varying extent by relationships with larger neighbours.

By its failure to stem flows of illicit finance through the UK's financial system, the Government is complicit in the plundering of Central Asian economies by their elites. Solving this problem will require the political will and resources to take legal action against those involved, as well as capacity building for officials in Central Asia to tackle the issue at source.

The UK Government now needs to adopt a clear, values-led approach to engagement in Central Asia; one that does not attempt to supplant or out-compete China or Russia, but that provides different options to Central Asian leadership. In so doing it should forge a path in line with the aspirations of Central Asian people whilst remaining clear-eyed about the motivations and actions of their governments.

1 Introduction

1. In February 2023 we launched the first inquiry into the UK's engagement in Central Asia by the Foreign Affairs Committee since 1999.¹ The five countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are often overlooked by UK policy makers. We sought to establish the nature of the Government's current engagement as well as to identify opportunities for broadening and deepening engagement, seeking to answer the following questions:

- a) What are the key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade, and what implications do these have for UK foreign policy?
- b) What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?
- c) Where do the relationships between Central Asian states and neighbouring countries, including the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK foreign policy, and where do they provide opportunities?
- d) What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?
- e) What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the Rules-Based International Order?

2. We fully acknowledge the limitations of taking a regional perspective for this inquiry.² The five countries in Central Asia have important cultural, political, linguistic and historical distinctions and should not be treated as a purely homogenous grouping when it comes to the implementation of policy or to focusing diplomatic attention. Nevertheless, these countries have a lot in common.³ We have approached this inquiry seeking to understand these nuances whilst looking at options for supporting cooperation between the countries as well as policy recommendations that are applicable in more than one context.

3. We received 27 submissions of written evidence from individuals and organisations, heard from 13 experts who contributed across three oral evidence sessions, and heard from Central Asians living and studying in the UK via a private engagement exercise. The ambassadors from each of the Central Asian countries met with us privately during the inquiry. We conducted a five-day visit to the cities of Astana, Bishkek and Tashkent, meeting various interlocutors and UK officials. We would like to thank all those who formally or informally supported the work of this inquiry.

4. Our inquiry demonstrated that there is considerable interconnectedness between several areas of engagement with Central Asian countries. For example, the resolve of the UK Government in tackling illicit finance has implications for its soft power, its influence in the human rights environment, and the ability of Central Asian societies to break

1 Foreign Affairs Committee, Sixth Report of Session 1998–90, [South Caucasus and Central Asia](#) (HC 349-I)

2 See, for example, [Q2](#) [Professor Frankopan]

3 Dr Sharshenova told us: "Central Asian cultures have a lot in common. We have a shared past; we have been part of the Russian empire for over 200 years. Russian remains the lingua franca in the region. We mostly still speak Russian, although the usage of Russian is decreasing as we speak." [\(Q2\)](#)

free from Russian influence. Engagement in the higher education sector and provision of scholarships affect its influence on education reform, civil society and the ability to counter Russian disinformation. Perhaps most importantly from a policy context, we found that much impact can be achieved through relatively inexpensive programmes. The following chapters explore these themes in more detail.

2 Contexts, principles and posture of the UK Government in Central Asia

The world acts completely like a dream,

He whose heart is open will realize it.⁴

5. UK Government foreign policy toward Central Asian states, both individually and collectively, needs to be grounded in the existing political realities. This chapter will outline some of these realities and seek to establish some guiding principles for future engagement.

Geopolitical context and regional cooperation

6. The five states of Central Asia have been the unfortunate victims of stereotypes and generalisations which have the potential to confuse and mislead policy makers. Terms such as “China and Russia’s backyard”, “post-Soviet states” and the “New Great Game”⁵ run the risk of underappreciating countries’ agency and underplays their potential.⁶ There are complicated and nuanced foreign policy objectives at play. Two significant factors currently shape foreign policy in Central Asian countries:

- a) Central Asian governments operate a “multi-vector foreign policy”⁷, looking to diversify trade, investment, and diplomacy away from Russia. However, the closeness of economic and cultural ties with Russia currently limits the opportunities and incentives for decoupling;⁸
- b) Russia’s renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine has damaged trust in Russia as a security guarantor in the region but has also increased Russia’s reliance on Central Asian countries for international support and for circumventing sanctions.⁹

Russia’s black and white approach of viewing countries as either “friend or foe” creates significant difficulties for Central Asian states as they attempt to keep all their international partners happy.¹⁰

4 Rudaki, “The World is Like a Dream” in Sassam Tabatabai, “[Father of Persian Verse: Rudaki and his Poetry](#)”, University of Leiden [Accessed 19 October 2023]

5 The Great Game was the term used to describe the geopolitical competition between the British and Russian empires in the 19th century where Afghanistan and Central Asia were contested areas.

6 [Q27](#) [Dr Sharshenova]

7 The term “multi-vector” foreign policy was used by President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan to describe his country’s approach to developing “predictable and friendly relationships with all countries”. It is an approach that has been adopted by most of the five Central Asian countries (CA5) and has been seen as an indicator of willingness to slowly decouple from Russia. (See London Politica ([ECA0009](#)) para 2.1.2.; TBI ([ECA0012](#)))

8 Annette Bohr, for example, did not think decoupling was possible, citing multiple dependencies between the countries. Dr Sharshenova, believed it would be difficult but not impossible and highlighted the high economic dependency on Russia, particularly in terms of remittances as well as the fact that in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan rely on Russia for most of the infrastructure for energy transmission ([Q2](#)); see also TBI ([ECA0012](#)) para 17

9 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

10 See, for example, KCS Group ([ECA0004](#)) para 11 (a); Heathershaw and Cooley note that: “No Central Asian states have moved decisively away from Russia during the war but none have taken an explicitly pro-Moscow stance” ([ECA0010](#)) para 19

7. There has been significant variation between Central Asian states in their posture toward Russia since its renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine, and even before. Traditionally, for example, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have remained militarily neutral to a greater extent than the other three countries. However, since the invasion, the desire for diversification in international partners has grown. The impotence of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)¹¹ has been demonstrated in its failure to act in the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan or the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Contributors point out that the CSTO has only been deployed outside Russia once, in 2022, in response to the civil unrest in Kazakhstan.¹²

8. The desire for diversification has been misconstrued by some Western capitals as a desire to fully embrace free-market liberalism, NATO defence systems, and democracy.¹³ It is likely that this is misplaced. Central Asian states are instead making the most of the renewed interest in the region to secure the best possible terms with all their international partners—trying to be “all things to all people”.¹⁴ Moscow, on the other hand, needs Central Asian cooperation like never before.¹⁵ The five countries are situated along key transport routes for sanctioned goods, such as components for military hardware, are rare security partners and represent key votes in the UN General Assembly. Russia, worried about losing influence, has significantly increased its focus on Central Asia in terms of ministerial visits and soft power.¹⁶ We have heard that this has not been entirely successful: there have been continued strides by other countries including China, the US, the EU, Turkey, Iran and the Emirates to deepen engagement and a receptivity to these moves in Central Asian capitals, sometimes at the expense of Russian influence.

9. In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan there is an increasingly significant divide in worldview amongst their populations,¹⁷ a trend reflected in the military and civil service. Rather than speaking Russian, the younger generation, born after 1985, have a greater tendency to learn English as a second language and use their native language as their first. They are more likely to digest non-Russian media, do not bear allegiance to the Russian Federation and are often Western-leaning.¹⁸ The older generation, who still remember life in the Soviet Union, continue to place significant importance on the Russian language, view and believe Russian media, and are supportive

11 The CSTO is a Russian-led military alliance between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (formerly including Uzbekistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan) and its members face pressure from Moscow to remain within its sphere of influence (Heathershaw and Cooley, [ECA0010](#)).

12 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

13 Annette Bohr argued that: “... while indeed the central Asian states now have more latitude to achieve greater balance in their relations with both global powers and regional powers such as Turkey, we should not view this rebalancing as an opportunity to move towards greater democratisation. Rather, central Asian Governments are now striving to play all sides to achieve maximum gain, and that is really important to remember.” ([Q2](#))

14 Dr Sharshenova explained that: “The leaders of central Asian countries are careful. They are trying to find the fine balance between pleasing Russia just enough without alienating the rest of the world.” (see also Martin Smith ([ECA0001](#)), Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))) However, Professor Marat believed that it works both ways: “On the regime level, I think the countries of central Asia prefer an alliance with Russia as a way of balancing other partners, including China and even the European Union and the West.” ([Q91](#))

15 [Q2](#) [Annette Bohr]

16 See example given by Martin Smith ([ECA0001](#)) para 3

17 Dr Sharshenova observed that: “In central Asian societies you get partial supporters because they still share the language, they listen to Russian news, they enjoy Russian entertainment, and so on. They have absorbed the narrative that the west is trying to attack Russia, that Russia has to protect itself against western influence, and so forth” ([Q10](#)). See also KCS Group ([ECA0014](#)) para 14

18 See, for example, KCS Group ([ECA0014](#)) para 15; see also Annette Bohr ([ECA0024](#)) para 13

of closer ties with the Russian Federation.¹⁹ These changing dynamics, coupled with the geopolitical implications, present significant opportunities for the UK Government and businesses (these trends in society are considered in more detail in Chapters 5 and 7).

China's engagement in the region

10. China is the region's largest trading partner²⁰ and has made the most of the damaged confidence in Russia among Central Asian countries.²¹ China is a popular partner of Central Asian governments, providing much needed financial support for infrastructure projects,²² but it struggles to gain an affinity amongst some populations.²³ Despite the apprehension of these groups, we have not seen evidence of Chinese interference in the internal affairs of Central Asian states. Chinese tech companies, like all companies registered in China, are obliged by law to provide information to China's intelligence services if required for national security reasons. Many such companies provide the infrastructure needed to implement the development of "safe" or "smart" cities in Central Asian countries.^{24, 25} There is little evidence of systemic competition between Beijing and Moscow, nor that China is attempting to take Russia's position as a military guarantor.²⁶ Contributors instead pointed toward joint agreements between Beijing and Moscow to shore up support for national-level authoritarianism in the region and a distinct lack of support from these two countries for regional collaboration or integration. Raffaello Pantucci, of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, asserted that it was a "waste of time to view the region as the place where China and Russia disagree" and instead highlighted the problem their increasing alignment causes for Central Asian countries in their pursuit of a multi-vector foreign policy.^{27,28} In terms of the UK's posture and

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- 19 Dr Sharshenova told us: "(Central Asians) have to decide where we are former Soviet people or independent Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tajik and so on." (Q10)
- 20 See, for example, Raffaello Pantucci (ECA0020) para 7
- 21 Observer Research Foundation (ECA0007); Sophie Ibbotson describes China as the "biggest threat to the status quo in Central Asia" and one that the UK "cannot expect to counterbalance alone" (ECA0002); KCS Group describe China seeing itself as the "primary power broker in the region" and that "pursuing an independent political & economic path will be taken as actively working against Chinese interests."
- 22 "Put simply, China is attempting to buy their way into Uzbek and Kazakh hearts and minds." KCS Group (ECA0004) para 16; Global Partners for Governance told us that bi-laterally, every Central Asian republic has signed a strategic agreement with China, and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have each signed a higher level Comprehensive Strategic Agreement. (ECA0016) para 4.2. London Politica told us that "China's investment represents 4.7% of the total investment in the country. By June 2022, China had invested in the construction of 56 factories in Kazakhstan worth nearly \$24.5 billion." (ECA0009) para 4.1.2
- 23 Global Partners for Governance have been tracking a growing anti-China sentiment amongst elites, decision makers and in the wider public sphere — the prevailing concern is that China is "slowly colonising the region by taking control of its resources". By way of example they cite research that: "Between 2017 and 2021, those with an unfavourable view of China increased from 16% to 45% in Kazakhstan, 6% to 33% in Uzbekistan and 32% to 42% in Kyrgyzstan. Dozens of anti-China protests have taken place in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan between 2018 and 2021." (ECA0016) para 4.3. See also Pantucci (ECA0020) para 11; Q21 [Annette Bohr]
- 24 The TBI told us that: "In 2019 Uzbekistan signed an agreement with Huawei worth \$1billion to build surveillance operations in the country, whilst Chinese company China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation supplied a police command centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan free of charge." (ECA0012) para 17
- 25 See also The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, [The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future](#) (October 2023), p18, accessed 11 October 2023
- 26 Raffaello Pantucci told us that: "The myth says that China does the economics while Russia does security. Quite aside from the illogical nature of this calculation, the reality is that both are engaged in both sectors (and more). This does in some cases lead to competition, but for the most part, they seem happy to operate in parallel" (ECA0020) para 20; see also, Q8 [Annette Bohr], Annette Bohr (ECA0024) paras 19 and 20
- 27 Pantucci (ECA0020) para 20
- 28 London Politica states that "Beijing is not a candidate to be a straightforward 'replacement' for Moscow" (ECA0009) summary.

principles when working in this region against such polarisation, the KCS Group (a risk and intelligence company) summarised that the UK had an opportunity to “assert itself” but:

... must have the confidence to openly set itself against Russia and China in this regard, and the commitment to not back down should either of those, or domestic lobbies within Central Asia, begin to fight back.^{29, 30}

US engagement in the region

11. The United States of America (US) has a 2019–2025 Central Asia strategy. They also have a CA5+1 platform which convenes “representatives from the five Central Asian states and the U.S. to address common concerns, as well as to promote regional dialogue and cooperation”.³¹ Since 2022 there has been an increase in US engagement in the region.³² Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on return from his recent visit to the region. Lu appeared to agree with the suggestion by members of the Committee that the US was at a crossroads in its relationship with Central Asian countries. Annette Bohr, of Chatham House, believed that such statements were overly simplistic and optimistic, discounting 25 years of rhetoric from Central Asian governments on the scale of their democracy agenda.³³ We heard criticism that the interest in Central Asia by Western countries has been determined by events in Afghanistan or Russia, not a desire for a deep and enduring relationship with the countries and their peoples.³⁴ The fickle nature of Western engagement in the region since the withdrawal from Afghanistan has damaged trust and plays to the narrative peddled by Beijing and Moscow that the US has nefarious designs in the region.³⁵

European Union engagement in the region

12. As demonstrated in Table 1 (in the next section), the UK’s European neighbours and the European Union (EU) have increased their levels of engagement with all five

29 KCS Group ([ECA0004](#))

30 The Observer Research Foundation agreed with this assessment stating that the “UK can take (Russia’s distraction in Ukraine) as a strategic opportunity to advance its regional interests” in order to help these countries “tilt towards democracies rather than allowing Central Asia to remain under the grip of totalitarian states”. ([ECA0007](#))

31 US Department of State, “[United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity \(Overview\)](#)” Accessed 27 September 2023. The first C5+1 meeting involving heads of state took place in the US in September 2023 and the joint statement reaffirmed the US commitment to alternative trade corridors, critical minerals supply chains, climate initiatives, cultural exchange and water management (The White House, “[C5+1 Leaders’ Joint Statement](#)” Accessed 27 September 2023)

32 In February 2023 Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and held a C5+1 meeting with foreign ministers. Commentators argue that the meeting signalled a move away from the US priorities which revolved around cooperation over US operations in Afghanistan, to a new focus on Central Asian countries’ role in the great power competition between China, Russia and the West (United States Institute of Peace, “[Blinken Debuts New U.S. Approach in Central Asia](#)” 2 March 2023). His visit followed high level visits in 2022 by Donald Lu, the U.S. assistant secretary of State for South and Central Asia who promised a \$25 million economic initiative in the region (Catherine Putz, “[US Focuses Attention on Central Asia With New Economic Initiative](#)” The Diplomat, 9 November 2022).

33 [ECA0024](#) para 26

34 For example, Dr Matteo Fumagalli and Dr Filippo Costa Buranelli, School of International Relations, University of St Andrews told us that, as the UK relationship with Central Asian countries had been defined by the security operation against the Taliban for more than 20 years, “(t)he 2021 abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan reinforced the beliefs among many Central Asia that the UK’s interest in the region is short-lived.” ([ECA0021](#)) para 15

35 See, for example, Observer Research Foundation ([ECA0007](#))

Central Asian countries in recent years, both bilaterally and through the CA5+EU format. EU countries and the US are considered the biggest investors in Kazakhstan, with an accumulated volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) of \$160 billion.³⁶ The political and human rights record of the Central Asian countries has proved a stumbling block for greater cooperation with the EU.³⁷

Turkey's engagement in the region

13. We heard repeatedly during the inquiry about the important role played by Turkey in regional cooperation, with consequent geopolitical implications.³⁸ Not only is Turkey an increasingly important economic partner, including in the sales of arms,³⁹ but may be attempting to influence the religious life of Central Asian populations through the funding of mosques.⁴⁰ Moreover, its ability to find a common heritage, apart from the Soviet Union, with other predominantly Turkic states has provided a platform for dialogue and soft power that Turkey is usefully exploiting.⁴¹ Dr Sharshenova, of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, told us that “Turkey is a winner, as you say, because they do pay respect” and “come at the highest level.”⁴²

Policy implications

14. As will be explored in the following chapters, the appetite of Central Asian countries to diversify their international partnerships, especially around trade and investment, provides opportunities for deeper engagement by the UK Government and UK companies.⁴³ However, the overriding objectives of leaders of these countries is to remain in power, with implications for illicit finance, human rights, internal and external security, and regional cooperation, that present significant challenges to the posture of the UK toward them.

15. Partly to act as a counterweight to Chinese and Russian influence, the UK Government should seek to support greater collaboration between Central Asian states.⁴⁴ We heard from all Central Asian governments, as well as students and experts from the region, that there is significant appetite for such collaboration. While there are differences on certain issues, and concerns from Tajikistan around the Turkic-based collaborations with Turkey, states appreciate the opportunities for closer ties. Breakthroughs in border disputes between Uzbekistan and its neighbours in recent years have been cited as an example

36 Djoomart Otorbaev, [“Who is the biggest investor in Central Asia? It is not China or Russia”](#), CGTN, 2 May 2022.

37 For example, Turkmenistan does not have an active Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU as attempts by the European External Action Service to ratify one have been blocked by the European Parliament on the basis of the country’s human rights record ([ECA0015](#)). Annette Bohr believed that the EU is particularly keen to access the country’s huge gas reserves and develop the “middle corridor” yet Turkmenistan is showing no signs of diverting gas to the west ([Q15](#)). Instead, there seems more likelihood of closer links with Russia and China. Currently 76% of China’s total imports of natural gas comes from Turkmenistan (Daisuke Kitade, [“Central Asia undergoing a remarkable transformation: Belt and Road Initiative and intra regional cooperation”](#), Mitsui & Co., August 2019).

38 See, for example, Foreign Policy Centre ([ECA0015](#)) para 21; FCDO ([ECA0023](#)) para 4.5

39 Annette Bohr ([ECA0024](#)) para 14

40 See, for example, Shavkat Ikromov, [Mosque Diplomacy in Central Asia: Geopolitics Beginning with the Mihrab](#), Voices on Central Asia, 16 December 2020

41 [Q27](#) [Annette Bohr]

42 [Q27](#)

43 See, for example, [Q114](#) [Charles Garrett]

44 Pantucci ([ECA0020](#)) para 20

of this cooperation bearing fruit.⁴⁵ However, the governments should be alert to the fact that pursuing independent economic paths may be considered by Moscow or Beijing to be “actively working against (their) interests” and attract reprisals.⁴⁶

16. The commitment to “multi-vector foreign policy” and desire for international recognition has compelled active engagement in various organs of the United Nations. Contributors believed that there is an opportunity for the UK to use its position as a member of the UN Security Council to “find opportunities” for greater engagement of these countries within the multilateral system. Minister Leo Docherty (The Minister), Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Europe), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office agreed, seeing the greater engagement in the UN as having the “ability to take a view that is more in line with their own or with international norms rather than being dominated by their neighbours”.⁴⁷ To enable such independence in the Indo-Pacific region, our report *Tilting horizons: the Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific*, recommended the Government establishes a Diplomatic Academy in the Indo-Pacific region “to build capacity in foreign policy formulation and diplomatic representation in partner governments that wish to make use of it.”⁴⁸ A similar initiative could be employed for Central Asia.

17. There is a genuine interest in Central Asian capitals in greater cooperation between the five countries. Such cooperation plays an important part in defending their independence from large and assertive neighbours such as China and Russia. It can help build on their shared history and cultural proximity to reduce the risk of conflict, not least over dwindling shared resources. The UK is well placed to support this ambition, due to its good standing in Central Asian capitals, highly experienced diplomatic service and convening power at the UN. Consequently, we recommend that:

- a) *a Central Asia 5+UK meeting is held in 2024, with the potential for follow-ups, to better understand how the UK can support regional cooperation. A single issue, such as renewable energy, should be identified for this meeting and result in concrete objectives for action.*
- b) *an offer is made by the FCDO of high-quality capacity building for the diplomatic corps of Central Asian countries through a Diplomatic Academy, enhancing the skills required for greater regional and international cooperation, as recommended for other Asian countries in our 2023 report on the Government’s tilt to the Indo-Pacific.*

18. The UK Government needs to have a clear, values-led approach to engagement in Central Asia,⁴⁹ one that does not attempt to supplant or out-compete China or Russia, but that provides different options to Central Asian leadership.⁵⁰ In so doing, it can forge a path in line with the aspirations of Central Asian people⁵¹ whilst remaining clear-eyed

45 See, for example, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) ([ECA0023](#)) para 1.2

46 See KCS Group ([ECA0004](#)) para 11 (a)

47 [Q132](#)

48 Foreign Affairs Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2022–23, “[Tilting horizons: the Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific](#)”, HC 172, p36 paras 123 and 124

49 See, for example, Professor Anceschi ([ECA0008](#)) paras 11 and 18

50 See, for example, Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#)), TBI ([ECA0012](#)) para 6, Foreign Policy Centre ([ECA0015](#)) para 24, Gohel, Andreopoulos and Jones ([ECA0024](#)) para 25, Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

51 Professor Frankopan told us: I would not use the word “contest”. I think it is working out what people in central Asia and the different states want and need and in what ways we can help them. How do we benefit? Our levels of co-operation with people we think of as competitors rather than partners is one problem. ([Q6](#))

about the motivations of their governments. **All five Central Asian states are rightly proud of their distinct cultural heritages and histories. Each has unique assets and strengths and fiercely defends its sovereignty. It is important that the UK Government both respects and encourages the independence of the Central Asian countries from their dominating neighbours. The Government should develop tailored approaches to engagement for each one. However, it is also important that the Government remains realistic about the extent to which countries are able to decouple from Russia at the current time and the varying levels of interest in doing so.**

The UK Government footprint in Central Asian countries

Ministerial engagement and resourcing of diplomacy

19. In almost every interaction during this inquiry the importance of minister-to-minister engagement in bilateral relations with Central Asian countries was emphasised, and we heard frequent criticism that the effort to initiate such contact by the UK had been inadequate.⁵² This is important because, whilst policy proposals in the UK can come from multiple parties, including relatively junior officials and specialist advisors, in Central Asia policy tends to be dictated from the very highest ministerial levels—failure to engage at those levels limits influence. The Minister himself described the lack of senior UK Government engagement with these countries in recent years as “perplexing” and criticism as “legitimate”.⁵³ As policy concepts flow from the top leadership downward in these systems, cultivating personal relationships is key to building trust and influence.⁵⁴ Central Asian governments are likely to draw conclusions about the importance of the relationship to the UK based on the attention given by senior ministers as well as heads of Government and State. As can be seen in Table 1, the levels of ministerial engagement from the UK Government fall far short of its close European partners. We note the effort that is being made to establish political and strategic dialogues bilaterally with these countries,⁵⁵ promoting a depth of engagement at official level, but this should not be seen as a substitute for senior ministerial engagement.

52 KCS Group, for example, described the UK as being “behind the curve” with respect to engagement and that there “is a lot of ground to make up” ([ECA0004](#)) para 4. Central Asian students studying in the UK told us that, given the UK’s position as one of the most developed countries, more could have been done in leading by example and engaging at all levels but particularly ministerial level, with the fledgling Central Asian states. Professor Frankopan described the lack of high-level visits as “the single biggest thing that (he) thinks we miss in the region” ([Q22](#)); Charles Garrett told us that “... certainly Britain could achieve a lot more with greater frequency and quality of senior official and ministerial time.” ([Q109](#))

53 [Q133](#) [Leo Docherty]

54 See, for example, Eleanor Kramers ([ECA0014](#)) para 13

55 [Q138](#) and [Q171](#) [Leo Docherty and Chris Allan]

Table 1: Examples of engagement at head of state, head of Government and Foreign Secretary level (Sources: Foreign ministries and media reports)

Central Asian country	Germany	France	UK
Uzbekistan	Federal President (2019); Uzbek President (2019, 2023); German Foreign Minister (2016, 2022)	Uzbek President (2022, 2018); Uzbek Foreign Minister (2014, 2017, 2022); French Prime Minister (2013, 2013); French Foreign Minister (2014, 2017, 2019)	Uzbek Foreign Minister (2023)
Kyrgyzstan	Federal President state visit (2023); Kyrgyz President visits Germany (2019); Foreign Minister (2016)	Kyrgyz President (2015); Kyrgyz Foreign Minister (2019) French Foreign Minister (2019)	Kyrgyz President (visited COP26 but has not had a bilateral visit)
Kazakhstan	Federal President state visit (2017, 2023); Kazakh President (2015, and 2020); Foreign Minister (2014, 2022); Prime Minister (2012); Foreign Ministers to Germany (8 visits between 2009 and 2023)	Kazakh President visits (2015, 2022); French President (2014); French Foreign Minister visits (2014, 2017); Kazakh Foreign Minister visit (2014, 2017, 2019)	Kazakh President (2006, 2015); UK Prime Minister (2013); UK Foreign Secretary (2023)
Turkmenistan	Turkmen President visits (2016); German Foreign Minister (2006, 2011)	French Foreign Minister visits (2013); French secretary of state (2019), Turkmen Foreign Minister (2015)	Turkmen President (2023)
Tajikistan	Tajik President (2011); German Chancellor meets President in Egypt (2022); German Foreign Minister (2021)	Tajik President (2022, 2019); French Foreign Minister (2019); Tajik Foreign Minister (2022);	None at senior minister level

20. As is explored more in chapters 4 and 5, evidence would suggest that the UK has highly competent and well-liked ambassadors and embassy teams in Central Asian countries. However, it is important that UK diplomatic missions in Central Asian countries are sufficiently resourced to allow for lower-level diplomatic engagement.⁵⁶ Whilst we welcome the uplift in staffing and resources in the UK Embassy in Uzbekistan, we heard criticism of resource availability regarding others: former UK Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Charles Garrett described the embassies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as being run on a “shoestring”.⁵⁷ We appreciate that there is sometimes a trade-off when additional resources are given to one region at the expense of another. However, Charles Garrett argued that “the current level of resourcing for UK work in Central Asia is so modest, a significant increase would barely impact other regional efforts.”⁵⁸ While the UK has an

56 The TBI described the UK’s role in the region as “significantly reduced” and needing to “increase”. (ECA0012) para 36

57 Q110

58 Charles Garrett (ECA0005)

embassy in each of the five countries, contributors have argued that a CA5+1 format, such as the US, China, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea and India, have independently with Central Asian governments is likely to be an effective approach the UK has yet to take. Professor Frankopan, of the University of Oxford, told us:

The UK is one of the few places with a mission in every single one of the five central Asian republics, but that is not followed up in the language and ritual ... you need either to have the ear of the leader, or look as if you do. It is not enough to have very skilled ambassadors trying to show that they are being listened to.⁵⁹

21. While not normally considered a Central Asian state, Mongolia is likely to share some of the same challenges with regards to its relationship with China and Russia. Many of the recommendations around the UK's engagement with the five Central Asian states may be relevant for the UK's engagement with Mongolia and we urge the Government to continue to pay this important international player significant attention at ministerial level.

22. **If the aspirations of Global Britain are to be realised the Government must live up to them across the breadth of its international relationships. We welcome the ambition of the FCDO's Europe and Central Asia directorate and the intention to make the most of opportunities open to the UK. However, while missions in Central Asian capitals continue to punch above their weight, achieving diplomatic successes, they have been let down by a lack of commitment from ministers. High-level ministerial engagement with Central Asian governments has been persistently inadequate and is interpreted by our partners as demonstrating a lack of seriousness from Government. We recommend more high-level engagement at Secretary of State and head of Government level over the coming three years with all five countries, including bilateral ministerial visits in both directions to each of them.**

Strategy and direction

23. KCS Group told us that there is "little evidence of joined-up thinking or strategy on the part of the UK."⁶⁰ Sophie Ibbotson, of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs, stressed the importance of this both at a regional level and national level.⁶¹ Professor Frankopan noted that "where we do appear on the radar, we are overpromising and underdelivering."⁶² Other witnesses were more positive. Believing that the UK had clear and consistent priorities.⁶³ In previous reports we have recommended the Government publish greater information on its strategy and delivery objectives at a country level with the aim of clarifying priorities to

59 [Q22](#)

60 This was also echoed by the TBI who claimed the UK has "no coherent strategy for engagement with Central Asian countries." ([ECA0012](#)) para 36

61 [ECA0002](#)

62 [Q5](#) [Professor Frankopan]

63 See [Q112](#) and [Q113](#)

interlocutors,⁶⁴ aiding scrutiny, and ensuring the mechanisms of trade, aid and diplomacy are working together to promote UK foreign policy. Our recommendations have been rejected, yet we have heard again from stakeholders about the importance of clarity.⁶⁵

24. There is much we agree with in the Government's approach for engagement with the region. The Minister told us:

We cannot match the scale of China in terms of its commercial interests or the Russian market. Our competitive edge is with institution building and the English language, for which there is a very significant appetite.⁶⁶

He went on to elaborate that “ensuring stable development and prosperity” are priorities of the UK Government.⁶⁷ Chris Allan, Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia at the FCDO, went further to clarify that “Russia’s resurgence in the wider region is the most important prism through which we are currently looking at the region.”⁶⁸ **We agree that Russia’s renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and Moscow’s scramble to secure willing partners is a key concern of the UK and must influence foreign policy toward Central Asia. However, the UK’s engagement with Central Asian countries and the relationships invested in must not succumb, once again, to an approach dependent on a single issue such as Afghanistan, Russia or trade. There is now an opportunity to build an enduring relationship with the people of Central Asia.**

64 Including NGOs, businesses, governments and international partners

65 Responding to complaints by business, NGOs and experts in Nigeria, the Committee’s report “Lagos Calling: Nigeria and the Integrated Review” called for an “integrated delivery plan” detailing how the aspirations of the integrated review would be in executed in Nigeria. The International Development Committee called for a similar updated plan to be produced for Pakistan. In both cases the FCDO rejected the recommendation insisting instead that the Country Plans and Business Plan, which remain internal, provide the appropriate direction to programme and engagement work (Foreign Affairs Committee, First Special Report of session 2021–22, [“Lagos calling: Nigeria and the Integrate Review: Government Response to the Committee’s Seventh Report of Session 2021–22”](#) HC573, p2; International Development Committee, Third Special Report of Session 2022–23, [“UK aid to Pakistan: Government Response to the Sixth Report of the Committee, Session 2021–22”](#), HC829, pv recommendation 4).

66 [Q131](#)

67 [Q132](#)

68 [Q132](#)

3 Illicit finance

The role of illicit finance in Central Asian polities

25. Efforts to tackle illicit finance (“dirty money”) should be seen as an essential part of the UK’s engagement with Central Asian countries. Illicit finance emanating from Central Asian countries then flowing into and through the UK is an integral component of autocratic rule in those countries. While the UK does not interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries by challenging the legitimacy of their autocratic regimes, the continuance of an underenforced financial crime prosecution system in the UK effectively constitutes facilitation of these kleptocratic autocracies.

26. Annette Bohr of Chatham House told us of the organic relationship between power and money in Central Asian countries:

Central Asia is ruled by deeply embedded kleptocratic regimes that are amongst the most corrupt in the world. Their leaderships are able to sustain their rule through the centralization and control of revenues from the export of natural resources. These revenues are used to finance patronage networks and pervasive security services for the purpose of quashing dissent. **As long as these revenues remain relatively intact, this system of vested interests perpetuates itself and is threatened by any genuine transparency or reform.** *[emphasis added]*⁶⁹

Box 1: Illicit finance and the role of the UK

Illicit finance is not a merely peripheral aspect of the political system of Central Asian countries. Professor Lasslett of the University of Ulster explained how illicit finance is linked to unaccountable power structures, lack of transparency and internal repression.⁷⁰ To understand these links, it is essential to “follow the money” by looking at how the proceeds of corruption and theft of state property are sent abroad to jurisdictions where they can be safely stored and used. Professor John Heathershaw of the University of Exeter extended the analysis by examining where the proceeds of kleptocracy continued their journey after leaving Central Asia:

In the downstream types of corruption, we are seeing assets being purchased and bank accounts being held in pounds, euros and dollars and residencies afforded; we are seeing influence being articulated.⁷¹

Much of this illicit financial activity, and the use of professional services to support it, takes place in the UK, where the financial framework is ideal for a wide variety of transactions involving the movement and storage of large amounts of money because of the highly developed banking system, capital market, currencies market and the firmly-entrenched rule of law. While the vast majority of transactions here are legitimate, those who wish to move illegally obtained money can take advantage of the respected institutional environment to conduct business that is not legitimate. Those bad actors can enjoy the same quality of life as other high-income residents of London and its surroundings. Professor Lasslett said his investigations indicated that:

... the United Kingdom is being used by kleptocrats, money launderers, security services and organised crime figures from Central Asia, primarily as a discreet location through which to set up corporate and financial structures, and to reinvest the proceeds of crime into assets, including real-estate.⁷²

Figures intimately associated on the public record with money laundering and organised crime, he continued,

... have holding companies in the UK with significant global interests. In some notable cases these individuals are openly on the [people with significant control] PSC register—though the use of proxies remains a widespread problem. And these figures own British real estate, while their children attend UK universities.⁷³

27. John Heathershaw of the University of Exeter and Alexander Cooley of Barnard College stated in their joint submission that:

The fundamental problem for the UK is that it is not outside these kleptocratic systems of power but has been **a key node for Central Asian capital flight and a leading enabler of its corrupt elites.**” *[emphasis added]*⁷⁴

To the extent that this illicit activity is allowed to persist unhindered, the UK therefore bears some responsibility for the continuation of corruption and kleptocracy by Central

70 Lasslett described “political dynasties that have reached the apex of unaccountable power” and that “are competing to control the most lucrative sectors of the economy. He said that “they curate these political sectors as their own private territories. ...” (...) Civic internal repression conceals what is going on because people cannot speak. Journalists cannot talk about this” [Q30](#) [Professor Lasslett]

71 [Q30](#) [Professor Heathershaw]

72 Professor Kristian Lasslett ([ECA0019](#))

73 Professor Kristian Lasslett ([ECA0019](#))

74 Heathershaw and Cooley ([ECA0010](#))

Asian elites.⁷⁵ This is happening in the UK, not elsewhere because, as the author Oliver Bullough told us, “We are much better at laundering money than most places; it is a core industry.”⁷⁶ Bullough suggested this arrangement had come about unintentionally but was nevertheless effective in enabling and concealing illicit financial arrangements.⁷⁷

Lack of enforcement

28. In our 2022 report *The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine*,⁷⁸ we welcomed the measures included in the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 but pointed out that they “do not go far or fast enough and do little to address the fundamental mismatch between the resources of law enforcement agencies and their targets”. Professor Heathershaw told us that the problem is not legislation and regulation, which have progressed in recent years, but in enforcement.⁷⁹ Oliver Bullough suggested to us that too little is being spent on fighting economic crime.⁸⁰ A major problem is the financial asymmetry between oligarchs operating in the UK and law enforcement agencies such as the National Crime Agency. For example, the National Crime Agency’s application in 2020 for unexplained wealth orders (UWOs) in relation to five homes in London worth over £80 million purchased by a former senior official in the government of Kazakhstan on the basis that the purchase was a means of laundering the proceeds of illegal action was rejected on procedural grounds.^{81, 82} Oliver Bullough concluded that the difference in resources between the National Crime Agency and the wealthy individuals concerned played a key role in the case.⁸³

29. Illicit finance is an integral component of autocratic rule in Central Asian countries. The UK is a key node for Central Asian capital flight and a leading enabler of its corrupt elites. While the UK is careful not to interfere with the internal affairs of Central Asian countries by challenging the legitimacy of their autocratic regimes,

75 Oliver Bullough, a writer specialising in illicit finance, told us: “We have turned a blind eye to the misuse of our corporate structures, financial system and professional services companies by the elites of the five republics of Central Asia for far too long. We have helped them loot their home countries and have made life worse for ordinary people from those countries as a result. I firmly believe the best thing we can do to assist the Central Asian countries in building a more prosperous and democratic future would be just to stop. [Q29](#) [Oliver Bullough]

76 [Q40](#) [Oliver Bullough]; he went on to say: “Often, comments are made about how the European Union is much more serious about tackling money laundering than we are. That is not true. It is just not as good at [money laundering].”

77 [Q42](#) [Oliver Bullough]

78 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2022–23, [The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine](#), HC 168

79 He elaborated that there have been “big steps forward around transparency in the past few years”, but that there was a lack of “state capacity” to enforce legislation: “When you degrade the state and allow the private sector essentially to self-regulate—for reasons ideological or economic—it takes many years to build back that state capacity.” [Q45](#) [Professor Heathershaw]

80 He drew attention to Spotlight on Corruption’s calculations on how much is spent on tackling economic crime. He suggested that the 0.042% of GDP estimated was inadequate and the UK should be doing “a lot better than that” as world class financial centre. [Q39](#) [Oliver Bullough]

81 [Unexplained wealth orders—how the National Crime Agency got it wrong](#), Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, 1 May 2020

82 Referring to this case, Oliver Bullough told the committee: “I think the difference in resources brought to bear on the case by the National Crime Agency and by Ms Nazarbayeva and Mr Aliyev, who employed Mishcon de Reya on their behalf, was a bit like Manchester City taking on Hereford. I am a proud Hereford boy, but I do not think we would have much of a chance.” [Q37](#) [Oliver Bullough]

83 Ibid

the continuance of an underenforced financial crime prosecution system in the UK constitutes an undeclared interference in the form of facilitation of kleptocratic autocracies.

30. While there has been progress in developing laws and regulations to curb money laundering in the UK in recent years, enforcement has been inadequate, not least because of a lack of enforcement capacity. State agencies have been under-resourced in comparison with the wealthy individuals they are investigating. *We reiterate the recommendation in our 2022 report, ‘The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine’, that the Government increase resources available to law enforcement authorities, including the National Crime Agency and the Serious Fraud Office, to ensure that they have the capacity to conduct effective actions against those engaged in illicit finance.*

Capacity building

31. While the solution to the problem of illicit finance may be stronger—and better-resourced—enforcement at home, the Government may also be able to tackle it in the originating countries by supporting institutional capacity building. The originators of dirty money coming to the UK from Central Asia are also enabled by institutions such as banks and law firms in their own countries. Governments there may not have the capacity to deal with these malefactors, whose activities impinge on the UK financial system, so cooperation between UK and Central Asian authorities to tackle the problem could be of mutual benefit.⁸⁴ We heard in Kazakhstan that in 2022 the UK provided training to build the capacity and resilience of Kazakh financial institutions, after which HM Treasury has been in regular contact with the Financial Monitoring Authority of the Republic of Kazakhstan in relation to further support, including looking at the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). It has also contributed to capacity building in Uzbekistan.⁸⁵

32. However, it appears that this kind of capacity building is not yet a major feature of UK assistance to Central Asia. While the FCDO pointed out that “corruption remains a substantial risk across the region” and stated that it regularly raised cases of corruption in its diplomatic engagement there, there is no mention in its evidence of anti-corruption or anti-money laundering capacity building in the long list of projects cited. The FCDO said that the NCA “has a focus on the serious and organised crime threat, with other UK agencies gradually increasing engagement with Central Asian counterparts”, which suggests that the NCA may be focusing mainly on the UK end of the problem.⁸⁶

33. Working with Central Asian autocracies on capacity building to fight corruption will not be easy, but failing to do so may mean that the UK becomes more, not less, entangled

84 Professor Lasslett told us: “If you look at a place like Uzbekistan, AML [anti-money laundering] legislation is parlous; it is from a different era. Some banks, not all of them, are run by money launderers openly. You do not require any great investigative capacity. You can google them and find that they are credibly linked to organised crime and money laundering.”

“There are international law firms working in-country playing critical roles. There is a really important conversation to be had and support to be provided in helping countries like Uzbekistan significantly to develop and modernise their AML capacity. If they do want to modernise their economies, it is critical that they have state-of-the-art AML processes.” [Q50](#)

85 [Q144](#) [Chris Allan]

86 FCDO ([ECA0023](#)),

in that very corruption.⁸⁷ We have heard that such work is feasible.⁸⁸ However, Sophie Ibbotson was sceptical about such cooperation.⁸⁹ Witnesses suggested to us that there is scope for pulling the above lessons together to form the basis of meaningful policy development.⁹⁰

Ownership transparency in Overseas Territories

34. The Overseas Territories (OTs) have, like the UK, also provided havens for laundering money from Central Asia because of a lack of transparency regarding asset ownership, though the situation is improving.⁹¹ While it is necessary to ensure that transparency is improved in the OTs, the main effort needs to be on building effective enforcement capacity within the UK, as transactions in the OTs are typically arranged from there.⁹²

35. All of the inhabited OTs have committed to adopt publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership,⁹³ thereby facilitating investigations into illicit finance emanating from Central Asia and potentially helping to reveal sanctions evasion. OTs with financial centres are committed to meeting international standards on illicit finance and anti-money laundering, including those set by the OECD and FATF. Most OTs already have publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership or are in the process of establishing them.⁹⁴ The Government has delayed the deadline for implementation of such registers from the end of 2020 to the end of 2023. In 2022, in response to the renewed illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK, along with Canada, the European Commission, France, Germany and Italy set up a Transatlantic Task Force to work together across borders to disrupt illicit financial flows and identify those hiding their identities and assets from recently imposed sanctions. The aim of the Task Force is to freeze and seize the assets of Russian officials and oligarchs. Its remit has not yet been expanded to include others, such as Central Asian kleptocrats.⁹⁵

87 KSC Group Europe told us: “Lip service is frequently given to the need to combat corruption but domestic efforts are lacking (weak legislative frameworks, institutional bias and ongoing repression against those that speak out) and there is little realistic prospect of removing a practice so entrenched. The government and corporates alike, need to be highly aware that to deepen the UK-Central Asian relationship, necessarily means to be exposed to a greater risk of being subject to, or complicit in, corruption.” (ECA0004)

88 The work of Global Partners Governance Practice Ltd works in collaboration with local partners on capacity building in areas including human rights and anti-corruption. This organisation has already conducted institutional capacity-building with the Kyrgyz and Uzbek parliaments and has worked with Central Asian academics and researchers on an extensive research portfolio, advising the FCDO in several policy areas. (ECA0016)

89 Sophie Ibbotson doubted that the UK has the “credibility or resources” to “forge meaningful partnerships” on issues including security, organised crime and human rights. (ECA0002)

90 Foreign Policy Centre (ECA0015)

91 For example, Professor Lasslett cited a group from Uzbekistan that had used “offshore political secrecy structures primarily in the British overseas territories of Gibraltar and the British Virgin Islands”. (ECA0019), para 9

92 Oliver Bullough agreed that public ownership registers in the OTs and Crown dependencies were essential to winning the fight against illicit financial activity, while stressing that “so much enabling is done out of this city [London], not our overseas territories; they are just a stamp on a piece of paper. The enabling schemes are arranged from here, and the core problem is a failure to invest in our law enforcement capabilities in this country.” Q39

93 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [Overseas Territories: adopting publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership](#), Policy Paper, 14 December 2020

94 This includes: Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Montserrat, St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, TCI and Gibraltar

95 [Transatlantic Task Force to tackle Russian dirty money has a critical role](#), Transparency International, 7 March 2022 (retrieved on 23 October 2023)

36. *We recommend that the Government:*

- a) *Offers assistance to each of the Central Asian countries in building their domestic capacity to tackle corruption and money laundering as a contribution to their economic development.*
- b) *Encourages the National Crime Agency to send agents to liaise with Central Asian governments in developing cooperation on Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWO) and on bringing back stolen public assets from the UK.*
- c) *Ensures that Overseas Territory governments comply with the extended deadline of implementing public registers of beneficial ownership with full and free access to company data, not limited to single entries. There should be no further deadline extensions.*
- d) *Imposes Global Anti-Corruption sanctions designations on those whose origins of wealth can be tied to assets they have illegally seized and apply the Global Forum on Asset Recovery's Principles for Disposition and Transfer of Confiscated Stolen Assets in Corruption Cases (the GFAR Principles).*
- e) *Ensures the Transatlantic Taskforce to tackle kleptocracy and Russian sanctions evasion, established in 2022, provides a special focus on sanctions evasion in Central Asia, by ensuring that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation updates Parliament with a special report on the action taken.*

Sanctions evasion in Central Asia

37. There is strong circumstantial evidence that the sanctions imposed on Russia after it began its renewed illegal invasion against Ukraine in February 2022 have been evaded by bringing merchandise into Russia via some Central Asian countries. A paper published by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in March 2023 noted that the dramatic decline in the export of sanctioned goods from the EU/UK to Russia was matched by a similarly large surge in exports to Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, with a similar pattern visible for US exports.⁹⁶ Detailed analysis of these trends by the EBRD strongly suggests that a substantial part of additional exports to Central Asia and the Caucasus may have been rerouted to buyers in Russia. This conclusion is supported by a significant increase in exports from the Kyrgyz Republic to Russia.^{97, 98}

38. Central Asian countries, which have large diasporas in Russia whose remittances are important for the economies of their home countries, do not impose sanctions against Russia. However, while the sanctions regime has presented them with opportunities to benefit by engaging in overt or covert sanctions busting, they are also keenly aware of the danger of secondary sanctions that might be imposed on entities based in their territories if they are seen as major alternative conduits for sanctioned merchandise and money. The

96 Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik and Alexander Plekhanovz, [The Eurasian roundabout: Trade flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia](#), EBRD, (March 2023)

97 Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik and Alexander Plekhanovz, [The Eurasian roundabout: Trade flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia](#), EBRD, March 2023

98 Statistical data for trade between Russia and the Central Asian countries are incomplete because of the membership of two of them in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a customs union composed of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia (Uzbekistan is an observer). Chatham House, [What is the Eurasian Economic Union?](#), accessed 22 September 2023

Government of Kazakhstan in particular has strongly voiced a determination “not to be a tool to circumvent the anti-Russian sanctions of the United States and the EU.”⁹⁹ Kyrgyz officials have acknowledged that sanctions evasion may be occurring, but insist that, if so, it is only private Kyrgyz companies that are involved, not state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or the state itself. They have pledged to investigate and stop such activities.¹⁰⁰ We understand that the US and UK have presented a list of nine items to Central Asian Governments that are likely to draw secondary sanctions for any entity enabling their supply to the Russian Federation.

39. The FCDO told us in September 2023 that the UK has been “very actively engaged [on sanctions circumvention] with the Kazakhs and the Uzbeks in recent months”, with two visits having taken place recently, one at official level in the spring and one by a group of experts in Kazakhstan in July.¹⁰¹ The Minister told us that Kazakhstan has taken measures to prevent banks in the country being used to circumvent sanctions on the flow of money.¹⁰²

40. Sanctions evasion by Russia via Central Asian states is a real and significant threat to the international measures against Russia’s renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine. The kleptocratic nature of Central Asian governments and the currently intractable economic ties between Russian and Central Asian economies makes addressing this issue complex. We encourage the Government to lead by example in terms of closing off opportunities for entities involved in sanctions evasion to use the City of London and UK services. We also encourage the Government to simultaneously work with Central Asian economies to reduce the dependence of their economies on that of Russia in the medium- to long-term.

99 Stanislav Pritchkin, [The Central Asian countries’ response to anti-Russian sanctions](#), Observer Research Foundation, 26 May 2022

100 Catherine Putz, [As Focus on Sanctions Evasion in Kyrgyzstan Intensifies, Government Promises Action](#), The Diplomat, 20 July 2023

101 Chris Allan, Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia Division (EECAD) in the FCDO, told us: “There was an extremely positive reception, very constructive conversations and very real signs of progress, I would say, in both countries [Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan] on the problem.” [Q141](#) [Chris Allan]

102 “ We have been impressed by the steps taken by the Kazakhs in terms of their own financial conduct authority, in terms of making sure that Kazakh banks are not a repository for money that is sanctioned or money connected to sanctioned individuals.” [Q139](#) [Leo Docherty]

4 Human rights and the environment

41. Whilst each state has its own history, human rights, democracy and the environment are pervasive themes affecting relationships with all Central Asian states, providing both challenges and opportunities for the UK Government.

Climate change, environment and water resources

Box 2: Looming climate crisis in Central Asia

Professor Peter Frankopan told the committee that:

The question of climate—in particular, water—is the single most important question in central Asia for the coming decades. ... the damming of rivers, over-damming and glacier melts. All the glaciers in Tajikistan that feed the two great rivers in central Asia are due to swell. The melt will come through, but within about 30 years there will be no water coming from those glaciers—it will all be gone.¹⁰³

Average temperature rises in Central Asia are estimated to be twice what other regions face as the climate changes.¹⁰⁴ This makes all five Central Asian countries highly vulnerable to climate change. The FCDO presented figures demonstrating the likely impacts over the coming decades:

... economic damage from droughts and floods in [Central Asia] is projected to be up to 1.3% of GDP per annum, while crop yields are expected to decrease by 30% by 2050. The Central Asian region could see as many as 2.4 million climate migrants by 2050.¹⁰⁵

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are highly dependent on glacier and snowmelt from countries upstream, primarily Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, for domestic consumption as well as industry and agriculture. However, the rapid decline in glaciers in these countries poses a risk for the water security in all five countries. Moreover, outdated infrastructure and policy leads to significant inefficiencies.¹⁰⁶ To compound matters the Taliban administration in Kabul is building the Qosh Tepa canal project which could divert up to 10 billion cubic metres of water from the Amu Darya each year—^{107, 108} an issue, we heard during our visit, is of considerable concern to governments in the region. To date, countries have managed to avoid major conflict over access to water; we heard about the importance of improving regional cooperation to avoid this in the future.¹⁰⁹

103 [Q11](#)

104 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

105 They went on to explain that Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan receive 90% and 80% respectively of their water externally and that Central Asian countries maybe losing around \$4.5 billion due to lack of cooperation over water resources (FCDO ([ECA0023](#)))

106 See for example [“Rethinking water in Central Asia”](#), Adelphi and Carec, 2017; [“Regulation of Water and Energy”](#) Eurasian Development Bank, Reports and Working Papers 22/4, 2022

107 Seamus Duffy, [“What Afghanistan’s Qosh Tepa Canal Means for Central Asia”](#), the Diplomat, 19 April 2023

108 The Amu Darya (starting as the Panj River in the high Pamir mountains of Tajikistan/Afghanistan) flows through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan towards what was once the Aral Sea. It provides the majority of the water required for industry, agriculture and domestic use in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to the extent that the river no longer reaches the Aral Sea.

109 Professor Marat of the US Defence College described water issues as “complicated” in Central Asia and that the “dynamics are really fraught with misunderstandings and tensions, because Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan release water in winter months to be able to generate electricity, whereas Uzbekistan needs water for its cotton cultivation in summer months.” ([Q97](#)); see also Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

42. Given the state of Central Asia's glaciers, the long-term potential of hydro-electric power may be limited. We heard how there is a significant potential for the UK to invest in solar and wind, as well as the infrastructure supporting renewable schemes such as that provided by the World Bank CASA-1000 project.¹¹⁰

43. There has been a willingness signalled by the Kyrgyz Republic and the Turkmenistan Government to cooperate with the UK on environmental issues. Charles Garrett told us that President Japarov took a personal interest in the COP26 meetings in Glasgow and that it was an area of successful engagement with the FCDO. He highlighted the opportunities to build trust through less locally controversial topics, such as climate change, which may increase opportunities to have greater engagement on more difficult topics.¹¹¹ In 2023 The Guardian revealed Turkmenistan to be one of the largest emitters of methane in the world.¹¹² We welcome the FCDO's response to the massive methane emissions from Turkmenistan by funding an update to Turkmenistan's national inventory of greenhouse gas emissions¹¹³ and encourage the Government to go further and deeper in its efforts to support transparent reporting of the scale of the problem and a quick response to the issue. The World Bank, one of the UK's key development and investment partners in the region, published its Country Climate and Development Report for Kazakhstan in 2022. Such reports should be key in guiding UK Government policy.¹¹⁴

44. Additionally, interest from Central Asian states in collaborating on ecology and biodiversity provides a means to preserve important ecosystems and to build soft power. Professor Milner-Gulland and Dr Bull, of Oxford University, writing about conservation in the Aral Sea region, told us that the "governments of the region are committed to the protection and restoration of these environments." They point to Uzbek Government plans for economic and industrial development of the Karakalpakstan region as providing opportunities as well as risks to habitat.¹¹⁵ The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative is given as an example of how UK NGOs, Government departments and academic institutions can work with national governments to act as a force for good on this issue.¹¹⁶ Indeed,

110 According to its website: "CASA-1000 is an ambitious renewable energy infrastructure construction project that will bring 1,300 megawatts of surplus electricity from Central Asia to high demand electricity markets in South Asia through new energy infrastructure." It is funded through a consortium of international development institutions including the World Bank, Islamic Development Bank, European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (UK) and the US Agency for International Development (CASA-1000, "[About us](#)", accessed 27 September 2023). The UK has provided £31 million of the \$1.2 billion project. FCDO ([ECA0023](#)) para 2.6

111 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

112 A study commissioned by the Guardian found "that the western fossil fuel field in Turkmenistan, on the Caspian coast, leaked 2.6m tonnes of methane in 2022. The eastern field emitted 1.8m tonnes. Together, the two fields released emissions equivalent to 366m tonnes of CO₂, more than the UK's annual emissions, which are the 17th-biggest in the world." Damian Carrington, "['Mind-boggling' methane emissions from Turkmenistan revealed](#)", The Guardian, 9 May 2023

113 See [Q153](#) [Chris Allan]

114 "The Kazakhstan Country Climate and Development Report identifies ways that Kazakhstan can achieve its development objectives while fostering the transition to a more green, resilient, and inclusive development pathway. It sets out policy reforms and investments needed to build resilience to climate change impacts and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions while creating a more diversified, competitive and sustainable economy." World Bank, [Publication: Kazakhstan Country Climate and Development Report](#), Online [Accessed 23 October 2023]

115 Professor E.J. Milner-Gulland and Dr Joseph Bull ([ECA0022](#)) paras 5 and 11

116 The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative, a collaboration between UK NGOs RSPB, Fauna and Flora International and colleagues including the Kazakhstan government, has just been recognised by the UN as a flagship restoration initiative. The UK-based NGO the Saiga Conservation Alliance, with academics at Oxford University, has worked in the region since 2006, supported by Defra's Darwin Initiative among other UK-based and international funders. ([ECA0022](#)) para 6

officials from Central Asian governments have highlighted to us collaboration with organisations such as the RSPB¹¹⁷ as examples to be emulated. We also heard during our visit and from Central Asian students in the UK that the environment is of importance to local populations. Many are aware of the catastrophe of the Aral Sea and are consequently highly conscious of the impact humanity can have on the environment.

45. Ensuring that the Qosh Tepa canal project does not lead to an environmental and political crisis for countries accessing the waters of the Amu Darya should be a key priority of the UK's engagement with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

46. The vulnerability of all five Central Asian countries to climate change is real and severe. Without rapid and concerted action, the consequences of food and water insecurity pose threats to regional and global resilience. It is in our mutual interest to shoulder this burden together. However, due to the uncertainties of future water resources in the region and the risks relating to water availability for hydropower, we suggest that the UK Government encourages focus on wind, solar and energy delivery infrastructure. *We recommend that the Government prepares a detailed and fully costed action plan within the next year, drawing on the deep preparatory roadmaps and costings already tabled in the World Bank's Country Climate and Development Reports when available, for how and where it will engage on climate adaptation and mitigation in Central Asian countries, including methane reduction in Turkmenistan. This should include facilitating regional cooperation on water use, a package for collaboration on renewable energy, continued support of conservation projects and details of how the UK will use its convening power to ensure Central Asian states are at the front and centre of international dialogue on these issues.*

Human rights

Human rights are poorly understood and selectively observed. Whilst Uzbekistan has made some progress regarding religious freedom and forced labour, which is to be commended, there have been recent clamp-downs across Central Asia on political opposition and the press. Protests have been violently suppressed, allegations of torture are common, gender-based violence is a major problem, elections are not free and fair, and those accused of crimes do not receive fair trials.¹¹⁸

47. As explored later in Chapter 6, the issue of human rights is closely linked to the desire for the regimes to maintain control. In the past two years, concerning incidents of human rights abuse have been reported in all five Central Asian states as well as some negative trajectories on certain rights. Freedom of religion and belief is highlighted as a major issue in all countries. The repression of religious expression of both minority and majority

117 Royal Society for Protection of Birds

118 Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))

beliefs has been identified by commentators and the UN as a significant and worsening problem.¹¹⁹ Where there are improvements, we heard that these tend to be in the relatively uncontroversial areas such as access of women to business opportunities and healthcare.¹²⁰

48. Maisy Weicherding, of Amnesty International, told us that governments in Central Asia are “using cultural traditions to repress diversity and to basically keep their population in check.”¹²¹ She uses the persecution of LGBTQI+ people as an example of governments persecuting a minority.¹²² Moreover, as explored in Chapter 6, LGBTQI+ is one of the issues weaponised by governments when it suits them to demonise Western democracies. Both she and Dr Azhigulova, an independent research consultant, observed that despite the rhetoric of Central Asian governments in conversations with multilateral and bilateral partners, there has been little action to improve the situation regarding human rights for most vulnerable groups in recent years. For example:

- Governments do not intervene to stop homophobic attacks across all five countries.¹²³
- There is little education or human rights literacy.¹²⁴
- There is a lack of enforcement on bride kidnapping laws.¹²⁵
- Despite ratification of CRPD¹²⁶ Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan still have legislation allowing for people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities to be deprived of legal capacity.¹²⁷
- In many countries, laws protecting women are either lacking or unenforced. Dr Azhigulova told us that in Kazakhstan “women are not protected from sexual harassment in any place—the workplace or public places.”¹²⁸

119 Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, told the Majlis Podcast that Tajikistan was a “curious” case as there are concerns not only for the freedom of minority religions, but also the space for the majority “Hanafi” religion is “highly regulated and this has serious implications on their ability to manifest freedom of religion or belief.” Majlis Podcast, 16 July 2023, “[UN Experts Decry Tajik Government’s Increasing Rights Violations](#)” 20:00–21:12, accessed 2 October 2023; see also [Q96](#) [Professor Marat]

120 [Q66](#) [Maisy Weicherding]

121 [Q69](#); see also [Q68](#) [Dr Azhigulova]

122 For example, the LGBTQI+ community in Turkmenistan is heavily repressed by the state with sex between men remaining criminalised. Foreign Policy Centre describes how Turkmenistan is one of only 8 countries in the world where “law enforcement officials” work with medical professionals to examinations with the objective of proving homosexual conduct (see Foreign Policy Centre ([ECA0015](#)) para 6); see also Amnesty International Public Statement, [Amnesty International urges Turkmenistan to resolve all enforced disappearances and end criminalization of same sex relations](#), EUR 61/9126/2018, September 2019.

123 [Q68](#) [Dr Azhigulova]

124 [Q68](#) [Dr Azhigulova]

125 [Q69](#) [Maisy Weicherding]

126 Convention for the rights of people with disabilities

127 Amnesty International told us: “Once a person is declared “incapable” by a court they are deprived of the right to make any decisions about their lives – for instance, to control their finances, to marry, to study or to work. Doctors no longer need their free and informed consent for medical treatment and can treat and hospitalize them with the consent of their guardian.” ([ECA0027](#)) para 6

128 Dr Azhigulova told us: “... since 2017, domestic violence has not been a crime in Kazakhstan. It was decriminalised. Right now, assault and battery and minor bodily harm are not crimes. That means that if a husband, or even an ex-husband, beats up his wife, he will not get any fine. He will get only a written warning from a court not to repeat it. If he commits the same assault and battery for a second time within a year, he will get only a few days of administrative arrest.” ([Q67](#))

- There have been multiple allegations against security services of torture during the violent clashes that took place in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan in 2022.¹²⁹

Human rights defenders

49. The treatment of human rights defenders is also well below international standards. Dr Azhigulova told us that governments consider human rights defenders a “threat”.¹³⁰ Maisy Weicherding agreed and pointed to the surveillance operation mounted against such defenders which involved the network of CCTV cameras with facial recognition and the use of foreign agent legislation to control international funding. She described how some governments attempt to circumnavigate the issue by establishing Government NGOs (GONGOs) to maintain control over civil society activity.¹³¹ Dr Azhigulova explained that consequence of the persecution in Kazakhstan is that human rights defenders self-censor any public facing material.¹³²

Examples of alleged ongoing abuses

Box 3: Gorno-Badakshan and Turkmenistan cotton industry

1. **The Gorno-Badakshan semi-autonomous oblast** (also known as GBAO, ‘Kuhistoni Badakshan’ and ‘the Pamirs’) is a mountainous region of eastern Tajikistan which constitutes 45% of the territory and only 2.5% of its people.^{133, 134} The majority of inhabitants are Ismaili Muslims, who speak distinct languages, and identify as the Pamiri ethnic group.¹³⁵ In 2022 the Tajik Government launched what it described as an “anti-terrorism operation” which involved the arrest or assassination of local leaders (including former warlords), journalists and activists.¹³⁶ Up to 40 people may have been killed by Government forces during protests¹³⁷ prompting Genocide Watch to issue a genocide watch for Tajikistan.^{138, 139} We heard evidence of transnational repression: Pamiris living abroad being targeted, with Russian authorities arresting and extraditing

129 [Q66](#) [Maisy Weicherding]; IPHR ([ECA0026](#)) para 7

130 [Q75](#)

131 [Q75](#)

132 [Q76](#)

133 For further overview see Giuliano Bifulchi, [“Geopolitics of the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast \(GBAO\)”](#), Special Central Asia, 24 March 2023

134 Under the Soviet Union the region had semi-autonomous status and the residents continue to assert their distinct history and ethnicity, identifying themselves as “Pamiri”. The majority of inhabitants are Shia Ismaili Muslims (rather than Sunni as in the rest of the country).

135 The Tajik Government has stated that it considered that the “Pamiri, and people living in other remote areas, were Tajiks and not ethnic minorities.” [Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Commend Tajikistan on Improved Treatment of Migrants and Asylum Seekers, Ask Questions on Discrimination against the Pamiri Minority and Human Rights Defenders](#), UN OHCHR, 21 April 2023

136 Catherin Putz, [“Tajikistan Lifts Internet Block on GBAO. What’s Next?”](#), The Diplomat, 29 June 2022

137 IPHR ([ECA0026](#)) para 5

138 Nat Hill, [“Genocide Watch: Tajikistan”](#), 13 June 2022

139 From research carried out by the Pamiri diaspora and reported on the news website “Pamir Inside” (banned by the Tajik Government), of the 205 documented cases of convicts, 11 were sentenced to life imprisonment (out of a total of 17 nationally), 85 were sentenced to terms from 10 to 29 years, 53 people were sentenced to terms from 1.5 to 9 years. [“Why is repression against people from GBAO a crime against humanity?”](#) Pamir Inside, 4 June 2023

activists living there.¹⁴⁰ The Tajik Government justifies its actions citing concerns of organised crime and national security.¹⁴¹

2. The Minister described the human rights situation in Tajikistan as “deteriorating”¹⁴² and there is considerable evidence that the “anti-terrorism operation”, extending to repression of freedom of religion and belief and cultural heritage, is continuing at pace.¹⁴³ A number of human rights activists and journalists remain detained with significant prison sentences.¹⁴⁴ Noah Tucker, of the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (a not for profit organisation fostering academic exchange between Central Asia and the rest of the world), described the situation as an “incredible disaster” and stated that Pamiri peoples are facing “erasure”.^{145, 146} Contributors described how the Tajik Government has been successful in greatly limiting the work of UN special rapporteurs to the country¹⁴⁷ and that the emphasis on the threat from Afghanistan has been successful in keeping the US administration quiet on the human rights situation. The UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, who visited Tajikistan in October 2023, called for an ‘impartial and transparent investigation according to international standards and measures to prevent tensions and escalation of violence’ in the Gorno-Badakshan region. Bruce Pannier of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty said:

People have called what has been happening in GBAO cultural genocide and it is difficult to argue with that. (...) Everything connected with the Ismaili culture is gradually being banned.¹⁴⁸

3. **The cotton industry in Turkmenistan** is widely reported to use forced labour to pick cotton¹⁴⁹ despite the Government of Turkmenistan denying this.¹⁵⁰ Anti-slavery International described how every year the Government send thousands of public sector workers to pick cotton and how private businesses are forced to support the

140 IPHR ([ECA0026](#)) para 18

141 A Tajik delegation to the UN Committee on elimination of racial discrimination claimed that: “... in recent years, significant crimes had been committed in the autonomous regions where the Pamiri lived, including murders, rapes, drug trafficking, and possession of illegal and unregistered weapons, which crimes were encouraged by the leaders of criminal groups. Military operations aimed to apprehend only the leaders of these groups. These terrorist groups aimed to change the Constitutional order and publicly uphold extremism that sought to overthrow the State. [Experts of the Committee on the \(Elimination of Racial Discrimination Commend Tajikistan on Improved Treatment of Migrants and Asylum Seekers, Ask Questions on Discrimination against the Pamiri Minority and Human Rights Defenders](#), UN OHCHR, 21 April 2023

142 Correspondence with Leo Docherty, dated [13 October 2023](#)

143 See for example IPHR ([ECA0026](#)) para 13, 14; Supported by others, see for example Giuliano Bifolchi, [“Geopolitics of the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast \(GBAO\)”](#), Special Central Asia, 24 March 2023; Emma Collet, [“In Tajikistan repression continues”](#), Novastan, 1 March 2023; Lorenzo Tondo, [“We want the truth’: families of ethnic Pamiris killed in Tajikistan call for justice as tensions rise](#), The Guardian, 4 February 2022; [Bruce Pannier and Mohammed Zain Shafi Khan, “The last Ismaili khalifa in the mountains of Tajikistan”](#), Open Democracy, 15 May 2023

144 IPHR report that: “On 9 December 2022 the Supreme Court of Tajikistan handed down long prison sentences to Manuchehr Kholiknazarov (see below), Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva and other human rights defenders who were targeted for their efforts to monitor, document and assist victims of government repression in GBAO.” They pointed out “that these were given despite numerous appeals to the authorities to drop the charges and release the human rights defenders” made by representatives of the international community. ([ECA0026](#)) para 9; see also para 12

145 [Q106](#)

146 This repression extends beyond the Badakshan issue. Maisy Weicherding described “a climate of fear in Tajikistan.” She described the pressure put on families of human rights defenders by the Government: “For example, most families of the lawyers who are currently in prison had to leave the country. There have been threats of rape against their daughters, their wives and even their mothers.” [Q70](#)

147 [Q71](#) [Maisy Weicherding]; IPHR ([ECA0026](#)) para 17

148 He also reported that: Hundreds of the best, brightest, and most influential GBAO natives have been arrested, and dozens are already serving lengthy prison sentences. Bruce Pannier, [“Central Asia in Focus”](#), Caspian Policy Center, 1 March 2023

149 Anti-Slaver International ([ECA0017](#)) and Foreign Policy Centre ([ECA0015](#)) para 8

150 [ECA0017](#) para 1.4

harvest through organising transport and food. Those who do not pick their quota risk losing their jobs and are forcing their children to pick alongside them. Anti-slavery International describe the conditions in the fields as “terrible”.¹⁵¹ They claim that the relationship between Turkmenistan and Turkey means that there is a higher prevalence of Turkmen cotton in their industry leading to significant risk that such products could be consumed in the UK. They point out that in May 2018, the US banned the import of goods made from Turkmen cotton. The Turkmenistan Government denies that the practice of forced labour is taking place. Despite calls by this Committee and others for improvements, the Independent Commission on Aid Impact was extremely critical of the Government’s progress in tackling modern slavery through its aid programme, grading it amber/red.¹⁵²

Response to persecution of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang

Box 4: The response to the repression of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang

Despite there being significant ethnic Uyghur minorities in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz living in Xinjiang, Central Asian Governments are publicly very quiet on the Chinese Government’s repression of these groups, as recorded in our 2021 report *Never Again: The UK’s Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond*.¹⁵³ Dr Azhigulova described how work of the UNHCR had prompted superficial improvements to the asylum system in Kazakhstan, yet now both Uyghur refugees and ethnic Kazakh refugees are refused asylum.¹⁵⁴ She explained that to grant asylum would be to criticise the policy of the PRC—a situation unthinkable given the close business ties with the country. Terms of membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation require all Central Asian states to extradite Chinese nationals on request.¹⁵⁵ Once again, the response of Central Asian regimes is partially determined by their efforts to maintain control over their own populations. Professor Anceschi, of Glasgow University, notes the PRC’s success in “obliterating the Central Asian part of (Xinjiang’s) identity.”¹⁵⁶ Central Asian regimes are conscious that their response on this issue has implications for their policy toward Muslim groups in their own countries and to reduce the political role of Muslim communities is of utmost importance to them.

50. The relationship between Central Asian governments and their own Uyghur populations is sometimes complex. The persecution of the Muslims in Xinjiang continues with little obvious objection from Central Asian governments. In some cases, Central Asian Governments have failed to provide asylum to Chinese Uyghurs.

Policy implications

Addressing ongoing human rights concerns

51. Significant wisdom, creativity and courage is needed in engaging on human rights issues in Central Asian countries, plus careful selection of issues to focus on. Charles Garrett explained that decision makers are “not inclined to listen” to UK Ambassadors

151 [ECA0017](#) para 1.1

152 Independent Commission on Aid Impact, [UK aid under pressure: a synthesis of ICAI findings from 2019 to 2023](#), 13 September 2023

153 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2021–22, [“Never Again: the UK’s responsibility to act on the atrocities in Xinjiang and beyond”](#), HC 198

154 [Q84](#); see also [Q20](#) [Annette Bohr]

155 [Q86](#)

156 [Q107](#)

in the same way they might in other parts of the world.¹⁵⁷ He advocated working with partners on systemic challenges that allow decision makers to share in the “joy” of the outcome, such as the eradicating of torture in Kyrgyz prisons. Confrontation, we heard, was more likely to cement existing positions. We heard a similar response from Chris Allan who believed that good cooperation on issues such as corruption and economic empowerment were a “way into the harder conversations that we want to have.”¹⁵⁸ Whilst we acknowledge the benefits of such an approach, we were surprised by reticence of some embassies during our visit to even raise certain human rights issues and believe there is a real risk of over-caution. The Minister was optimistic about receptivity to conversations about human rights and the extent to which his interlocutors understood the need to address certain situations. Nevertheless, the response of his senior official resonated with the evidence that there are “considerable human rights concerns”, particularly in terms of “freedom of expression and freedom of political involvement”.¹⁵⁹ The persistence, and in some cases escalation, of human rights abuses, despite claims from Central Asian governments to the contrary, suggests that progress should not be measured by the sentiments conveyed in conversations with senior ministers and officials. **The crackdown on human rights defenders as well as the repression of Pamiri culture and Ismaili religion in Gorno-Badakshan in Tajikistan is a particularly concerning example of human rights abuses by the Tajik Government. We recommend that the Government supports the call of the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues for an impartial and transparent investigation according to international standards and takes steps to prevent tensions and escalation of violence in Gorno-Badakshan. It should raise this situation formally with the Tajik Government bi-laterally and press them to implement recommendations to be made in the Universal Periodic Review follow-up report due in March 2024. We further recommend that the FCDO add Tajikistan to the list of priority countries included in its annual report on human rights. The Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan should be also considered for inclusion.**

52. *We recommend, once more, that the Government implements the recommendations made in the Committee’s report Never Again: The UK’s Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond, to focus on supply chains that might be facilitating forced labour in the cotton fields of Turkmenistan. Lessons should be learnt and applied from initiatives that have brought about reforms on cotton picking in Uzbekistan.*

Implications for trade and investment

53. A number of contributors called on the UK Government to consider making further deepening of cooperation, particularly in trade and investment, conditional on improvements in human rights.¹⁶⁰ Previous attempts to do this were criticised as being inconsistent and potentially hypocritical.¹⁶¹

157 [Q121](#)

158 [Q147](#)

159 [Q148](#)

160 KCS Group ([ECA0004](#)) para 10(c); FPC ([ECA0015](#)) paras 5 and 6; Anti-Slavery International ([ECA0017](#)) para 4.9; IPHR ([ECA0026](#));

161 See, for example, Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))

Box 5: The UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme

In early June 2023, the Government's Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) was launched. This provides tariff free trade for multiple goods and sectors between the UK and eligible developing countries. In Central Asia Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are eligible. Written evidence submitted to the International Trade Committee raised concerns that the scheme might not have the same rigour regarding human rights abuses in participating countries as the EU's equivalent GSP-plus scheme does.¹⁶² Chris Allan of the FCDO told us that the DCTS "includes a set of expectations or requirements relating to the main human rights conventions, as well as some broader conventions. If there are systematic violations of those countries' commitments under those conventions on human rights, trading preferences under the developing countries trading scheme can be suspended."¹⁶³ He commented that there had not been any "pushback from recipient countries on the basis of conditionality"¹⁶⁴ but to date no country has had a trading arrangement suspended.

54. There has not been enough detail shared with Parliament to satisfy how thresholds will be set for human rights and environmental standards under the DCTS, still less how participants in this scheme will be monitored and penalties enforced.^{165, 166} Mary Weicherding warned us of the dangers of introducing such a scheme without robust monitoring mechanisms:

It must not just be like a footnote or an addendum, and it must not be discussed over lunch, which has happened a lot with the GSP+ and the GSP in Brussels.¹⁶⁷

Sophie Ibbotson, of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, observed that previous attempts to make foreign investment conditional on improvements in human rights have "been inconsistent, and in some cases left the UK and its European allies open to allegations of hypocrisy."¹⁶⁸ There is a danger with such conditionality that to withdraw from trade and investment arrangements would reduce the UK's ability to positively influence those governments and societies, and the UK's ability to support greater engagement of Central Asian countries within the UN.¹⁶⁹ Economically, disengagement would be damaging for the UK companies working there or seeking to do so, as well as for the countries in the region with which the UK trades.¹⁷⁰

162 The EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) gives developing countries a special incentive to pursue sustainable development and good governance. Eligible countries must implement 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, the environment, and good governance. In return, the EU cuts its import duties to zero on more than two thirds of the tariff lines of their exports.

163 [Q146](#)

164 [Q147](#)

165 Written evidence submitted to the International Trade Committee raised concerns that the scheme might not have the same rigour regarding human rights abuses in participating countries as the EU's equivalent GSP-plus scheme does. See Correspondence from the International Trade Committee to the Secretary of State for Trade, [7 November 2022](#), p3

166 The Minister, in his letter of October 2022, told us that means of verification could include reports from international convention bodies and through the diplomatic network.

167 [Q79](#)

168 [ECA0002](#)

169 [Q124](#) [Charles Garrett]

170 [Q125](#) [Erlan Dosymbekov]

Implications for civil society organisations

55. Space for civil society organisations is small and establishing them difficult.¹⁷¹ UK Government funding for civil society organisations has been criticised as being too administratively laborious with unnecessarily high eligibility criteria. Noah Tucker, of the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, shared the views of young people he had surveyed:

Young people are forming all kinds of really fantastic and impactful informal civil society organisations, and we need to find a way to relate to them. We need to find a way to be able to fund them, outside the logistics of funding a non-profit that we recognise as a legal non-profit and things like that.¹⁷²

We have been told that there has been an increasing burden on local organisations in terms of the accountability mechanisms to international donors for funding. This has the consequence of reducing their flexibility in programme activities, increasing their administrative costs, and draws attention from host government agencies, concerned as to the level of influence foreign donors are exerting. **Civil society organisations act as a bastion against totalitarianism and a counter to foreign disinformation. We welcome the UK Government’s support of civil society organisations in Central Asia. However, this support needs to be fit for purpose and accessible to those organisations that need it most. We recommend that the reporting requirements for civil society organisations receiving funds from the UK Government are amended so as to provide for an appropriate level of accountability needed and allow the maximum agency in their operations.**

56. Consistency of policy remains the most significant concern in the UK’s engagement on human rights. It is vital that the UK Government works closely with G7 partners at country level (something we observed to be effective during our visit) and at an international level to ensure continuity and consistency of response.¹⁷³ Perhaps more importantly, human rights need to be part of a comprehensive strategy for Government’s engagement in countries and the region at all levels. We heard how the status and popularity of UK Ambassadors (and in some cases, their spouses) has a big impact on the strength of their advocacy on human rights issues¹⁷⁴ but that their action on human rights, although sometimes highly effective, is driven by “personal judgement” rather than “by policy”.¹⁷⁵ The Government needs to be clear on what the implications of its values are on all aspects

171 See, for example, [Q103](#) [Noah Tucker], Fumagalli and Burnelli ([ECA0021](#)) para 10, IPRH ([ECA0026](#))

172 See [Q103](#) [Noah Tucker]

173 Dr Sharshenova of the OSCE academy observed that the EU, UK and US are the only three entities drawing attention to human rights ([Q21](#)). EU engagement with CA5 states continues to deepen. HRW, however, pointed out that the heads of states of the CA5 countries had talks with Council President Charles Michel in 2019 during which Michel failed to mention human rights concerns. There was also no mention of human rights in the public declarations from President Macron or High Representative Borrell during the Tajik President’s visit to Brussels and Paris in 2019. (“[EU: Tackle Central Asia Rights Abuses](#)”, [Amnesty International](#), 19 November 2021). The European Parliament has voted down partnership agreements with Turkmenistan put forward by the Commission.

174 For example, Charles Garrett and his wife were well respected and popular figures in Kyrgyzstan. As a result they were in a position to campaign for disability rights amongst other issues. John Heathershaw also drew attention to the case of Alexander Sodiqov, a Canadian based researcher working with him in Gorno-Badakshan in 2014. Sodiqov was arrested on espionage charges and the then UK Ambassador (Robin Ord Smith) advocated “tirelessly” for his release (for more information on the case see John Heathershaw, “[Consequences of the detention of Alexander Sodiqov](#)”, [Open Democracy](#), 22 July 2014; [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), “[Tajik FM to discuss detained researcher’s case with British officials](#)”, [Asia-Plus](#), 1 July 2014; John Heathershaw ([AFP0029](#)))

175 [Foreign Policy Centre](#) ([ECA0015](#))

of engagement including trade and investment,¹⁷⁶ military assistance,¹⁷⁷ ministerial level communication, and multilateral diplomacy. As covered in more detail in Chapter 3, the Government needs to see its continued failure to prevent the City of London being used as a conduit for illicit finance as a human rights issue and one that could limit the UK's influence in Central Asian societies.¹⁷⁸

57. The situation for human rights, and the environment for human rights defenders, may be different in different Central Asian countries, but there is evidence of a negative trajectory in all of them. This is a situation which cannot be ignored in the UK's bilateral relationships. We have not seen evidence to support the rhetoric that agreed universal human rights are at times at odds with cultural heritage. We welcome the work we saw in various Central Asian countries in which the FCDO is engaging effectively on important human rights issues. However, there is still much work to be done to bring consistency to the UK's messaging on human rights in the region. *We recommend that countries included in the Developing Countries Trading Scheme be rigorously assessed against qualifying criteria and that incentives be provided to adhere to them—wishful thinking and vague reference to convention bodies is not enough. The Government should be fully prepared to suspend trading arrangements with countries that fail to meet the conditions and clearly communicate thresholds for this action. Industries closely connected to particular human rights abuses should receive specific attention. UK ambassadors should be key sources of information in this scrutiny. We recommend this action is coordinated with the EU and US.*

176 Professor Anceschi, Glasgow University, told us: "We can't just have business interacting with central Asia and pretending there is no human rights problem. I am much more pessimistic about that than my colleagues are. I think the region is getting nowhere in terms of rights. Global Britain should do something in this area, such as engaging and being firm about how important these values are to your objectives." [Q102](#)

177 KCS Group raised concerns around the supply of military hardware: "Without safeguards, the UK risks further accusations of being happy to break bread with autocrats & dictators. The ongoing arms sales to repressive Turkmenistan is a case in point." ([ECA0004](#)) para 11 (c)

178 Dr Sharshenova told us: "Given that a big chunk of Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek and Kazakh public funds are in circulation in the United Kingdom—illicit financing—it is quite difficult to keep that moral authority when you are telling central Asian Governments how to do democracy." [Q8](#)

5 Young people, education and soft power

Make a shield of knowledge

*There is no stronger shield against calamities.*¹⁷⁹

Soft power

58. The overriding impression from the evidence gathered and conversations held over the course of this inquiry is that the UK is well regarded in all five Central Asian countries and wields significant soft power. However, there was a universal feeling of bafflement amongst interlocutors and experts as to why the UK Government does not do more to capitalise on the opportunities in the region and invest small amounts of money to reap large rewards.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, we heard a powerful case for the UK to capitalise on its strengths, not just for the sake of the development of Central Asian societies, but for the resilience of UK interests there. This also acts as a counterweight to those neighbours with a vested interest in the endurance of authoritarian rule and represent “no-regret investments” for the UK Government and businesses.^{181, 182}

59. The two most significant organs of soft power cited in evidence were the British Council (whose Creative Spark initiative and English language offering are covered in more detail below) and the BBC World Service.¹⁸³ Martin Smith, of Goldsmiths University, told us that despite having “developed and exceptionally strong” soft power relationships, with FCDO and British Council cuts “there is a danger of these relationships being eroded to the point of dysfunctionality, with severely regressive consequences for UK influence in the region.”^{184, 185} Ministers and senior officials were effusive in their praise of the British Council,¹⁸⁶ but reiterated that how the £511 million the Government has provided to the British Council would be spent was a decision for that organisation, over which it had little subsequent influence.

60. Regarding the BBC World Service, Professors Heathershaw and Cooley described the policy decision to reduce funding to the BBC World Service as “one of the more self-defeating acts of foreign policy in recent years.” They go on to list the Central Asian national language services that are facing cuts or extinction. Despite reduced services we saw a healthy appetite for BBC news and programming. The World Service’s presence in Uzbekistan, for example, consists of one reporter producing his own YouTube videos

179 Nāṣir-i Khusraw, Diwan, Qasida no. 79, verse 30 (tr. Annemarie Schimmel)

180 Sophie Ibbotson told us that: “Despite its low levels of investment in Central Asia, the UK is nevertheless viewed by regional governments as a prestige partner.” (ECA0002). See also, Heathershaw and Cooley (ECA0010) para 23

181 Charles Garret told us that: “Soft power offers the most fertile ground for influencing the development of (Central Asian) states. And the UK, enjoying a unique reputation in many ways, is well placed to do this.” (ECA0005); see also, TBI (ECA0012) para 39; Q7 [Annette Bohr]

182 “No-regret investment” - any investment made by the UK Government, such as in education or security needs to carefully consider its impact and reduce the likelihood that it will be regretted later.

183 See, for example, Sophie Ibbotson (ECA0002),

184 (ECA0001) para 1

185 Charles Garrett also agreed that the UK “does not do enough to exploit (the soft power gained through the British Council) and influence people through that channel.” Q116

186 See Q157–8

in Uzbek. The channel has over 1.6 million subscribers with views ranging from 6,000–500,000 per report. Sophie Ibbotson told us that under-resourcing “makes it look as if the UK Government does not recognise (Central Asian countries’) importance, or does not really care about investing in Central Asia where it matters.”¹⁸⁷ Despite these concerns, the Minister agreed that an expanded BBC World Service in the region would be “logical” and fits with an “institutional ambition”.¹⁸⁸

187 Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))

188 [Q163](#)

Box 6: UK involvement in the creative sectors in Central Asian countries

The British Council and FCDO have been supporting the creative industries in Central Asia since 2017 through the Creative Spark and Creative Central Asia programmes.¹⁸⁹

Creative Spark came out of the Creative Central Asia initiative and aims to support universities and institutional partnerships to develop the countries' enterprise skills and creative economy and had a budget of around £90,000 per country.¹⁹⁰

The Creative Spark programme specifically, and the UK's support of the creative industries more generally, was mentioned multiple times in evidence. Some of the successes of the programme mentioned were as follows:

- The 60 plus UK partner universities working across seven countries in Ukraine, Central Asia and the Caucuses, have changed the education system in the region, in particular in Uzbekistan.¹⁹¹
- Creative Spark's total number of participants across all seven countries over four years amounted to over 65,000.¹⁹²
- One of its partners wrote the first book produced in Uzbekistan as a guide to the Creative Industries. It credits the UK throughout as a model for developing ideas, indicating soft influence with a strategic reach.¹⁹³
- It helped secure Kyrgyz government support for new legislation and sectoral development.¹⁹⁴ Another contributor told us that the importance of this goes well beyond economic development: "employment in this sector is more likely to benefit rural populations, women, the disabled and others often excluded from work opportunities; and the SMEs¹⁹⁵ created through sectoral growth are often powerful advocates for the rule of law."¹⁹⁶

Charles Garrett commented that the UK's initiative:

... put the UK at the centre of developing national and regional collaboration in the creative industries and has been credited with catalysing the development of the sector. It fell victim to the British Council's pandemic-related difficulties. Reinstating this initiative would be welcomed across the region.¹⁹⁷

Education

61. In all five of the Central Asian states more than 50% of the population are below 54 years of age. This presents significant challenges to governments in terms of providing

189 According to Martin Smith (ECA0001): "CCA was the brainchild of Jim Buttery, then (2017) British Council country Director for Kazakhstan (...) The idea was to stimulate the development of a regional creative identity, supported by regional networks, by deploying the formidable convening power of the Council. For successive three-day annual events the Council flew out a delegation of some twenty cultural leaders and creative entrepreneurs (plus a couple of politicians) from across the UK. ... they mixed with representatives of the rising creative class from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (and latterly from Tajikistan) within the framework of a series of thematic and structured programmes of presentations and workshops."

190 Gerald Lydstone (ECA0006)

191 Gerald Lydstone (ECA0006)

192 Gerald Lydstone (ECA0006)

193 Gerald Lydstone (ECA0006)

194 The legislation refers to a new law setting up the framework for a Creative Industries Park, modelled on Kyrgyzstan's existing High Technology park which allows participating businesses tax advantages. Sectoral development refers both to the new law as well as engaging leaders at the most senior levels, helping increase understanding of the potential of the creative sector.

195 Small and Medium Sized Enterprises

196 Charles Garrett (ECA0005)

197 Charles Garrett (ECA0005)

education and employment. We heard that there is a shift taking place in many of these countries with English replacing Russian and the international language of choice.¹⁹⁸ Secondary and tertiary education was highlighted by many as an area where the UK could make a considerable difference.¹⁹⁹

62. UK tertiary education is highly sought after by those in Central Asian countries.²⁰⁰ Students from the region studying in the UK described the high standards of education and facilities as well as a “vibrant and cosmopolitan atmosphere” in which to live and study. Students felt inspired by the history and landscapes of the UK as well as its proximity to the rest of Europe.²⁰¹ The Chevening Scholarship programme and John Smith fellowships were highly praised. We heard of a high percentage of Chevening Scholars returning to take up key positions in the administrations of their respective countries.²⁰² We welcome the commitment to increase the number of scholars across the region from 23 in 2022 to 31 in 2023.²⁰³ Throughout our inquiry we have come across such scholars who are now thought leaders or policy makers in Central Asian countries. Continuation and even expansion of scholarship opportunities was strongly encouraged.²⁰⁴ Dr Sharshenova, a former Chevening Scholar herself, told us:

... you do not seem to invest enough and make (Chevening) more sustainable, and develop it.²⁰⁵

Professor Frankopan agreed describing Chevening Scholarships as “cheap at the price” and that a little money could go a long way to rectifying “missed opportunities” in this regard.²⁰⁶

63. Another potential possibility for expanding the opportunities for engagement in the education sector is in terms of opening campuses of UK universities in Central Asian countries.²⁰⁷ We visited one such site in Tashkent. Professors Heathershaw and Cooley cautioned that overseas campuses and ventures “are at huge risk of corruption and violations of academic freedoms.”²⁰⁸

64. English language training is a highly significant opportunity for the UK to make a difference to societies in Central Asia whilst expanding its soft power. Multiple contributors, including the Minister and senior officials, confirmed that there is both a strong appetite to learn English as well as an interest from the UK to provide English language training.²⁰⁹ To date, much of this training has been delivered through the British Council which has faced significant budget constraints (as covered above).

198 See, for example, Gerald Lydstone ([ECA0006](#)) para 11

199 See, for example, Fumagalli and Burnelli ([ECA0021](#)) Rec d; [Q21](#) [Annette Bohr and Dr Sharshenova]

200 See, for example, Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#)), Heathershaw and Cooley ([ECA0010](#)) para 25

201 Comments provided as part of a private engagement activity the Committee organised with students in the UK.

202 [Q21](#) [Dr Sharshenova]; [Q26](#) [Prof Frankopan]

203 [Q163](#) [Chris Allan]

204 See, for example, Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#)), Eleanor Kramers ([ECA0014](#)) paras 9 and 10

205 [Q21](#)

206 [Q22](#)

207 Yeung and Huang ([ECA0011](#)) para 24; TBI ([ECA0012](#)) para 15

208 Heathershaw and Cooley ([ECA0010](#)) para 25

209 For example, Charles Garrett told us how the UK could be doing “a lot more” in terms of language training and that currently “very little money” is allocated to it ([Q116](#)). Minister Leo Docherty described English language training as “our competitive edge” for which there is “significant appetite” and that is central to the Government’s approach ([Q131](#)).

Box 7: UK involvement in education reforms in Uzbekistan

According to the British Council, enrolment rates in universities in Uzbekistan rose from “9% in 2017 to over 30% in 2022 with a goal of 50% by 2030 and the number of universities doubling.” The British Council, with the support of the British Embassy and UK educational institutions, has been instrumental in supporting educational reform in Uzbekistan.²¹⁰

Some of the activities and positions of influence the Council holds include:

- The British Council held the first Inclusive University Conference, in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations and the Uzbek Parliament. They “identified key focus areas including inclusive education strategies, inclusive curriculum, and student support services.” And “co-chaired a National Inclusive University working group and are developing a Good Practice Guide in this field.”
- In 2023, the Council launched a University Governance and Quality Assurance in HE Policy Discussion series—engaging Vice-Chancellors and academic leaders nationwide.
- “The Uzbekistan-UK Education Forum was held in March 2023 bringing together UK-Uzbek Trans-National Education stakeholders to share experiences and reflections on challenges and opportunities for TNE partnerships development, ensuring understanding of Quality Assurance in the UK and the positive impact of internationalising education.”
- In the Presidential schools in Uzbekistan the Cambridge Partnership for Education has been assisting with the adoption of the A-level examination system.²¹¹

65. Education provides one of the most promising opportunities for the UK to be a force for good and to build soft influence in Central Asian countries—contributing to a generation of educated young people who know English and have had exposure to the UK. It is a strategy with potential long-term results but requires concerted and deliberate short- and medium-term action. If the Government is serious about its aspirations to take advantage of interest in the English language, it needs to ensure that it has fully committed and resourced partners through which to achieve them. Currently the ambitions here, and for the further promotion of the English language, rely heavily on funds available to the British Council and the choices it makes in spending them. To improve the effectiveness of its support on language and education, we recommend that the Government:

- a) *Support the establishment of permanent offices for the British Council in Dushanbe and Bishkek—as recommended in the Committee’s 1999 report. The British Council must be adequately resourced to take advantage of the opportunities presented to it in a part of the world transitioning from Russian to English as its second language of choice.*
- b) *Galvanise its support of the creative sector in Central Asian countries by sending a high-level ministerial delegation to the World Conference on Creative Economy in Uzbekistan in 2024.*

210 British Council ([ECA0025](#)) para 3.1

211 Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))

- c) *Expand the numbers of Chevening scholars from Central Asian countries initially to 40 per year by 2025, and better support the visa application process for students.*
- d) *Enhance engagement with the Uzbek Government, and other governments where invited, on education reform.*

Cultural exchange

66. A key to exercising soft power and improving mutual understanding between countries in the region and the UK is cultural exchange. A student from the region studying in the UK told us that cultural exchange was one of the most important tools in “fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of each country”:

by encouraging exchanges of authors, musicians, cultural performances (and so on) I think it could really help to create a cultural bridge and deepen people-to-people connections.²¹²

Much of this can be achieved by expanding the educational opportunities for Central Asians to study in the UK, learn English, or experience UK education systems (see above). The Seasonal Agriculture Workers scheme (Box 8) provides another opportunity for such experiences. We heard how the scheme has a very high rate of workers returning to their country within the permit period.²¹³ It was described as a “good way” of individuals experiencing an alternative to the poor treatment received when working in Russia as well as witnessing a democracy with a strong rule of law.²¹⁴

Box 8: Seasonal Agricultural Worker’s Scheme

The seasonal agricultural worker’s scheme enables Central Asian workers to acquire a short-term permit to work in the UK via a number of approved companies. The FCDO is anticipating up to 10,000 workers coming to the UK from the region in 2023. The FCDO works with the International Organisation for Migration to provide pre-departure training covering topics including human trafficking and radicalisation.

During our visit to Tashkent, Bishkek and Astana we heard universal acclaim for the scheme. Interlocutors shared how conditions in the UK were vastly better than those experienced in Russia, the traditional destination for migrant workers from Central Asia. The scheme was described as bringing the UK soft power influence as well as economic benefit to all parties.²¹⁵ We heard calls not only to expand the numbers but also the types of work available, opening up to other trades such as plumbers and electricians as well as health workers. A criticism raised was the challenge in acquiring visas in-country. In some cases applicants are having to travel to Istanbul or Almaty for visa applications. This is causing significant frustration in some foreign governments.

67. **The Migrant Workers Scheme is highly effective, with benefits for the UK, the workers themselves and the societies they are returning to. We see huge potential for this to be expanded for agricultural workers and other trades. We recommend that the Government reviews its ability to issue visas and provide more options, including application centres closer to the populations that require them. In order to enhance**

212 Private stakeholder engagement

213 See, for example, [Q167](#) [Chris Allan]

214 [Q117](#) [Charles Garrett]

215 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#))

the benefits of the programme we suggest that the Government considers an additional element to provide vocational training as well as cultural experiences for those workers visiting the UK.

6 Security, drugs and violent extremism

68. The need for authoritarian governments in Central Asia to maintain their control poses a significant risk to internal and external security in the region.²¹⁶ We have heard how the willingness of these states to use violence against their own populations and rival criminal elements, as well as the mobilising of ethno-religious arguments in state-to-state disagreements, creates underlying conditions for rapid and dangerous escalation of minor disputes. The repression of basic outward expressions of Muslim faith, such as head coverings for women and beards for men, as well as restricted religious education, is likely to create frustration and antagonism with the respective governments and foment unrest.²¹⁷ Despite these underlying conditions, there are still opportunities for the UK Government to engage whilst being a force for good. The UK Government and businesses should consider appropriate “no-regrets investments” in the Central Asian security environment. The political, security and natural environments of Central Asia are sensitive to outside influence and are unpredictable. Any investment made by the UK Government, such as in education or security, needs to carefully consider their impact and minimise the likelihood that it will be regretted later. Likewise, trade and investment ventures the UK Government supports need to be considered in light of these variables.

The security environment

69. As indicated previously, witnesses argued that despite coming from different levels of democratic representation, none of the governments in Central Asia could be described as democratic and all are currently on a negative trajectory to greater levels of authoritarianism.²¹⁸ For leaders in Central Asia, survival of the regime is the number one priority.²¹⁹ Professor Luca Anceschi, of Glasgow University, described how Central Asia regimes used Covid-related restrictions as an opportunity to “regenerate” and to further tighten their grip:

Here, we witnessed the regional elites engaging in a multilevel strategy of disinformation, data manipulation and outright repression that had the net effect to shrink further the space available to independent media operators in a region where state outlets were already exerting a nearly complete monopoly over information policy.²²⁰

UK, and other Western, policy makers should recognise that these are young countries attempting to discover their identities²²¹ yet their governments have been promising democratic reform for 25 years whilst in most cases doing the opposite.²²² Figure 1 demonstrates how the various factors interact to create a cycle of escalation—escalation which poses challenges to businesses and governments looking to deepen their engagement with Central Asian states. **The autocratic nature of the governments in the region and**

216 See, for example, [Q93](#) [Luca Anceschi]; Charles Garrett pointed to the “popular protests” which unseated the president in 2005, 2010 and 2020. The protest in 2010 saw 100 protestors shot dead by the security forces and scores killed in subsequent ethnic violence. He highlighted situations in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan which have both also seen big public protests in the last 18 months with many killed.

217 [Q96](#) [Noah Tucker]

218 See, for example, Martin Smith ([ECA0001](#)); Annette Bohr ([ECA0024](#)) para 7;

219 [Q18](#) [Prof Frankopan]

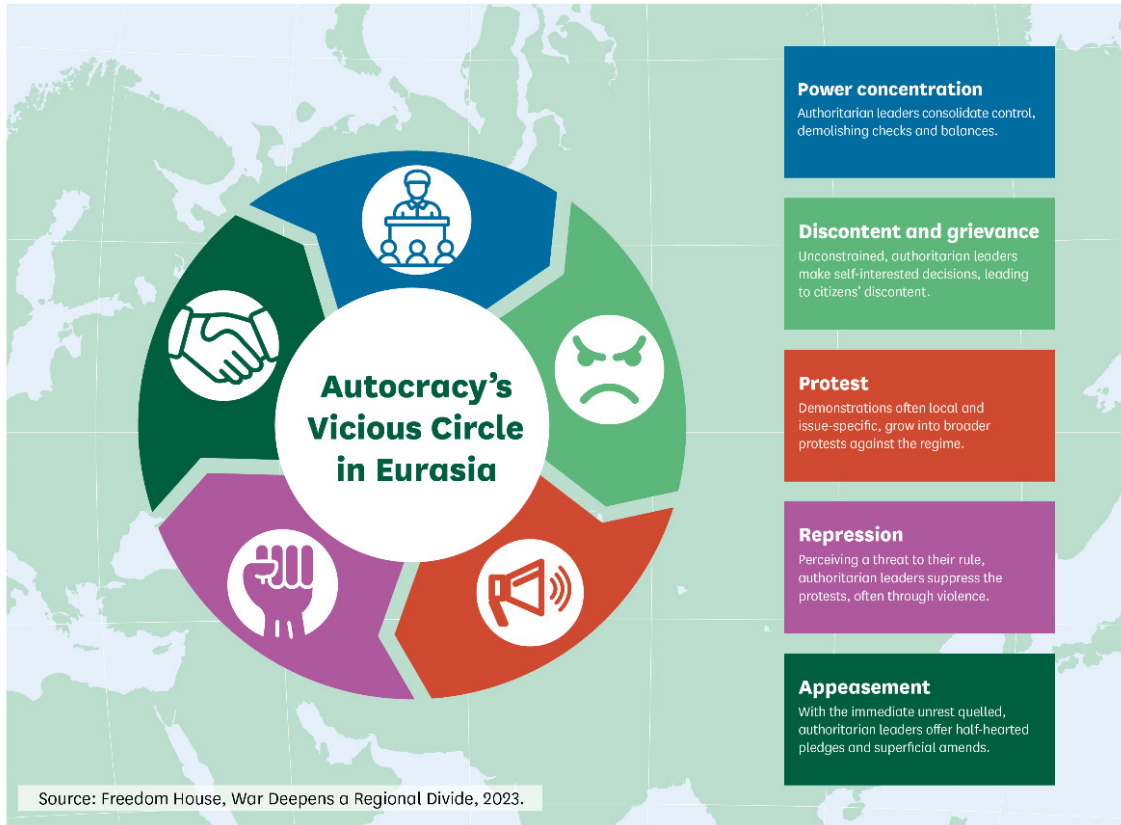
220 [ECA0008](#)

221 A common feeling amongst officials and experts we met with on our visit to the region.

222 Annette Bohr ([ECA0024](#)) para 26

the lack of civil society engagement in most countries represents the foremost threat to peace and stability in the region. As recommended elsewhere, the UK Government should continue to prioritise the promotion of meaningful civil society activity and the meeting of human rights obligations as cross-cutting themes in its engagement with the five Central Asian states.

Figure 1: Autocracy’s Vicious Circle in Eurasia



Box 9: Two examples of violent repression of demonstrations in 2022: Karakalpakstan and Kazakhstan

Karakalpakstan is a semi-autonomous republic in the north-west of Uzbekistan constituting 40% of the land area but less than 6% of the population. In June 2022, thousands of Karakalpaks demonstrated against living conditions and constitutional reforms that would remove the sovereign status of the region. According to Government figures, in the heavy response that followed at least 18 people lost their lives and 243 were injured.²²³ In response, the President announced that he would change the proposed constitutional amendments but he also declared a state of emergency and promoted a message of foreign attempts to destabilise the country.²²⁴ Professor Anceschi uses the response to the protests as an example of “post-pandemic authoritarian entrenchment”.²²⁵ The 61 people put on trial for involvement in the violence have been found guilty (although not all imprisoned), none of the officials or members of security services have faced trial and the Parliamentary commission set up to examine the events has failed to report and been accused of operating below international standards.²²⁶

In January 2022, in **Kazakhstan**, at least 238 people were killed as Government troops attempted to disperse protests across the country.²²⁷ According to IPHR:

Despite widespread allegations of the use of torture of detainees during the January events, only a few law enforcement officials have been convicted for torture to date. Most investigations into complaints of torture were closed after ineffective investigations which predominantly involved asking the alleged perpetrators if they confirmed the allegations or not.²²⁸

70. In 2022 fighting broke out between the border forces of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan leaving more than 100 people dead.²²⁹ Human rights organisations believe that there is evidence of both sides committing war crimes.²³⁰ We heard from interlocutors in the Kyrgyz Republic who have been implementing trauma counselling funded by the UK Government in the border region. This conflict is likely to have many underlying causes, including disputes over water²³¹ and grazing access, and the internal politics in the two countries. Dr Sharshenova told us that the situation was unlikely to remain peaceful for long as the primary issues are unresolved, there is lack of communication with those living on the border and lack of analysis to aid the finding of solutions.²³² Global Partners for Governance Foundation highlighted the apparent arms race between the two countries as well as resurgent nationalism. Professor Erica Marat, of the US National Defense University, observed that there were few international actors involved in the resolution of this conflict and there could be a role for the UK Government to play in such situations.²³³

223 IPHR (ECA0026) para 6

224 “What is Karakalpakstan and what is going on there?”, Nationalia, 27 September 2023

225 ECA0008

226 Majlis Podcast, 2 July 2023, [One Year Since The Violence In Karakalpakstan Over Proposed Changes To Uzbekistan’s Constitution](#) [Accessed 2 October 2023]

227 IPHR (ECA0026) para 6

228 IPHR (ECA0026) para 4

229 Catherine Putz, [Parviz Mullojonov on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Dispute](#), the Diplomat, 1 November 2022

230 “Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan: Apparent War Crimes in Border Conflict”, Human Rights Watch, 2 May 2023

231 Q97 [Prof Marat]

232 Q24; see also Charles Garrett (ECA0005)

233 Q100

Countering the threat posed by Russian disinformation

71. As discussed in Chapter 1, Moscow is concerned not to lose its sphere of influence, which includes the five Central Asian states. There has been a noticeable response from Russia to moves that countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have taken away from their historic positions (such as no longer promoting Russian as the second language). We heard that part of its strategy is a concerted disinformation campaign which includes discrediting Western countries and misrepresenting their intentions in the region (see also Chapter 4).²³⁴ The KCS Group described this as “posing a threat to UK foreign policy and its political and economic reforms.”²³⁵

72. The concern is particularly acute in Kazakhstan, where high proportions of ethnic Russians live in northern parts of the country. Evidence from the Observer Research Foundation suggested that renewed interest from Russia, and behaviour evident in their invasion of Ukraine, has led to concerns in Kazakhstan for its sovereignty:

In 2020, the Russian duma deputy, Yevgeny Fedorov, stated that Kazakhstan must return those territories to Russia, where Russians live.²³⁶

Professor Frankopan drew attention to the longest land border on earth between the two countries and noted “the shivers that went through the spines of everyone living in a former Soviet state when the Chinese ambassador said that ‘effective status’ under international law was not guaranteed or recognised.”²³⁷ The news website Caravanserai reported in April 2023 that some of this propaganda has the intention of recruiting Kazakh men as soldiers for the Wagner Network.^{238, 239}

73. We heard that the BBC is a vital tool in combatting Russian disinformation over the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and anti-British propaganda from the Russian state. Charles Garrett highlighted the benefits of English language training in countering disinformation as if “they only have Russian, they only get (Russia Today) and other Moscow-based resources.”²⁴⁰ **Russian disinformation is a threat to both the UK and its Central Asian partners. The insidious messages spread by the Russian state have a powerful impact on how the older generation views the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and the nature of UK engagement in their countries. It also poses a threat to the attempts of Central Asian states to protect their sovereignty, especially in areas with high numbers of ethnic Russians such as in northern Kazakhstan. There is potential for the UK Government to support the governments and civil society in the region in combatting such disinformation.**

234 See, for example, Global Partners for Governance ([ECA0016](#))

235 ([ECA0004](#)) para 15

236 ([ECA0007](#))

237 [Q27](#)

238 Kanat Altynbayev, “[Russian propaganda sets the stage for Wagner recruitment in Kazakhstan](#)”, Caravanserai, 27 April 2023

239 The nature and extent of the Wagner Network’s operations is covered in more detail in Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2022–23, “[Guns for gold: the Wagner Network exposed](#)”, HC1248

240 [Q116](#)

Violent extremism and terrorism

74. The risk of violent extremism in Central Asia is small but not insignificant; it may have been increased by the Taliban takeover in 2021.²⁴¹ Noah Tucker told us that where Central Asians lead such organisations that continue to operate in northern Syria and Afghanistan “we do not have any particular indication from any of them that they are interested in operating anywhere outside of those theatres” and that recruitment from Central Asia has “almost completely stopped”.²⁴² Other contributors, including Gohel, Andreopoulos and Jones did not share this assessment claiming that “Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the regional ISIS affiliate, has recruited ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks with the intention of having them carry out attacks within Afghanistan and against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.”²⁴³ There is the prospect of potentially radicalised Central Asians returning to their countries having fought in Syria and Ukraine or being radicalised whilst working in Russia or elsewhere. However, the number of terrorist attacks within Central Asia is very low.²⁴⁴

75. As outlined in Chapter 4, the protection of populations at home and abroad from terrorism is a narrative used by Central Asian governments to justify restrictions on human rights defenders, civil society and religious groups,²⁴⁵ as well as rationale for greater international defence support. However, it is a complex situation whereby a form of moderate, cultural Islam is promoted and more conservative expressions are discouraged. Global Partners for Governance describe what they refer to as a “loyalist form of Islam” promoted by the governments:

These narratives imply that Central Asian societies each have a unique “national Islam” that is “under attack” by Western democracies and other external actors that want to “destroy their national values and traditions.” They also portray social pluralism or democratic reforms, including an independent civil society or free elections, as an existential threat and part of an “anti-Islamic” agenda.²⁴⁶

There is evidence that religion is becoming a contested space, with Gulf states and Turkey sponsoring the building of new mosques in Central Asian countries. We recognise the dangers in a repressive response by local governments.²⁴⁷ Noah Tucker explained that such restrictions were counterproductive from a security point of view:

241 Global Partners for Development ([ECA0016](#)) para 3;

242 [Q94](#)

243 Gohel, Andreopoulos and Jones ([ECA0018](#)) para 18; they also highlighted the increase in propaganda campaigns by IS-K aimed at ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks with reach into Central Asian countries by using subtitles in the Cyrillic alphabet; the TBI described the increase in Islamism and violent extremism as “one of the greatest challenges facing Central Asia” ([ECA0012](#))

244 Global Partners for Development state the last confirmed terrorist attack was in Tajikistan in 2018 ([ECA0016](#)) para 3

245 See, for example, Observer Research Foundation ([ECA0007](#)) p2; (Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, speaking on Majlis podcast, 16 July 2023, “[UN Experts Decry Tajik Government’s Increasing Rights Violations](#)”, 6:30, accessed 2 October 2023)

246 ([ECA0016](#)) para 7; see ‘Human rights and the environment’ section for more analysis

247 Shavkat Ikromov, [Mosque Diplomacy in Central Asia: Geopolitics Beginning with the Mihrab](#), Voices on Central Asia, 16 December 2020

... the single most positive reform to prevent violent extremism would be for the central Asian governments to allow women to cover their heads—not to harass them for it and not to shave men’s beards.²⁴⁸

Professor Marat highlighted the unease of populations where “frictions” are building between sections of society that are more secular and those that are more religious.²⁴⁹

Figure 2: Some prevailing influences on societies and national identity in the Republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic



76. Some of the influences on Central Asian societies as their own identities re-emerge are outlined in Figure 2. In the majority of cases Central Asian governments, to a lesser or greater extent, are promoting cultural conservatism whilst discouraging conservative Islam and many Western values. There is an apparent contradiction between this stance and the rhetoric around closer collaboration with Western democracies—a contradiction which warrants careful analysis. The UK Ministry of Defence has an Islamic adviser who supports Muslims serving in the armed forces and works to ensure a better understanding of Islam. Such skills could be relevant in a Central Asian context.²⁵⁰ **The Government should proceed with caution when engaging with Central Asian governments on the issue of terrorism and military to military cooperation. The threat of terrorism is often used as an excuse for tightening the authoritarian grip of the state on its own people, opening the door for Chinese surveillance technology with the potential for misuse. Moreover, there is evidence that the threat of terrorism is used to encourage foreign investment in security infrastructure. We encourage the Government’s focus to be on**

248 [Q95](#)

249 [Q96](#)

250 See for example [Asim Hafiz: My Journey as Imam to the British Armed Forces](#), Forces Muslim Association, 15th December 2017

the offer of training to Central Asian armed forces, initially in English language and in the ethical dimensions of conflicts, with the offer of training from the UK's Islamic advisor to Central Asian militaries.

Drugs trafficking

77. Drugs trafficking through Central Asia is significant and has the potential to destabilise countries and relations between them.²⁵¹ As joint tenth in terms of prevalence of problem drug use in Europe in 2020, the UK presents a likely destination for drugs trafficked through the region.²⁵² We heard that it is likely drugs trading was one of the underlying triggers for the 2022 conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, the control of drugs routes out of Afghanistan across the river border in Gorno-Badakhshan may have been an objective of the Tajik Government as it began a programme of repression of the Pamiri population in 2022.²⁵³ Part of the reason for these political implications are that ruling elites, are “involved in, and controlling, drug-trafficking routes” and that such activity is used to “prop” them up.^{254, 255} Professor Erica Marat emphasised that any actions the UK, or any other, government takes on drug trafficking along borders will be used to stop smaller scale traffickers rather than the political elites who control the majority of the trade.²⁵⁶ However, she emphasised the importance of the UK Government in tackling how illicit finance from drug trafficking “ends up in the UK from Central Asia, including from presidential families or families affiliated with incumbents”.²⁵⁷

78. A policy implication of these trends and response, Noah Tucker observed, is that “when we look at technology and equipment transfer [whether for counter drugs or counter terrorism], we run a serious risk that it will be used for purposes that do not align with our values and goals.”²⁵⁸ Professor Marat highlighted the advantages for countries, particularly Tajikistan, which have a border with Afghanistan in terms of leveraging foreign support.²⁵⁹ Noah Tucker went further to assert:

The Tajik Government is simply not being an honest broker about this situation.²⁶⁰

251 In a paper in May 2022 for the University of Birmingham, Erica Marat and Gulzat Botoeva explained that up to 90 tonnes of heroin produced in Afghanistan passes through Central Asia annually. Erica Marat and Gulzat Botoeva, “[Drug Trafficking, Violence and Corruption in Central Asia](#)”, Serious Organised Crime and Corruption Evidence, Briefing Note 13. In oral evidence to the Committee during a one-off session on narco-diplomacy, Dr Annette Idler emphasised the impact of shifting illicit drug supply chains on organised crime flows in Central Asia. Oral evidence taken on 6 June 2023, HC (2022–23) 1422, [Q27](#)

252 According to data from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction in 2020 8.7 people per 1,000 had problem drug use in the UK. ([Prevalence of problem drug use per 1,000 inhabitants in Europe in 2020, by country](#), Statista, [Accessed 6 October 2023])

253 Suzanne Levi-Sanchez, “[The assassination that shook the Pamir Mountains to the core](#)”, openDemocracy, 3 August 2022

254 [Q66](#)

255 Kristian Lasslett, Ulster University, told the Committee: “They curate those political sectors as their own private territories. There has always been competition to get sectors such as gas, oil trading, telecommunications, construction, drugs and illicit trades to be part and parcel of the process.” [Q30](#)

256 Professor Marat explained that the “big actors who are closely aligned with the ruling regimes in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan especially, it is more about local power sharing among drug traffickers and local political and law enforcement officials.” [Q66](#)

257 [Q104](#) [Professor Marat]

258 [Q105](#)

259 [Q106](#)

260 [Q106](#)

He stressed the positive advantages of Western efforts to train security services, including in ethical elements of enforcement. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI), a not-for-profit organisation advising governments, has criticised Western nations for not engaging with the younger generation who are likely to be those most vulnerable to radicalisation.²⁶¹ **Drugs trafficking is a complex issue with close links between the trade and ruling elites as well as organised crime. There are also linkages to funds originating from the drugs trade being channelled through the City of London. The UK cannot shirk its responsibilities: it is not only the source of demand for narcotics but is also complicit in the washing of the illicit gains of the trade.**

7 Trade and investment

Levels and sectors of UK engagement in the region

79. As demonstrated in Table 2, Kazakhstan is currently by far the largest UK trading partner in the region and receives the most inward Foreign Direct Investment from the UK. UK businesspeople and UK businesses are well established actors in the region. Erlan Dosymbekov, of EY, told us of the situation in Kazakhstan. He described a “strong” relationship and how the UK was seen as a “consistent investor” both in terms of overall investment as well as in terms of the presence of UK nationals on the boards of major state-owned companies.²⁶² He also believed that the UK Government, and embassies in particular, had been consistent in their messaging and approach but the facilitation of more “dynamic investment activity” from them would be useful.²⁶³

Table 2: Economic relationship with the UK

	Gross Domestic Product (US\$ bn)	Trade in 2022	UK Foreign Direct Investment
Kazakhstan	197.11	£2.7 bn	£1.2 bn ²⁶⁴
Kyrgyz Republic	8.54	£28 m	-
Tajikistan	8.74	£69 m	<£1 m ²⁶⁵
Turkmenistan	45.23	£52 m	£28 m ²⁶⁶
Uzbekistan	69.23	£141 m	£92 m ²⁶⁷

Source: Department of Business and Trade (gov.uk)

80. We heard about the work the UK Government has been doing to support Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and the stabilising effect on society that such growth can have.²⁶⁸

Challenges and opportunities

81. Central Asia represents a challenging environment for trade and investment. Charles Garrett described both as being “fraught with difficulties”, particularly regarding the rule of law: “Your investment, resources and time are always at risk.”²⁶⁹ However, we heard that whilst there were challenges, doing business was possible, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

262 [Q111](#)

263 [Q112](#)

264 In 4 quarters to end of Q1 2023

265 In 2021

266 In 2021

267 In 2021

268 [Q114](#)

269 [Q119](#)

Box 10: Astana International Finance Centre (AIFC)

“In March 2015, President Nazarbayev unveiled a comprehensive national plan to put forward five key institutional reforms, known as the ‘100 Concrete Steps’. Step 70 outlines the commitment to establishing the AIFC. The AIFC is intended to serve as a financial hub for the Central Asian region. It enjoys a special status recognised by law, including notably an independent legal system based on English law principles.”²⁷⁰

82. Some commentators argued the AIFC, and other similar projects, provide excellent opportunities for UK businesses.²⁷¹ Not only would legal practitioners have an important advantage due to the system of UK common law used, but there are considerable incentives (including tax breaks and visa free regimes).²⁷² The FCDO sees this project as a success with potential improvements in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for the business environment.²⁷³ We also heard that the ambitious economic reform plan of the Uzbek government, including the privatisation programme, provides both an opportunity for UK business and potentially an opportunity to bring UK standards of corporate governance and transparency to Uzbek business, through, for example, encouraging listings on the London Stock Exchange.

83. There is an opportunity for British business to set ethical and human rights examples when operating in Central Asia. Erlan Dosymbekov suggested that this is taking place, with local companies gradually increasing awareness and improving conditions for their workers.²⁷⁴ He argued that:

... there is a need generally to demonstrate how the rule of law, proper governance, transparency of legislation and consistent application of the law and court practices help businesses to thrive. The UK is extremely well positioned in that sense, not only because you have a rich history of developing those aspects for many years, but because of the respect that UK businesses and the UK in general command in some of these countries.²⁷⁵

The memorandum of understanding signed between Kazakhstan and the UK in March 2023 on critical minerals may act as a foundation for a more comprehensive attempt to improve ethical, social and governance standards.²⁷⁶ At the very least, there is an opportunity across all five countries to promote “no-regrets investments” in terms of the social and environmental impacts of projects.

84. There are opportunities for increased trade and investment for UK companies in Central Asian states. Policies on investment should be clearer and calibrated to its efforts to curb corruption in-country and in the City of London, its ministerial engagement programme, its ethical principles and work to ensure the resilience of critical supply chains. Ministers should be alive to the opportunity to improve

270 Yeung and Huang ([ECA0011](#))

271 Charles Garrett ([ECA0005](#)); London Politica ([ECA0009](#))

272 Huang and Yeung ([ECA0011](#))

273 In this regard, the opening of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), established with UK support in Kazakhstan in 2018, is an important development, operating on the basis of English Common Law with a successful court and arbitration centre run by English judges. Similar projects in Uzbekistan are in their planning stages, and could provide comparable improvements for the business environment. ([ECA0023](#))

274 [Q123](#)

275 [Q126](#)

276 The Minister told us that the MOU included an objective to “promote adoption of high ESG standards in the mining sector of Kazakhstan” (Correspondence dated [13 October 2023](#))

standards of corporate governance through encouraging listing of firms on the London Stock Exchange. We recommend that the Government produces a strategy for its approach to trade and investment in Central Asia. This strategy should be clearly communicated to the business community in the UK and relevant interlocutors in the region. We encourage the involvement of Central Asian civil society in any resulting arrangements to help ensure ethical standards are maintained.

85. While there is a clear ambition from governments, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, to improve the investment environment, we heard that to do this there will need to be a considerable increase in the capacity of the civil service.²⁷⁷ Crown Agents, a not-for-profit international development company, believed that there were large potential rewards for UK companies should local capacity building be supplied. This may be particularly important in the area of anti-corruption (see also Chapter 3) and needs to be well-targeted, long-term and fully funded.²⁷⁸ **The investment environment in Central Asian states is still far from attractive to many would-be investors. There is much more the UK Government could do to improve the situation. We recommend that capacity building for civil servants and practical assistance in policy and legislation formulation be a central offer made by the UK to Central Asian states. This should be calibrated to complement UK initiatives to support reforms to regional trading infrastructure and policies.**

277 See, for example, Crown Agents ([ECA0013](#)) para 2.4

278 Sophie Ibbotson ([ECA0002](#))

8 Conclusion

86. Engagement with Central Asian countries comes with significant potential for mutual benefit. Whether it be in terms of cultural exchange, migrant labour, investment in tech, creative industries, education or critical minerals, the countries of this region have hospitable cultures ready to embrace a closer relationship with the UK. Now is the time to take this opportunity. We can see that the relevant directorate in the FCDO has the ambition for greater engagement but question the extent to which the Government as a whole is ready to enable it.

87. Governments in the respective Central Asian states are forthright diplomatic actors, fully aware of the importance and potential of their nations and the region in the geopolitical manoeuvrings of this decade. The UK is well positioned to be a reliable long-term partner and critical friend. It can afford to be more assertive and courageous in its engagement with these governments.

88. It is important that UK engagement in Central Asia is responsive to what the citizens of the various states want and need. Change in any political sphere in Central Asia is unlikely to take place rapidly, and UK influence is more likely to be successful if it is based on a stable relationship of mutual respect, trust and understanding. Relatively inexpensive programmes (such as in education, English language and creative industries) can make a big difference in terms of creating good will amongst populations and governments in Central Asian countries. *We recommend that the UK Government's strategy governing engagement with countries in the region be characterised by clear long-term goals with corresponding, fully funded, short- and medium-term actions. We suggest that the Government articulates and implements distinct and consistent principles to govern agreements and cooperation, choosing no-regret investments which can be adjusted in light of any changing political situations on the ground.*

89. The UK Government needs to be clear-eyed and discerning in its engagement with Central Asian governments, all of which fully understand that there is international competition for their cooperation. There are likely to be many issues which the UK will not be able to cooperate on given the nature of governance and human rights records in those countries. We understand that in some cases governments may undertake significant public relations work to portray progress on human rights and corruption, for example, whilst the reality is the opposite. The UK Government should not be satisfied with unsubstantiated assurances that conditions have been met and instead be prepared to robustly enforce adherence to mutually agreed commitments.

90. Progress on human rights will depend on creative approaches to dialogue that respect the sovereignty and heritage of these countries yet empower them to meet their obligations to internationally-agreed rights. The UK Government should ensure that clear objectives relating to human rights are consistently embedded across its programme of engagement.

Conclusions and recommendations

Contexts, principles and posture of the UK Government in Central Asia

1. There is a genuine interest in Central Asian capitals in greater cooperation between the five countries. Such cooperation plays an important part in defending their independence from large and assertive neighbours such as China and Russia. It can help build on their shared history and cultural proximity to reduce the risk of conflict, not least over dwindling shared resources. The UK is well placed to support this ambition, due to its good standing in Central Asian capitals, highly experienced diplomatic service and convening power at the UN. Consequently, we recommend that:
 - a) *a Central Asia 5+UK meeting is held in 2024, with the potential for follow-ups, to better understand how the UK can support regional cooperation. A single issue, such as renewable energy, should be identified for this meeting and result in concrete objectives for action.*
 - b) *an offer is made by the FCDO of high-quality capacity building for the diplomatic corps of Central Asian countries through a Diplomatic Academy, enhancing the skills required for greater regional and international cooperation, as recommended for other Asian countries in our 2023 report on the Government's tilt to the Indo-Pacific. (Paragraph 17)*
2. All five Central Asian states are rightly proud of their distinct cultural heritages and histories. Each has unique assets and strengths and fiercely defends its sovereignty. It is important that the UK Government both respects and encourages the independence of the Central Asian countries from their dominating neighbours. The Government should develop tailored approaches to engagement for each one. However, it is also important that the Government remains realistic about the extent to which countries are able to decouple from Russia at the current time and the varying levels of interest in doing so. (Paragraph 18)
3. If the aspirations of Global Britain are to be realised the Government must live up to them across the breadth of its international relationships. We welcome the ambition of the FCDO's Europe and Central Asia directorate and the intention to make the most of opportunities open to the UK. However, while missions in Central Asian capitals continue to punch above their weight, achieving diplomatic successes, they have been let down by a lack of commitment from ministers. High-level ministerial engagement with Central Asian governments has been persistently inadequate and is interpreted by our partners as demonstrating a lack of seriousness from Government. *We recommend more high-level engagement at Secretary of State and head of Government level over the coming three years with all five countries, including bilateral ministerial visits in both directions to each of them.* (Paragraph 22)
4. We agree that Russia's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's scramble to secure willing partners is a key concern of the UK and must influence foreign policy toward Central Asia. However, the UK's engagement with Central Asian countries and the relationships invested in must not succumb, once again, to an

approach dependent on a single issue such as Afghanistan, Russia or trade. There is now an opportunity to build an enduring relationship with the people of Central Asia. (Paragraph 24)

Illicit finance

5. Illicit finance is an integral component of autocratic rule in Central Asian countries. The UK is a key node for Central Asian capital flight and a leading enabler of its corrupt elites. While the UK is careful not to interfere with the internal affairs of Central Asian countries by challenging the legitimacy of their autocratic regimes, the continuance of an underenforced financial crime prosecution system in the UK constitutes an undeclared interference in the form of facilitation of kleptocratic autocracies. (Paragraph 29)
6. While there has been progress in developing laws and regulations to curb money laundering in the UK in recent years, enforcement has been inadequate, not least because of a lack of enforcement capacity. State agencies have been under-resourced in comparison with the wealthy individuals they are investigating. *We reiterate the recommendation in our 2022 report, 'The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine', that the Government increase resources available to law enforcement authorities, including the National Crime Agency and the Serious Fraud Office, to ensure that they have the capacity to conduct effective actions against those engaged in illicit finance.* (Paragraph 30)
7. *We recommend that the Government:*
 - a) *Offers assistance to each of the Central Asian countries in building their domestic capacity to tackle corruption and money laundering as a contribution to their economic development.*
 - b) *Encourages the National Crime Agency to send agents to liaise with Central Asian governments in developing cooperation on Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWO) and on bringing back stolen public assets from the UK.*
 - c) *Ensures that Overseas Territory governments comply with the extended deadline of implementing public registers of beneficial ownership with full and free access to company data, not limited to single entries. There should be no further deadline extensions.*
 - d) *Imposes Global Anti-Corruption sanctions designations on those whose origins of wealth can be tied to assets they have illegally seized and apply the Global Forum on Asset Recovery's Principles for Disposition and Transfer of Confiscated Stolen Assets in Corruption Cases (the GFAR Principles).*
 - e) *Ensures the Transatlantic Taskforce to tackle kleptocracy and Russian sanctions evasion, established in 2022, provides a special focus on sanctions evasion in Central Asia, by ensuring that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation updates Parliament with a special report on the action taken.* (Paragraph 36)
8. Sanctions evasion by Russia via Central Asian states is a real and significant threat to the international measures against Russia's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The kleptocratic nature of Central Asian governments and the currently intractable economic ties between Russian and Central Asian economies makes addressing this issue complex. *We encourage the Government to lead by example in terms of closing off opportunities for entities involved in sanctions evasion to use the City of London and UK services. We also encourage the Government to simultaneously work with Central Asian economies to reduce the dependence of their economies on that of Russia in the medium- to long-term.* (Paragraph 40)

Human rights and the environment

9. Ensuring that the Qosh Tepa canal project does not lead to an environmental and political crisis for countries accessing the waters of the Amu Darya should be a key priority of the UK's engagement with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. (Paragraph 45)
10. The vulnerability of all five Central Asian countries to climate change is real and severe. Without rapid and concerted action, the consequences of food and water insecurity pose threats to regional and global resilience. It is in our mutual interest to shoulder this burden together. However, due to the uncertainties of future water resources in the region and the risks relating to water availability for hydropower, we suggest that the UK Government encourages focus on wind, solar and energy delivery infrastructure. *We recommend that the Government prepares a detailed and fully costed action plan within the next year, drawing on the deep preparatory roadmaps and costings already tabled in the World Bank's Country Climate and Development Reports when available, for how and where it will engage on climate adaptation and mitigation in Central Asian countries, including methane reduction in Turkmenistan. This should include facilitating regional cooperation on water use, a package for collaboration on renewable energy, continued support of conservation projects and details of how the UK will use its convening power to ensure Central Asian states are at the front and centre of international dialogue on these issues.* (Paragraph 46)
11. The relationship between Central Asian governments and their own Uyghur populations is sometimes complex. The persecution of the Muslims in Xinjiang continues with little obvious objection from Central Asian governments. In some cases, Central Asian Governments have failed to provide asylum to Chinese Uyghurs. (Paragraph 50)
12. The crackdown on human rights defenders as well as the repression of Pamiri culture and Ismaili religion in Gorno-Badakshan in Tajikistan is a particularly concerning example of human rights abuses by the Tajik Government. *We recommend that the Government supports the call of the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues for an impartial and transparent investigation according to international standards and takes steps to prevent tensions and escalation of violence in Gorno-Badakshan. It should raise this situation formally with the Tajik Government bi-laterally and press them to implement recommendations to be made in the Universal Periodic Review follow-up report due in March 2024. We further recommend that the FCDO add Tajikistan to the list of priority countries included in its annual report on human rights. The Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan should be also considered for inclusion.* (Paragraph 51)

13. *We recommend, once more, that the Government implements the recommendations made in the Committee's report Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond, to focus on supply chains that might be facilitating forced labour in the cotton fields of Turkmenistan. Lessons should be learnt and applied from initiatives that have brought about reforms on cotton picking in Uzbekistan. (Paragraph 52)*
14. Civil society organisations act as a bastion against totalitarianism and a counter to foreign disinformation. We welcome the UK Government's support of civil society organisations in Central Asia. However, this support needs to be fit for purpose and accessible to those organisations that need it most. *We recommend that the reporting requirements for civil society organisations receiving funds from the UK Government are amended so as to provide for an appropriate level of accountability needed and allow the maximum agency in their operations. (Paragraph 55)*
15. The situation for human rights, and the environment for human rights defenders, may be different in different Central Asian countries, but there is evidence of a negative trajectory in all of them. This is a situation which cannot be ignored in the UK's bilateral relationships. We have not seen evidence to support the rhetoric that agreed universal human rights are at times at odds with cultural heritage. We welcome the work we saw in various Central Asian countries in which the FCDO is engaging effectively on important human rights issues. However, there is still much work to be done to bring consistency to the UK's messaging on human rights in the region. *We recommend that countries included in the Developing Countries Trading Scheme be rigorously assessed against qualifying criteria and that incentives be provided to adhere to them—wishful thinking and vague reference to convention bodies is not enough. The Government should be fully prepared to suspend trading arrangements with countries that fail to meet the conditions and clearly communicate thresholds for this action. Industries closely connected to particular human rights abuses should receive specific attention. UK ambassadors should be key sources of information in this scrutiny. We recommend this action is coordinated with the EU and US. (Paragraph 57)*

Young people, education and soft power

16. Education provides one of the most promising opportunities for the UK to be a force for good and to build soft influence in Central Asian countries—contributing to a generation of educated young people who know English and have had exposure to the UK. It is a strategy with potential long-term results but requires concerted and deliberate short- and medium-term action. If the Government is serious about its aspirations to take advantage of interest in the English language, it needs to ensure that it has fully committed and resourced partners through which to achieve them. Currently the ambitions here, and for the further promotion of the English language, rely heavily on funds available to the British Council and the choices it makes in spending them. To improve the effectiveness of its support on language and education, we recommend that the Government:
 - a) *Support the establishment of permanent offices for the British Council in Dushanbe and Bishkek—as recommended in the Committee's 1999 report. The British*

Council must be adequately resourced to take advantage of the opportunities presented to it in a part of the world transitioning from Russian to English as its second language of choice

- b) *Galvanise its support of the creative sector in Central Asian countries by sending a high-level ministerial delegation to the World Conference on Creative Economy in Uzbekistan in 2024.*
 - c) *Expand the numbers of Chevening scholars from Central Asian countries initially to 40 per year by 2025, and better support the visa application process for students.*
 - d) *Enhance engagement with the Uzbek Government, and other governments where invited, on education reform. (Paragraph 65)*
17. The Migrant Workers Scheme is highly effective, with benefits for the UK, the workers themselves and the societies they are returning to. We see huge potential for this to be expanded for agricultural workers and other trades. *We recommend that the Government reviews its ability to issue visas and provide more options, including application centres closer to the populations that require them. In order to enhance the benefits of the programme we suggest that the Government considers an additional element to provide vocational training as well as cultural experiences for those workers visiting the UK. (Paragraph 67)*

Security, drugs and violent extremism

18. The autocratic nature of the governments in the region and the lack of civil society engagement in most countries represents the foremost threat to peace and stability in the region. As recommended elsewhere, the UK Government should continue to prioritise the promotion of meaningful civil society activity and the meeting of human rights obligations as cross-cutting themes in its engagement with the five Central Asian states. (Paragraph 69)
19. Russian disinformation is a threat to both the UK and its Central Asian partners. The insidious messages spread by the Russian state have a powerful impact on how the older generation views the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and the nature of UK engagement in their countries. It also poses a threat to the attempts of Central Asian states to protect their sovereignty, especially in areas with high numbers of ethnic Russians such as in northern Kazakhstan. There is potential for the UK Government to support the governments and civil society in the region in combatting such disinformation. (Paragraph 73)
20. The Government should proceed with caution when engaging with Central Asian governments on the issue of terrorism and military to military cooperation. The threat of terrorism is often used as an excuse for tightening the authoritarian grip of the state on its own people, opening the door for Chinese surveillance technology with the potential for misuse. Moreover, there is evidence that the threat of terrorism is used to encourage foreign investment in security infrastructure. *We encourage the Government's focus to be on the offer of training to Central Asian armed forces, initially in English language and in the ethical dimensions of conflicts, with the offer of training from the UK's Islamic advisor to Central Asian militaries. (Paragraph 76)*

21. Drugs trafficking is a complex issue with close links between the trade and ruling elites as well as organised crime. There are also linkages to funds originating from the drugs trade being channelled through the City of London. The UK cannot shirk its responsibilities: it is not only the source of demand for narcotics but is also complicit in the washing of the illicit gains of the trade. (Paragraph 78)

Trade and investment

22. There are opportunities for increased trade and investment for UK companies in Central Asian states. Policies on investment should be clearer and calibrated to its efforts to curb corruption in-country and in the City of London, its ministerial engagement programme, its ethical principles and work to ensure the resilience of critical supply chains. Ministers should be alive to the opportunity to improve standards of corporate governance through encouraging listing of firms on the London Stock Exchange. *We recommend that the Government produces a strategy for its approach to trade and investment in Central Asia. This strategy should be clearly communicated to the business community in the UK and relevant interlocutors in the region. We encourage the involvement of Central Asian civil society in any resulting arrangements to help ensure ethical standards are maintained.* (Paragraph 84)
23. The investment environment in Central Asian states is still far from attractive to many would-be investors. There is much more the UK Government could do to improve the situation. *We recommend that capacity building for civil servants and practical assistance in policy and legislation formulation be a central offer made by the UK to Central Asian states. This should be calibrated to complement UK initiatives to support reforms to regional trading infrastructure and policies.* (Paragraph 85)

Conclusion

24. Engagement with Central Asian countries comes with significant potential for mutual benefit. Whether it be in terms of cultural exchange, migrant labour, investment in tech, creative industries, education or critical minerals, the countries of this region have hospitable cultures ready to embrace a closer relationship with the UK. Now is the time to take this opportunity. We can see that the relevant directorate in the FCDO has the ambition for greater engagement but question the extent to which the Government as a whole is ready to enable it. (Paragraph 86)
25. Governments in the respective Central Asian states are forthright diplomatic actors, fully aware of the importance and potential of their nations and the region in the geopolitical manoeuvrings of this decade. The UK is well positioned to be a reliable long-term partner and critical friend. It can afford to be more assertive and courageous in its engagement with these governments. (Paragraph 87)
26. It is important that UK engagement in Central Asia is responsive to what the citizens of the various states want and need. Change in any political sphere in Central Asia is unlikely to take place rapidly, and UK influence is more likely to be successful if it is based on a stable relationship of mutual respect, trust and understanding. Relatively inexpensive programmes (such as in education, English language and creative industries) can make a big difference in terms of creating good will amongst

populations and governments in Central Asian countries. *We recommend that the UK Government's strategy governing engagement with countries in the region be characterised by clear long-term goals with corresponding, fully funded, short- and medium-term actions. We suggest that the Government articulates and implements distinct and consistent principles to govern agreements and cooperation, choosing no-regret investments which can be adjusted in light of any changing political situations on the ground.* (Paragraph 88)

27. The UK Government needs to be clear-eyed and discerning in its engagement with Central Asian governments, all of which fully understand that there is international competition for their cooperation. There are likely to be many issues which the UK will not be able to cooperate on given the nature of governance and human rights records in those countries. We understand that in some cases governments may undertake significant public relations work to portray progress on human rights and corruption, for example, whilst the reality is the opposite. The UK Government should not be satisfied with unsubstantiated assurances that conditions have been met and instead be prepared to robustly enforce adherence to mutually agreed commitments. (Paragraph 89)
28. Progress on human rights will depend on creative approaches to dialogue that respect the sovereignty and heritage of these countries yet empower them to meet their obligations to internationally-agreed rights. The UK Government should ensure that clear objectives relating to human rights are consistently embedded across its programme of engagement. (Paragraph 90)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 24 October 2023

Members present

Liam Byrne, in the Chair

Brendan O'Hara

Bob Seely

Henry Smith

The UK's engagement in Central Asia

Draft Report (*Countries at crossroads: UK engagement in Central Asia*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 90 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Tenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 14 November at 10.30 am.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 9 May 2023

Professor Peter Frankopan, Professor of Global History, Worcester College, Oxford University, Professor of Silk Roads Studies and Bye-Fellow, King's College, Cambridge University; **Dr Aijan Sharshenova**, Research Fellow, Foreign Policy Centre, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy; **Annette Bohr**, Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House

[Q1–27](#)

Professor John Heathershaw, Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter; **Professor Kristian Lasslett**, Head of the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, University of Ulster; **Oliver Bullough**, Freelance journalist

[Q28–65](#)

Tuesday 27 June 2023

Khalida Azhigulova, Independent Research Consultant; **Maisy Weicherding**, Researcher, Amnesty International

[Q66–87](#)

Professor Erica Marat, Professor, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University; **Noah Tucker**, Senior Researcher, The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, Senior Research Consultant, Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), University of St Andrews; **Professor Luca Anceschi**, Professor of Eurasian Studies (Central & East European Studies), School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow

[Q88–108](#)

Tuesday 5 September 2023

Charles Garrett, Former UK Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan; **Erlan Dosymbekov**, Managing Partner, Ernst and Young (EY) in Kazakhstan and Central Asia

[Q109–129](#)

Leo Docherty MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Europe), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; **Chris Allan**, Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia Division (EECAD), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

[Q130–173](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

ECA numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Amnesty International ([ECA0027](#))
- 2 Anceschi, Luca (Professor of Eurasian Studies, University of Glasgow) ([ECA0008](#))
- 3 Anti-slavery International ([ECA0017](#))
- 4 Bohr, Annette (Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House) ([ECA0024](#))
- 5 British Council ([ECA0025](#))
- 6 Crown Agents Limited ([ECA0013](#))
- 7 FCDO ([ECA0023](#))
- 8 Foreign Policy Centre ([ECA0015](#))
- 9 Fumagalli, Dr Matteo (Senior Lecturer, University of St Andrews); and Buranelli, Dr Filippo Costa (Senior Lecturer, University of St Andrews) ([ECA0021](#))
- 10 Garrett, Mr Charles ([ECA0005](#))
- 11 Global Partners Governance Practice Ltd ([ECA0016](#))
- 12 Gohel, Dr Sajjan (International Security Director, Asia-Pacific Foundation); Andreopoulos, Marucs (Senior Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific Foundation); and Jones, Victoria (Senior Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific Foundation) ([ECA0018](#))
- 13 Heathershaw, Professor John (Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter); and Cooley, Professor Alexander (Tow Professor of Political Science, Barnard College) ([ECA0010](#))
- 14 Howkins, John ([ECA0003](#))
- 15 Ibbotson, Sophie (Chairman, Royal Society for Asian Affairs) ([ECA0002](#))
- 16 Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship (ICCE), Goldsmiths, University of London ([ECA0001](#))
- 17 International Partnership for Human Rights ([ECA0026](#))
- 18 Jardine, Samuel (Head of Research, London Politica); Fenwick, Cameron (Senior Analyst, London Politica); Johnson, Matthew (Research Director, London Politica); Startt, Ella (Research Analyst, London Politica); and Zafar, Mohammad Ali (Research Analyst, London Politica) ([ECA0009](#))
- 19 KCS Group Europe ([ECA0004](#))
- 20 Kramers, Eleanor (Founder, Montfort Communications (Eurasia)) ([ECA0014](#))
- 21 Lasslett, Professor Kristian (Professor of Criminology, Ulster University) ([ECA0019](#))
- 22 Lidstone, BA, MA, ATC, Dr.h.c FRGS Gerald (Director of the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, Goldsmiths, University of London) ([ECA0006](#))
- 23 Milner-Gulland, Professor EJ (Tasso Leventis Professor of Biodiversity, University of Oxford); and Bull, Dr Joseph (Associate Professor-Tutorial Fellow in Climate Change Biology, University of Oxford) ([ECA0022](#))

- 24 Pantucci, Raffaello (Senior Fellow, RSIS / Senior Associate Fellow, RUSI, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) & Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)) ([ECA0020](#))
- 25 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change ([ECA0012](#))
- 26 Wani, Ayjaz (Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF)) ([ECA0007](#))
- 27 Yeung, Dr. Horace (Associate Professor in Commercial Law, University of Leicester); and Huang, Prof. Flora (Professor of Law and Business, University of Derby) ([ECA0011](#))

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4th Special	Encoding values: Putting tech at the heart of UK foreign policy—Government Response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 811
5th Special	Refreshing our approach? Updating the Integrated Review: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 1401
6th Special	Stolen years: combatting state hostage diplomacy: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report	HC 1596
7th Special	Guns for gold: the Wagner Network exposed – Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report	HC 1914

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2nd	Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond	HC 198
3rd	Sovereignty for sale: the FCDO's role in protecting strategic British assets	HC 197
4th	The UK Government's Response to the Myanmar Crisis	HC 203
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6th	Sovereignty for sale: follow-up to the acquisition of Newport Wafer Fab	HC 1245
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1st Special	A climate for ambition: Diplomatic preparations for COP26: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2019–21	HC 440
2nd Special	Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2021–22: In the room: the UK's role in multilateral diplomacy	HC 618
3rd Special	Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report: The UK Government's Response to the Myanmar Crisis	HC 718
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