

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's engagement in central Asia, HC 1158

Tuesday 27 June 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Liam Byrne; Drew Hendry; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 66 - 108

Witnesses

I: Dr Khalida Azhigulova, Independent Research Consultant; and Maisy Weicherding, Researcher, Amnesty International.

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



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Azhigulova and Maisy Weicherding.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee in which we will continue our inquiry on central Asia. Today, we will focus very much on human rights in that part of the world. Can I ask you both to introduce yourselves?

Maisy Weicherding: My name is Maisy Weicherding. I am a researcher on central Asia for Amnesty International.

Dr Azhigulova: Hello. My name is Khalida Azhigulova. I am an independent international research consultant.

Q66 **Chair:** Brilliant. Thank you ever so much. Maisy, is there anywhere in central Asia where the human rights record is improving?

Maisy Weicherding: Yes, I think in certain areas it is definitely improving. I would not say there has not been any progress over the years. For example, I look at some rights for women, and engagement with communities of women to give them access to business opportunities and to help them get access to healthcare. Definitely those, and I think we have seen improvements in freedom of speech, even though it is still very limited, but we cannot say that there has been no progress whatever. When it comes to issues such as torture and accountability for past human rights violations and human rights abuses, I really do not see any progress whatever. That partly explains the worsening situation in some countries—for example, with regard to the violence we have seen recently in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Q67 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Khalida, is it fair to say there is a level of accepted violence when it comes to the treatment of certain vulnerable groups or ethnic minorities?

Dr Azhigulova: There are very big issues with violence against women. Moreover, as a researcher I can claim that in Kazakhstan there is systemic and structural discrimination against women. For example, 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.

This does not help with stopping the perpetuation of violence against women. Worse, there is still no punishment for sexualised harassment or stalking, including online. Basically, women are not protected from sexual harassment in any place—the workplace or public places. Another big issue is that women human rights lawyers and human rights defenders who raise these issues and talk about such events, and who do not want



to be silent, also become victims of persecution by the police. We have a well known case of a defendant, whose name is Dina Smailova. She is the leader of the banned NeMolchi.kz—"Don't be silent".

Dina Smailova had to leave Kazakhstan two years ago because the police initiated several criminal proceedings against her for allegedly publishing false information, but everything she did was publishing information on behalf of victims of sexualised crimes, rape, and violence and sexual abuse against children. Basically, there is a disturbing trend in Kazakhstan of persecuting female human rights lawyers.

Q68 Chair: That is very helpful. Can I ask you about LGBT rights? I was very struck on our visit by the number of times I felt people were trying to silence me, and if I raised LGBT rights, I was somehow reinforcing some Kremlin narrative that the West is only interested in imposing LGBT values as if, somehow, respecting people's right to love whom they love is some sort of crime or negative narrative. Can you talk us through what you see as the trends taking place across central Asia when it comes to LGBT rights? For example, I understand that, previously, in the Kyrgyz Republic there was a rich civil society with LGBT groups.

Dr Azhigulova: You are absolutely right. Homophobia is on the rise, and it is widespread in Kazakhstan. There are different activists pretending to be human rights activists who fight against LGBTQI under the pretext of protecting children from harmful information and under the pretext of their religious rights. You are absolutely right: since 2020, we have seen the rise and proliferation of anti-gender movements that use the rhetoric of Russian propaganda. They use the words that are characteristic only of the Russian propaganda media—"You are all fascists. You are promoting western values. You want to take away our children and give them for adoption to gay people in the West."

That is right—as a researcher, I can confirm that since 2020 we have seen this rise in homophobia. What is worse is that these activists who attack LGBTQI people do a lot of harassment online—they attack them online, threaten them online and even send them death threats in personal messages. What is bad is that I cannot see the Government do anything to stop it. The Government are doing nothing to promote human rights education or human rights literacy for all in the population. Basically, the Government are just a bystander watching one group of anti-LGBTQI people attacking and harassing LGBTQI human rights activists and the people of this community, and that is appalling.

Q69 Chair: Maisy, there is quite a complex picture, because at the same time we have seen a reduction in bride kidnapping, for example. The Kyrgyz Republic has had a female President. It currently has a female member of its Cabinet. It has had a female chair of its foreign affairs committee. What is the best way for us to understand this prism?

Maisy Weicherdig: What we have seen is the Government using cultural traditions to repress diversity and to basically keep their population in check. It is almost like we are forming our own national



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identity. Our national identity is based on our cultural traditions, and in our cultural traditions we do not acknowledge that we have LGBTQI people, and women are of secondary status. It is being promoted a lot. I know that a lot of activists are saying that it is a diversionary tactic, because if you concentrate on these very small, vulnerable minorities—women are not a small, vulnerable minority, but let us take LGBTQI people, for example—you are diverting from the real problems, such as the economic problems and the failure to tackle corruption. You have easy scapegoats.

It is the same with bride kidnapping. Yes, there are fewer bride kidnappings, but has the mentality really changed? Has there been fundamental change? Yes, you can announce that, “We are now against bride kidnapping. We are going to take measures. We are going to pass laws,” but when you look at it, these laws, even if they are passed, are not enforced.

Like my colleague said, there is no proper human rights education programmes that educate the population in rural areas throughout the country about what the rights of women are, and what is wrong and what is not. The problem is that you have one narrative that the Government present to other Governments, to investors, to the UN, the EU and the OSCE, but in practice, when you get down to it, there is no fundamental change.

Q70 Henry Smith: Tajikistan is not identified as a country of concern on the list in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s human rights report. Do you think that is right, and what is your understanding of the criteria for how a country might appear on that list?

Maisy Weicherding: I am not privy to the Foreign Office’s criteria for listing a country as a country of concern, but certainly when you look at what is happening in Tajikistan right now and what has been happening for decades, it should absolutely be a country of concern. For example, the human rights community and even the wider NGO community—you do not have to be a human rights defender, but could work in a humanitarian organisation or a local social organisation—are all at risk of being persecuted, because they could be associated with people who are critical of the Government or could happen to be from Gorno-Badakhshan or other parts of the country.

Right now, there is such a climate of fear in Tajikistan. We have been saying for years that the Government have been using families to put pressure on opposition politicians, independent journalists and human rights defenders to toe the line. That pressure is very real. 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. So that should figure very prominently.

Q71 Henry Smith: Thank you for that. What opportunities or influence do you think that the UK Government can have in terms of seeking to mitigate the abuses that are happening? For example, I understand that the



Pamiri group is facing particular repression at the moment. Is there anything practically that the FCDO can do to assist in countering that?

Maisy Weicherding: Yes. For example, you could insist on actually being allowed to visit Gorno-Badakhshan. It was very interesting that the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders was not allowed to go to Gorno-Badakhshan but that the UN special rapporteur on religious belief was allowed to go. I think that might be because she is originally from Iran, so might have been perceived by the Government as less difficult, or friendlier. That is one thing: to insist that we need to go and see what is happening for ourselves. Even if you do not necessarily get access to all the detention centres and everywhere, by being there you will get a sense of the situation.

Also, you could speak up in defence of human rights defenders. Like Mary Lawlor said, human rights defenders are not the enemy, and currently, for example, in a country such as Tajikistan, they are portrayed as the enemy. It is very important for a country such as the UK to explain that human rights defenders are not the enemy; essentially they want to improve the rights for all in their country. They just happen to sometimes criticise the Government, but that does not make them an enemy.

Q72 **Royston Smith:** We have heard details about human rights abuses in Turkmenistan, not least the extensive use of forced labour in cotton fields. What can the UK do to encourage Turkmenistan to adhere to its commitments?

Maisy Weicherding: I would look at the example of Uzbekistan, where you have seen progress on forced labour in the cotton industry—forced child labour—and look at what has worked. You could work with the ILO, which was very engaged. There was a whole coalition—the Cotton Campaign—of international NGOs and apparel manufacturers. Look at the lessons, learn from Uzbekistan and see if you can apply some of them to Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is obviously a lot more closed than Uzbekistan, but I think there are openings, especially from the perspective of climate change and the environment. The situation in Turkmenistan is really quite catastrophic when it comes to climate change. That directly affects the population, but it will also affect their crops, so you might be able to approach it from that angle.

Q73 **Royston Smith:** What was done in Uzbekistan to improve conditions?

Maisy Weicherding: In Uzbekistan, they looked very closely at forced child labour, which obviously has a lot of resonance, by addressing it. The Uzbekistan Government did not necessarily want to be on the international stage as a country that uses forced child labour, so that was a good incentive. Image is so important in all five central Asian republics, but especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. That got the ball rolling. Then, of course, the coalition asked for a boycott and they got buy-in from major brands and companies to stop sourcing cotton from Uzbekistan or from elsewhere that was produced in Uzbekistan. That had a major impact. The cotton coalition is actively working on Turkmenistan, so it might be worth talking to them to see what strategies they recommend.



Q74 Royston Smith: Is there any mileage in conditionality on trading investment in Turkmenistan from the UK to try to get it to change its approach?

Maisy Weicherding: We do not normally argue for conditionality. For me, I would say that conditionality is just very basic human rights provisions that should be part of any trade deal you are proposing. So you should be doing your due diligence before approaching a deal: make sure that labour rights are included, access to water, access to sanitation. Make sure that if you go into a project like cotton, all the workers have access to clean drinking water, sanitation and housing—just basic rights—and children have access to schooling.

Those are all sustainable development goals, so I think if you approach it from the point of view of sustainable development goals, you are more likely to get a buy-in from Turkmenistan. As long as you do not forget that sustainable development goals are underpinned by human rights—that often gets forgotten, and human rights seem to fall by the wayside.

So I think that would be conditionality—and to make sure you have proper monitoring mechanisms, because that has failed so far. We have wonderful projects, yet there is no monitoring whatsoever. If you go in and say, “We want you to do this, this and this. Give basic rights to the workers and the local community involved. We want you to report back, and we want you to allow independent monitors to go in and check that this is happening. We do not want you to intimidate those people who are part of the project, who are leading the project.” To me, I would see that as conditionality.

Q75 Drew Hendry: Khalida, how has the situation for human rights defenders developed in these countries in recent years?

Dr Azhigulova: The situation with human rights defenders in Kazakhstan—thank you for this question. Basically, I would say that those human rights defenders who really do their job and raise all these sensitive issues are not welcomed by the Government. They are not welcomed by the presidential executive office. They are seen as a threat, and that is why they are watched and followed, meaning that their posts are always read on social media, but the authorities are not trying to cooperate with them.

I can see it from my own example. For example, in 2019, I returned from the UK to Kazakhstan after graduating from my PhD degree. I was raising and putting into practice all my knowledge to help my Government, my country, become more democratic, but since 2019, nothing has really changed. Unfortunately, for all my recommendations and everything that I sent to the presidential executive office, to Members of Parliament or to Ministries, such as the Ministry of the Interior, they listened to what I said, but they just ignored it and brought up their own arguments that, “Everything is okay,” and, “It could be worse.” They like to compare Kazakhstan to other states in central Asia, claiming that the situation with



human rights is better in Kazakhstan than in other states in central Asia, so, "Let's not do much."

Unfortunately, another trend that I see is to create GONGOs—artificial organisations that are headed by friends and relatives of people in power. They create these GONGOs and give them a lot of money through different schemes. They have a scheme called state order, or state procurement. They organise tenders for different services, and then they invite and co-operate with only those particular human rights lawyers who are loyal to the Government and the presidential executive office.

Drew Hendry: What are your thoughts, Maisy?

Maisy Weicherdig: I think I agree. One big problem we have is exactly what Khalida just said: it is Governments setting up these non-governmental organisations. I do not think it is always necessarily bad, because some of the people in those organisations actually do some very effective work. It is just that, in their interactions with foreign Governments or foreign donors, they are never open about who they really are. They will say, "We are an independent NGO," but they are not.

What was very interesting in Uzbekistan, for example, was that the National Centre for Human Rights, in the beginning, came to the UN and said, "We are an NGO," but it is not. It is the National Centre for Human Rights, and it has been set up by the President. But that narrative will just go on, and people who are not aware will then start believing that, yes, there is a thriving, independent community.

Those who are truly independent find it very difficult to get their organisations registered and, like Khalida said, they are under very close surveillance, which is something else that is a huge problem throughout the region, but especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. There is facial recognition technology in operation. There are video cameras everywhere. The truly independent cannot even go to an embassy meeting or meet with a foreign NGO without being called for questioning.

Q76 **Drew Hendry:** Let us move on to things that influence Governments. Are levers such as monitoring court cases of human rights defenders, raising concerns at official level and using the mechanisms of the Human Rights Council affecting the actions of Governments in these countries? If so, how is that coming forward?

Dr Azhigulova: I see that there is always a threat from the Government towards human rights lawyers. Indeed, for independent human rights lawyers and defenders, it is always a fine line. We have to use this auto-censorship—self-censorship—every time we write anything online. The Government have introduced a Bill to Parliament. They want to fine any blogger or social media user for spreading allegedly false information. The criteria of what is considered to be false information is very vague and wide. We understand that this is used as a pretext to put more pressure on human rights defenders to shut them up and force them maybe to leave the country, which we have definitely seen happening in Kazakhstan.



Maisy Weicherding: I see that there is an impact from, for example, individual cases being raised at the UN, EU and international level. That is important. In countries where you have limited impact and limited access, being able to affect one case and get a positive result—for example, to get a person released or to get compensation for a person—is very important.

But on the other hand we have had wider results from engagement by Governments at EU and UN level—for example, on the death penalty—so that has been very effective. At UN level, if you decide which issue would be beneficial for the Government's image and you concentrate on that—something that does not cost them a lot to do but that will have quite an impact on the people affected, like, for example, the death penalty—they are likely to act if there is a lot of pressure at international level.

Q77 **Drew Hendry:** Talking of international pressure, what other diplomatic options might be open to UK diplomats in central Asian countries to encourage adherence to their obligations?

Maisy Weicherding: I was reading just yesterday about the US and their C5+1 initiative, where they have regular meetings with the central Asian republics. Of course, they do not necessarily raise only human rights issues; they raise all kinds of issues, including human rights, and that is a good conduit directly to the Governments, because that is what these Governments in the region want—they want access to the US, and I think they are very keen on also having access to the UK. Démarches work really well, so think, “Where can I do a démarche, and who should I target?” Do not just do a démarche to the President necessarily, but identify the people who can influence the President to take a decision. I think that has been very effective in the past.

Drew Hendry: Do you have anything to add, Khalida?

Dr Azhigulova: Yes. I want to add that I fully agree with Maisy. I would also suggest adding human rights clauses to trade and investment treaties, which UK companies should have with Kazakh counterparts. For example, I see how it works based on my personal example. I worked as an international consultant on the prevention of sexualised exploitation and abuse for several UN agencies. All partners and local NGOs who get funds from the United Nations have to create and develop internal policies on the prevention of sexualised exploitation and abuse, and I help them to do that.

As I said, in Kazakhstan we do not have any legislation on the prevention of sexualised harassment. All the NGOs have to prepare internal policies, and then we train them and introduce clauses in the labour conference with all staff members and so on. Maybe the same practice could be introduced in other bilateral trade and investment treaties. This could be introduced and used as a bundle in relation to the treaties. That is my view.

Q78 **Henry Smith:** Khalida, what is your assessment of how the international community responds to human rights abuses? Are there any examples of



positive diplomatic measures that have been taken, by either the UK or any other country, to help to effect positive change in that area?

Dr Azhigulova: Yes, definitely. We have some positive changes, but they are on a case-by-case basis—ad hoc cases. For example, we have a group of female activists who organise a women’s march and the women’s rally around 8 March, International Women’s Day, and here we had a lot of support from the international community. The embassy of the UK, EU embassies, the embassies of the US and Canada, and UN agencies actually supported it and sent some “note verbale” messages to the Government saying, “Yes, this is a great initiative. Please support and give permission to organise this event.”

A year or two years ago, we had such marches, but this year, in the city of Almaty, the major city of Kazakhstan, the local city council banned this march, the women’s march, for 8 March. What we saw is that, again, even though it is said that we have the new era, the new Kazakhstan regime, this is not really true; we still have the same people in power. The local governor’s team just used another GONGO and claimed that it had already booked all the places that are used for peaceful rallies in the city of Almaty—until, basically, at the end of February they didn’t allow this march.

That was where the diplomatic pressure was very important, including on behalf of the UK—the British embassy—and other international organisations and other foreign states. So this is one of the examples where we see how it works to put pressure on. Then, this initiative was allowed and the women’s rally took place, even though the women’s march was still not allowed; it was a compromise decision.

Q79 **Henry Smith:** Maisy, do you think trading schemes with human rights conditions attached are effective at improving human rights in participating countries?

Maisy Weicherding: I think they are if you have proper monitoring mechanisms, as I said before. You need to have something in place to actually enforce. You also need to be very principled about it. 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. It actually needs to be an agenda item: an agenda item has to have the same priority as all the other points. Then, I think, they will be effective, but it needs buy-in from the Governments who want to negotiate a trade deal with republics in central Asia.

Q80 **Henry Smith:** You have mentioned the generalised scheme of preferences-plus and, in the context of Tajikistan, if the European Commission and the European Parliament decide not to go ahead with that, how does that leave, in your opinion, the UK and its developing countries trading scheme?

Maisy Weicherding: It gives you an opportunity to actually do your due diligence, to put your human rights into the agreements and into your negotiations. Like I said, maybe start with the sustainable development



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goals but link them to human rights; that might be easier to enforce. I think it is important that if this trade deal does not go through—I mean, there is still the EU-Tajikistan human rights dialogue; that is still in place. But this gives you an opportunity to maybe go in and negotiate, be successful and have human rights not only in that dialogue, but in a trade agreement.

Q81 **Henry Smith:** You mentioned—correctly, I think—that monitoring is very important. How realistic is robust monitoring?

Maisy Weicherding: Again, it should not be impossible to do if it is part of the deal and you designate a team that will go in and monitor. I mean, I see it a little bit like businesses that go in and invest, let us say, in the clothing sector in somewhere like India or China—Apple, for example, or other big businesses. There is a team that will go in, do the due diligence and check-up and monitor, and that does not seem to be a problem, so maybe just look at those practices. They are not perfect, but there is a long history there. There is practice there—just incorporate it.

Q82 **Bob Seely:** Can I ask you both about the Uyghurs? What is the situation regarding ethnic Uyghur people living in the five central Asian countries? What are the prevailing attitudes of people in those countries towards the Uyghurs? Are they part of the central Asian community or central Asian family of ethnic groups? Why is there a muted response from central Asian Governments? Is that in part or in large part due to the power and the growing power of the Chinese communist state?

Maisy Weicherding: With the Uyghur communities, it depends on each country. They are present in all the republics, but it is a very small community, for example, in Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, you have a much larger community, and partly, in the south of the country, that community is quite integrated and there is a lot of, for example, intermarriage between Uyghurs and ethnic Uzbeks. They are a larger part of that.

Q83 **Bob Seely:** And in Kazakhstan how big a community is there?

Maisy Weicherding: I think Khalida is probably better placed to answer that.

Dr Azhigulova: Thank you. I have been working on this issue since 2009. I used to work for the UNHCR as a protection officer. That is when we actually had Uyghur refugees coming from China, and I can tell that since the 1990s the response from the Government towards the issue of Uyghur refugees was not really compliant with international law.

At least there were indeed some improvements. For example, back in the 1990s, there were reports that Uyghur refugees could be just apprehended in the streets and immediately sent back to China without any process or consideration of their claims, but due to the work of UNHCR, gradually the Government stopped that practice, so at least they allowed for registration of asylum claims by Uyghur asylum seekers. None the less, they always refused every asylum claim from Chinese Uyghurs, and the situation is the same right now. It became even worse, because



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not only ethnic Uyghurs who come from China are denied any access to asylum in Kazakhstan, but even ethnic Kazakhs who come from China seeking asylum in Kazakhstan, claiming and trying to settle here as ethnic Kazakhs, are denied asylum. The reason for that is that Kazakhstan would never go against China. For Kazakhstan, asylum matters are very political—political and sensitive.

For Kazakhstan to grant asylum to any Chinese Uyghur or Chinese Kazakh is a form of criticism of the policy of China. That is why Kazakhstan tries to find another political, non-legal solution. For example, a few years ago we had an ethnic Kazakh, a lady who came to seek asylum in Kazakhstan. She was denied asylum, but before she was deported, Sweden came up and offered asylum to her. Kazakhstan did not mind and did not prevent her from leaving Kazakhstan for Sweden. That is the way we like—the way the Government of Kazakhstan solves such issues. I believe that no Chinese Uyghur refugee would get any asylum here.

On the other hand, we have a quite big Uyghur community who are locally settled in the south-eastern part of Kazakhstan. They have always been there—for centuries, as it is their local, traditional habitat—so basically they are well integrated and we do not hear any big news such as anything on inter-ethnic clashes. But actually, two years ago, we had a very big incident, an inter-ethnic clash, even though the Government said that it was not an inter-ethnic clash. We did have such a thing, however, as in one of the villages where we have Uyghur and Kazakh populations, the adolescents had a fight, but this fight deteriorated into a pogrom, with houses set on fire—there was a lot of mess.

The problem, again, is that we do not really have access to, or even have, sufficient independent media, so sometimes we do not really have sufficient access to independent information. Whatever we see in the news is all that we will hear about a situation. That is why, often, the Government might just be silent about any information on inter-ethnic clashes in Kazakhstan.

Q84 **Bob Seely:** Broadly, however, ethnic relations with the Uyghurs are pretty healthy in central Asian states.

Dr Azhigulova: Yes.

Q85 **Bob Seely:** I assume that those Uyghur communities in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are aware of what is happening to Uyghur communities in China. Are they politicised about that? Are they campaigning among themselves? Are they collectively aware of what is happening and how are they reacting to it? Are they trying to influence central Asian Governments, or is that simply off limits because of the power of the Chinese state?

Dr Azhigulova: Absolutely. The local Uyghur community are well aware of the situation happening to other ethnic Uyghurs in China, but the problem is that they cannot really campaign. If they try to campaign, for example, we do not really see anything about it in the news—it is not covered in the media. We have some independent media whose owners are located



abroad, and only they can shed light on events such as groups coming to the Chinese embassy and trying to campaign. Once they approach any embassy, however, they would be immediately apprehended by the police, arrested and taken off, which is why in Kazakhstan it is practically impossible to rally and campaign for the rights of Chinese Uyghurs. In Kazakhstan, it is impossible.

Q86 Bob Seely: Chinese Uyghurs, therefore, are not able to get across the border anyway, so very few people come across and, if they do, there is no point going to Kazakhstan, because they will be sent back.

Dr Azhigulova: That is absolutely right. We had some cases when people crossed illegally, but of course immediately they were apprehended, charged with illegal crossing of the state border and deported. Basically, there is no chance for them to get any asylum here. Often, even if they apply for asylum, China will send a request for extradition. Kazakhstan, as you know, is a member of the Shanghai Co-operation Agreement and, under that regional treaty there are regional commitments, so Kazakhstan is obliged to extradite any Chinese nationals back to China. It is impossible to get any asylum or protection for Chinese Uyghurs in Kazakhstan.

Q87 Bob Seely: Finally, how do Uyghur communities feel about the situation? Clearly, their voices are being somewhat muzzled and, clearly, they know that their fellow Uyghurs are suffering in China. What is their sense of that? Is it frustrating for them? Is it fuelling a sense of worse relationships with central Asian Governments?

Dr Azhigulova: I cannot, unfortunately, talk on behalf of the Uyghur community, but I can definitely talk on behalf of the Kazakh community. Right now, unfortunately, even ethnic Kazakhs are being apprehended and sent to so-called education camps in China. Many such Kazakhs have been repatriated, under a special Government scheme for ethnic Kazakhs. They share their frustration and their feelings. They worry a lot about their relatives and friends who are left behind, and they share such stories, that their relatives or friends too cannot come to Kazakhstan; or some of them go back to China from Kazakhstan where they may be apprehended, and then we lose any information about or trace of them. So, yes, we have such reports

Chair: Thank you both ever so much for taking the time for us. I am aware we have votes coming shortly, so I will wrap us up and suspend the session while we change who is giving evidence to us. Thank you both.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Anceschi, Professor Marat and Noah Tucker.

Q88 Chair: Welcome back to the Foreign Affairs Committee as we continue our hearing on central Asia, looking specifically at human rights. Thank you all for joining us for this second session. Would you kindly introduce yourselves?



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Professor Anceschi: My name is Luca Anceschi, and I am a professor of Eurasian studies at the University of Glasgow. I study authoritarianism in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Noah Tucker: I am Noah Tucker, a senior research analyst at the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. I worked for about a decade for US Government projects and various agencies studying social violence in central Asia—everything from ethnic violence to extremism and things like that. I have worked on the Syrian conflict since it began, and now focus primarily on the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees from the Syrian conflict to central Asia.

Professor Marat: Hi, I am Erica Marat, a professor at the National Defence University in Washington DC. I am originally from Kyrgyzstan. I am joining you from Tbilisi right now. I study several issues on central Asia, primarily security situations, protests and organised crime.

Q89 **Chair:** Thank you ever so much. Luca, perhaps you can kick us off. What are the biggest threats to stability within central Asia? Why do they matter to the UK, and where does the threat to the UK potentially come from, if there is one?

Professor Anceschi: My view is that the biggest threat to stability in central Asia is local authoritarianism. The way in which authoritarian politics has been entrenched, has evolved and has been consolidating in the last 30 years makes the region unstable in the long run. We saw it in 2022 in Kazakhstan, when a regime that was by every account seen as the most stable and durable was on the verge of collapse because of something that turned out to be quite difficult to explain. We will not go into that.

The lesson that we learned, which was somewhat replicated last weekend in Russia, is that these regimes are stable until they are not. We have seen the crystallisation of these long-term authoritarian regimes, and the personalisation of politics whereby these regimes become controlled by one person with a more or less narrow range of people surrounding them. That to me is something that in the long run may be problematic for the stability of each individual country, and of the region as a whole.

Q90 **Chair:** Noah, where do you see that threat potentially drifting over to our strategic interests?

Noah Tucker: I have to start by agreeing 100% with my colleague.

Chair: Please do—you are allowed to agree.

Noah Tucker: It is really important to stress that the primary threat to the people of the region—to its human security—is authoritarian Governments, and the kinds of intra-elite conflicts that develop and that can, at times, become extremely violent. It is important to consider as well that, while the threat of terrorism, foreign fighters and things like that has not had a particularly large effect on the region, it has had an effect on western democracies, such as the United States and Sweden, and



continues to pose a threat. While it is not necessary to oversimplify or try to draw direct lines between things, the authoritarian approaches, the lack of opportunities, and the lack of ability of citizens to pursue personal development and see a future for themselves in their own country are a major driver of the violent extremism, and the mobilisation of violent extremist movements. That does present a threat to the West.

- Q91 **Chair:** Erica, the same question to you. We are talking so far about authoritarianism. On the basis that you will not necessarily disagree with that as a fundamental driving factor—it looks like you will not—we note that over the weekend, with the chaos in Russia, Putin took the time to call Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. I am going to assume that he also called the Kyrgyz Republic, because historically there has been a slightly closer relationship, despite the current dairy embargo, than there has been with others. What does that mean in terms of where central Asia is positioning itself, how much what is going on currently in Russia may impact on how central Asian countries see themselves, and how pro-democracy movements may feel in different parts of central Asia?

I apologise, because I recognise that we use the term “central Asia” throughout this inquiry. We do recognise that central Asian countries are so different in terms of their culture, food and way of thinking, but forgive me for using that catch-all.

Professor Marat: This is a great question, and it is obviously a developing situation. On a broader scale, I do not think that whatever is happening in Russia will have a direct impact on central Asia, and it is important to separate how the regimes feel about whatever is happening in Moscow from how the population might be impacted, because there are so many labour migrants from central Asia—especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—who send a lot of big remittances to central Asia.

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. Whoever replaces Putin, central Asian countries will continue to be interested in brokering relations with Moscow on their own terms, not necessarily on Moscow's terms. But for labour migrants, there is always a challenge that whatever is happening in Russia will impact large parts of the population because of declining remittances and so on. Past crises—the pandemic and the financial crisis in 2008—have shown us that labour migrants are really resilient and provide an extra layer of stability for central Asia, because remittances might fall in the short term but then they pick up again, and migrants will find a way to support their relatives back in central Asia. In a way, they do the work of the state in central Asia by providing a sort of welfare state for the central Asian population.

- Q92 **Chair:** That is really helpful. While we are on remittances, we heard rumours that people from central Asia—there is a significant portion, as you say, who go across Russia to work—were being offered Russian passports in return for fighting on the frontline, and that we were starting



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to see coming back from Ukraine the first body bags of central Asian individuals who had chosen to take that citizenship offer. Do you think this is likely to have an impact domestically? Will people be frustrated and angry to see people fighting in these wars? Will they not be interested? What is the cultural impact of having those body bags coming back?

Professor Marat: The body bags have been coming for quite a while, starting last summer. There is a mix of how central Asians were recruited. Some joined willingly in exchange for passports, and others were forced to join from prisons, or outside prisons, in Russia by Russian state forces or by the Wagner Group.

We do not really know the number of central Asian migrants who were recruited. It might be in hundreds or thousands of people. We know that dozens of body bags returned to central Asia, and we do not really know how many people returned alive. That is a big problem for central Asia, because whoever fought on the side of Russia probably committed war crimes and have probably been radicalised. Will they return to central Asia? We do not really know. But in the future, it will be troublesome for central Asia.

All central Asian countries, in one way or another, signalled that they do not approve and will punish those who join Russia's war in Ukraine, but it is an unfolding dynamic. Just like for Russia, those who were formerly incarcerated, then joined the Russian war and now are free—that might, in the future, be a headache for central Asian countries, absolutely.

Q93 **Chair:** Thank you.

Luca, obviously the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, is much-heralded as an alternative NATO, although we heard on multiple occasions during our visit that it is dead and has failed to deliver anything meaningful. What do you see as the future of the CSTO, not least in the light of the last few days but also in the light of what we have seen in Nagorno-Karabakh, where there is no movement or effort to shape things or de-escalate? Is the CSTO dead, or do you think there will be some way in which it is revived and becomes some sort of force?

Professor Anceschi: These organisations that have membership are mostly if not exclusively comprised of authoritarian states. They have this rulebook that gets torn down and rewritten all the time. The CSTO is an instrument in authoritarian hands; it has been for 30 years. We saw it resurrecting out of nowhere in January 2022, when they got sent to Almaty. Obviously, it was not part of the resolution of the Osh conflict; that was never the case. In Azerbaijan, there was a lot of controversy.

I would not discount it. I would not give it too much importance, but I would also say it is not just a talking shop, because it can be very conveniently transformed into an instrument of authoritarian solidarity. You could have an authoritarian leader who at some point and for some reason is in trouble, and having ignored the provisions for 30 years, they go in and there is a restoration. We saw that in Kazakhstan, obviously.



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That is not to say that it was pro-democracy; it was different. But in Kazakhstan, it pretty much saved the Tokayev regime and closed something new.

I would look at it in an exclusively pragmatic way, as an instrument of authoritarian solidarity between the network of these people.

Q94 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Noah, if you wish to touch on that, please do. But I would love to draw you more into the counter-terrorism field; we're also currently conducting an inquiry into counter-terrorism. What is the meaningful risk to counter-terrorism from central Asian countries? What is the form it is taking?

Actually, my reflections from our visit—I recognise we were there for a very short period—is that there is not necessarily that significant a terror threat currently, although that is not necessarily what I've heard from other capitals around the world, who seem very captured by the risk. But what I did see was that for these countries, a majority of whom consider themselves to be secular, there was a great deal of what I suspect to be Saudi and Turkish influence. There were a lot of new mosques in almost every village in some places, which was very surprising. The paint was barely dry.

Obviously, there are the concerns about Afghanistan, but not necessarily a meaningful attraction to violent extremism, although obviously there are some parts where there is a great deal of deprivation, where that could be more enhanced. Are we getting this wrong? Are we jumping to red flares when we possibly should not be?

Noah Tucker: First of all, these are really excellent questions. I had the privilege of leading a research team for a London-based organisation called Global Partners Governance Foundation, which just a couple of months ago published a large report that was a result of our research team's fieldwork on this question of socialism-isation and political attitudes that it leads to. I was very pleased with the team that we were able to put together. I hope that it has been useful for the FCDO and maybe it would be useful for your Committee, as well. However, in response to your questions, I can highlight a few of the things that we found and have found in other work.

First of all, while there are certainly still violent extremist organisations that have central Asians in them, that are run primarily or led by central Asians, that continue to have funding and that continue to operate both in northern Syria and in Afghanistan, we do not have any particular indication from any of them that they are interested in operating anywhere outside of those theatres where they are fully embedded. And they are embedded not just as central Asian groups who had fought, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihad Union, who were sort of trapped in the Pakistani tribal areas following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001.

These groups are deeply embedded in funding networks and larger organisations. They are led for publicity purposes by central Asians, but do



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not make their own decisions about how the money from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, for example, is spent in Syria, or how the money that the Taliban supplies to fighters that it has managed to buy off into their coalition in Afghanistan will be used.

It is worth noting that the Tajik group Jamaat Ansarullah has been given control of the border post between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. I think that was in large degree a stick in the eye to President Rahmon, after he made claims about being the leader of all the world's Tajiks and things like that. But the group has not been allowed to carry out operations across the border, as far as we know. There is some taunting back and forth across the border and some graffiti has been written on large rocks visible from the border post, and things like that.

In all the projects that I have worked on with Oxus and others for UK Government and American Government clients, our consistent refrain is that violent extremist recruiting from central Asia has almost completely stopped. It was a major issue in 2013 and 2014, and the circumstances that made that a major issue were very much related to and dependent on the Syrian conflict. Once that conflict changed, we are not seeing a similar mobilisation to Afghanistan. We are not seeing a similar mobilisation within the central Asian states. But we very frequently see—I think this is perhaps what you are alluding to—that in interactions with local Governments, they consistently portray social Islamisation happening in their countries as if there is a direct connection between that and an extremist threat.

Q95 **Chair:** And then they impose incredibly tight restrictions on religious education and imams, which are potentially counterproductive.

Noah Tucker: Absolutely. We have found mountains of evidence that that is directly counterproductive. In particular, restrictions on simple religious expression, such as women covering their heads: those are commonly practised in all the rest of the Muslim world, but are for some reason banned in many institutions or certain social circumstances in central Asia. Those things have improved somewhat—I know we have some colleagues from the region in the room—but as I have said in other fora, where there were Government representatives, 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. They should just allow them to practise their religion in a way that harms no one. That would allow more people to remain at home in their own home countries and their own positive social networks. I will stop—I apologise for going on quite the bandwagon there.

Q96 **Chair:** No, that's fine.

Professor Marat: On the religious issue, yes, the states are trying to control religious expression, and then that results in radicalisation. There should also be a more nuanced focus on the unease in the population. There are frictions between the more secular and the more religious, and also among religious communities in the ways that religion is practised.



There are so many different traditions present in central Asia, and sometimes those traditions do not tolerate each other or speak to each other. There is the state, but then there is also the unease in the society. Some in the society sometimes welcome the control of religion in central Asia, as much as it leads to radicalisation.

Q97 **Drew Hendry:** I want to turn to natural resources. To what extent does access to water influence the dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan?

Professor Marat: Water issues are so complicated in central Asia. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are upstream countries that supply water to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. 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.

For three decades now, countries were able to somehow deal with it. There was some animosity and escalation between countries, but it is becoming an inter-state issue between, as you pointed out, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in border areas—related not necessarily to hydro power production, but to how local populations share water resources.

Again, it is a complicated topic. In border areas, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and other ethnic groups live intermixed, and there are still disputed border areas between those two countries. What happens is that on both sides the border is militarised, so whenever there is a dispute over resources—be that water or anything else, or just an everyday dispute—the population has no recourse but to engage the military, or the military jumps into the confrontation. It can easily escalate into brawls, fights or, in some cases, the inter-state military confrontation that we saw last year and two years ago as well.

Q98 **Drew Hendry:** Luca, what are your thoughts on that, and what other factors might be at play here?

Professor Anceschi: I do not really work on hydro politics, but my sense is that the way in which water resources ought to be organised in central Asia is a collective threat. As such, it deserves a collective solution, and that has not happened for 30 years.

Obviously, there is a very significant tradition of environmental disaster in the region—the Aral Sea, for instance; that is the main problem in terms of water. There are also others now; we see that Caspian Sea levels are going down. In general terms, there is a misperception about what is a shared environment.

Q99 **Drew Hendry:** Is the competition over water and other resources likely to be a cause of conflict in the future?

Professor Anceschi: No—it depends how you define conflict. To use your expression, Noah, it is human security. The more that these problems are not addressed collectively, the more you are going to see threats to human security in terms of climate change, water politics and even energy



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policy. This is a region that should not see the kind of energy poverty that it is seeing. There is no reason why Uzbekistan now has to get gas from Russia—it has enough, but there have been three decades of total misuse and misappropriation of these resources.

I would not expect that to be an open conflict in military terms, if that is what you meant. But of course, the people are going to be suffering, and you are going to see a lot of migration, because the region is becoming more and more arid, and people will have to move. The agricultural production is shifting, and the region is changing.

It will be a source of instability, especially at the Turkmen-Afghan border; that is one of the places where you will see it. I think that the OSCE has a programme on that, in which you have the intersection of critical environmental problems and other kinds of instability. That is something you may want to look at in the future.

Q100 Drew Hendry: Erica, do you agree on that point about the possibility of conflict, and is there a role for the UK and its allies in resolving this dispute?

Professor Marat: Yes, I agree with that. There is mismanagement. Of course, there is the Soviet legacy of how water resources were distributed, but there is also climate change and the feeling that water is not unlimited; I think the population can notice that as well. There is corruption.

When something happens between states, or even if it is an intra-state dispute, the UK or other international actors should absolutely play a role, because when Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan went into military confrontation, it seemed like there were not that many international actors on the ground. I know that there was some behind-the-door diplomacy by the OSCE or the State Department. I am not quite sure about the UK or the EU; sorry about that. I think, absolutely, whenever there is a dispute, western actors, and the UK especially, can play a decisive role in de-escalation and trying to achieve ceasefire initiatives.

Q101 Drew Hendry: Would you like to add anything, Noah?

Noah Tucker: No, I defer to my colleagues on this.

Q102 Royston Smith: We have talked about the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes in central Asia and what that means for human rights. How should the UK engage with those countries? Do we engage enough and is that engagement effective? Is there anything else we should be doing? Who wants to go first?

Professor Anceschi: I don't think you do enough. First, it is great to assist this inquiry because it could be the launch pad for something else. We should give credit for that.

There should be more engagement and better engagement. When it comes to more engagement, you should allow a lot of central Asia to come to the UK more and more—students, young professionals, people who



want to train here, people who want to spend time here. You have a well-functioning university system, so you could welcome them. That would make a difference, particularly because you have freedom from the shock of local scholarship in which these people are paid by the Government of Uzbekistan or of Kazakhstan, then they return and get socialised again. You are freer.

To my mind, what should be more important is a better form of engagement. I made a couple of points in written evidence. The first was that human rights should not be a cosmetic issue and should not be just a clause that you add. The UK Government should pretty much make sure that those values are respected.

Also, I made the case on engagement regarding the OSCE, such as funding, especially when it comes the British delegation to the OSCE. You have a centre in Ashgabat and a centre in Astana, so put in your money like the Norwegians and Germans do and say, "We are happy to fund extra-budgetary projects in the area of good governance and rule of law." It is not that much money, but it could make a difference.

Look at what the OSCE is doing. It has lost all its teeth in the human dimension. The central Asian countries are also member states, and they are intractable partners, but if there were more engagement with specific pockets of central Asians—bringing them to the UK in particular, and a targeted dimension of engagement with the OSCE—that would make two good departure points on which you could bank on something for the future. That would have to be co-ordinated with the embassies, and I know you have one in each capital.

Having those embassies is a great thing, but you could also co-ordinate with people like us and with the business sector. 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. In terms, that addresses the issue of governance, which, as I said before, is the biggest threat to central Asia.

Q103 Royston Smith: Would OSCE involvement be welcomed or seen as interference or intrusion?

Professor Anceschi: Those are negotiated, so when they are extra-budgetary, the director of the centre is told by your delegation that there is money available for this, this and this. In the case of Turkmenistan, which is the country I know best, the OSCE used to be represented in human rights cases. Those cases would be paid for in an extra-budgetary way. It would be up to the OSCE diplomats to do all the to-ing and fro-ing. All the UK Government would have to do is make the cash available. It is not even that much money, to be honest with you. You can make a surprising amount from not that much, relatively speaking. Particularly in the specific foreign policy moment you are living, the Government could



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do something. There are other structures in place, and the people who run those centres in Ashgabat and in Astana, are very capable. So that is something: you may want to ask the Foreign Office to liaise with them.

Royston Smith: Noah, do you have anything to add?

Noah Tucker: I am not sure if we are under oath.

Chair: You are protected under parliamentary privilege. Just do not tweet what you say in this place and you will be fine.

Noah Tucker: I would confidently say, even under oath, that we did not compare our answers to this question ahead of time. But in some of our conversations with staff leading up to this, I have said some things that very closely echo Luca's thoughts, which is quite gratifying to me because I respect him a great deal.

To expand on that, on answer is education, absolutely. I live in Scotland, in Fife. We have hundreds and hundreds of Kyrgyz migrant workers who are working in the strawberry fields this year and it is fantastic. It is a really strong experience for them. They are people who, in other circumstances, would have known about the UK and Europe primarily through Russian news channels and things like that. They get an opportunity to see what it is actually like to live here and to earn some money, and they are enjoying themselves. It is really nice to see them—and they are making sure that the strawberries get to the table as well, so everyone wins in this case.

I think there is huge interest in us opening up more both to migrant labour and, absolutely, for education. In Uzbekistan, for example, there is a massive deficit in places—especially funded places, but even unfunded places—in higher education institutions. People in rural areas are waiting sometimes four and five years to get a place in the university. These are bright people who can make a real contribution to the UK and to their own countries when they come back.

Overall, my recommendation to any Government I speak with is generally for central Asia to play the long game in our diplomacy. In particular for anyone who has interacted with or has younger friends who interact with older Soviet generation people who continue to consume Russian information and propaganda as their primary source of information in the world, there is a massive generational divide in the region between those for whom Russia is still their north star and can do no wrong and those for whom the war in Ukraine in particular has really reoriented that—even their openness to that—and created a very sharp generational rift.

I will speak in particular to Uzbekistan since it is the context that I know a little better. We see within that Government a very sharp generational divide. It is quite equally divided, especially among older generation folks and in the security services, who are extremely pro-Russian and are rounding up pro-Ukrainian protesters and people showing support at the embassies, and then we have young people who are willing to go out there



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and get arrested in order to support the rights of Ukrainians to live and be free. I think eventually there will be a generational change; it is inevitable. It is a function of time and nature.

I think we are better served spending our time investing in education, in public diplomacy and in informal civil society. As our previous panel spoke eloquently on, it is very hard to form formal civil society organisations. 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. That is something that many of the young people we have spoken with—when I say young people, I mean my age and younger, so I am being quite generous to myself there; but I mean genuine young people as well—feel very strongly about.

In closing on this, I will mention one of the things that we were quite surprised, in some ways, to find in this last project. We interviewed around 200 people in focus groups and longer-form qualitative interviews who were themselves primarily identified as Muslims and potentially as political Islamists. They almost unanimously had really positive things to say about the UK because of the freedom of commerce, freedom of religion, and freedom of education and opportunities. When we asked them in these focus groups where they would live if they could choose anywhere in the world, a large percentage said the UK, Canada and the United States.

Q104 Chair: Erica, in terms of drug trafficking, how much can the UK be targeting and limiting the drugs trade, particularly elite engagement in the central Asian drugs trade? Should we be worried that these drugs are going to make their way to the UK? How much can we, and should we, be investing in counter-narcotics programmes?

Professor Marat: That is a big question. I completed a report last year on drug trafficking through central Asia for the FCDO, and yes, absolutely, the ruling elites and their families are involved in, and controlling, drug-trafficking routes.

The biggest transfers of drugs are to Russia through the northern route from Afghanistan, through central Asia to Russia. Some drugs do end up in the UK. We are talking about opiates—heroin and other opiate products. Some drugs that end up in the UK do not necessarily go through central Asia. They might go through Iran, Turkey or the Caucasus.

What can be done, and should we invest in efforts to counter drug trafficking? It is a really tough call. Yes, we should invest, but we should also know that whatever capabilities we build among law enforcement or border guards will be used to stop small drug traffickers, not those 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.



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But doing nothing is also not an option. There should be capabilities for central Asia to stop drug trafficking. I am sure that this has been discussed over and over again, but the UK should also be really aware of how corrupt money, including drug money, ends up in the UK from central Asia, including from presidential families or families who are affiliated with incumbents.

Drugs will unfortunately continue flowing. That is what we know from research of drugs. They will be passing in one way or another. We have to deal with their consumption, but doing nothing is not an option. There is a lot of corruption associated with drugs.

Q105 Chair: That is very helpful. Noah, I saw you nodding in agreement there. How do we tackle the elite capture part of the drugs trade in central Asia? Should we be worried about drugs making their way to the UK, or is it more about global stability and the way in which drugs undermine cohesion?

Noah Tucker: I defer to Erica on this; she knows this issue better than I do. She is one of the people I turn to for these questions.

I do not have a lot to add other than that I certainly agree with the direction that you are leading in and that one of the key roles that narco-trafficking plays in the region is to prop up and fund these authoritarian regimes. That is especially true in Tajikistan, has been true in different ways in Kyrgyzstan and, in more complicated ways, was very true in Uzbekistan; it continues to be true as far as we know, but it is much more closely hidden there.

It is a very difficult puzzle. In some ways it is similar to the puzzle of what we do about defence co-operation with these regimes. I spoke with a US Government official last summer who was really excited about the idea that the war in Ukraine may prompt a number of the central Asian Governments to increase their defence co-operation with the United States, and that they would switch over some of their weapon and transport systems to US-made products that would then cement that relationship and pull them away from Russia.

I don't find myself able to be as optimistic about this. With drug trafficking and defence co-operation, training and diplomacy are always good. At CENTCOM I met a special forces trainer who had at one point gone to Uzbekistan, I think. He sold me on that by saying that essentially he's the only person they are ever going to hear who says, "Don't shoot the protesters," as their training lesson. That is a good thing to support. There is probably a narco-trafficking version of that. But when we look at technology and equipment transfer, we run a serious risk that it will be used for purposes that do not align with our values and goals.

Q106 Chair: That sounds almost like an "engage but verify" situation. In terms of where that takes us when we talk about drugs, there is a natural transition to the Taliban, who we have seen razing opium fields to the ground. We know, however, that they have held back significant reserves



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of opium, so it is not like it is all going to dry up overnight. They will probably receive a great increase in price as a result of having done this. What is the relationship between the different states and the Taliban regime? Again, I recognise that the Taliban are a diverse organisation rather than having one unified position of spokespersons and decision makers. Are there ways in which we can work with central Asian states to try to limit the worst excesses of the Taliban? What sort of relationship do we see?

Professor Anceschi: I will start because I did some work on the Taliban-Turkmenistan relationship. I teach a class on security in central Asia at Glasgow, and one of the slides that I have is of the original Taliban shaking the hands of Boris Şyhmyradow, who used to be the Foreign Minister from 1995 onwards. That tells you a story, which is that they are habitual partners, and they were habitual partners in the 90s. In the winter before the fall of Kabul, there were already Taliban guards guarding the Turkmen embassies and consulates across Afghanistan. That means that they were negotiating, and they had been negotiating for a long time.

We need to realise that the border is not always demarcated. There is the Murghab River, but there are parts where you do not know where you are, because the border goes back centuries and millennia there. It has been a very functional partnership. If you believe the story of the TAPI pipeline—the pipeline that will never be—it is incorporated in Dubai and there is a significant Afghanistan component linked to it. In that sense, the Turkmen have been very pragmatic. They have a long border and a substantive economic relationship, with both licit and illicit things to trade. They have been doing it in a way that is functional to what their agenda is.

On the other hand, I do not really believe that much of what Uzbekistan has been saying about central Asia-south Asia integration, because that is something that requires a lot of money. I cannot see Uzbekistan putting in that money, even though it has a short border.

The point that I am trying to make is that two of the three states that have that border—maybe Noah can talk about Tajikistan—with Afghanistan have a different relationship, but this is a relationship that needs to be studied and worked on more because it is there.

Chair: That is very helpful. Noah or Erica, do either of you want to come in on that?

Professor Marat: I would say that Tajikistan obviously has a completely different approach to the Taliban, compared with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and even Kazakhstan. It does not accept the Taliban, and sees it as a security threat. Maybe Noah can talk more about the ethnic part of Taliban Tajiks on the other side of the border and the relationship with the Rahmon regime.

I would just like to add that Tajikistan leverages its position next to Afghanistan when it comes to western partners, or even partnerships with China, Russia or Iran, by encouraging more security assistance and



training. For Tajikistan, to be very pragmatic, it is beneficial to have these low-level and mid-level security challenges across the border and then leverage security support from other partners.

Noah Tucker: I want to emphasise the last point that Erica made. It is hard to overestimate how much the Tajik Government are intent on over-emphasising the idea that they are under threat from Afghanistan and then leveraging that. They have been somewhat successful—I speak not about the UK, but as a US citizen—in getting us to stay frustratingly quiet about the incredible disaster in Gorno-Badakhshan, and the erasure that Badakhshani peoples and Pamiri peoples are facing inside Tajikistan. I get the impression that they have been effective in continuing to assure people that they need some sort of security relationship with Tajikistan. I know there was interest for a long time, and a lot of consideration in US special operations command, in potentially opening a base in Tajikistan, which would make a third international base inside Tajikistan—

Chair: Alongside the lovely Chinese one on the border to stop Uyghurs escaping genocide.

Noah Tucker: It is probably more than a small country can sustain. For many reasons, it would have been quite a bad idea. I hope it does not get pursued again. I can say, without going into too much detail, that for one of the projects that we work on regularly at Oxus, we have sources and researchers inside Tajikistan who investigate security threats and the perceptions of security threats that come from sources within the Tajik Government, and there are things that can be verified on the ground. We find that there is an incredible disconnect between these two things. The Tajik Government is simply not being an honest broker about this situation.

Q107 **Chair:** That is very helpful. We drifted slightly—well, I dragged us slightly—into the Uyghur issue. Obviously, you saw that we touched on it in the previous session. Why is there such an absence of the concept of the ummah, shared relations and the importance of protecting your Muslim brothers and sisters? I was surprised by the lack of warmth towards China as a state and its objectives. There are some countries that, in the past, have provided refuge to people from central Asia when they were fleeing from atrocities and being persecuted, but I heard very little sympathy for the Uyghur cause, except from a few individual actors—actually, they were business representatives—across our time in central Asia. We see the same from our Arab friends, and across the Gulf, the Middle East and Indonesia—we are also not seeing the focus on the Uyghur genocide that we should see. To take it to a more security-focused question, can you unpack why central Asian countries will not necessarily turn to China for their security, in terms of the historical relationship with China and what is going on, and this overlay of the fact of the silence over the Uyghur genocide?

Professor Anceschi: My sense is that with issue of Xinjiang, China has been very successful at obliterating the central Asian part of its identity. I teach a class in China, and I asked the students, “Is Xinjiang part of China



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or central Asia?” Of course, the class went nuts, as you can imagine, saying, “No, in fact it is part of both.” But now with the fact that China has been so successful with its rhetoric and repression in obliterating that part of the identity, we struggle to think of Xinjiang as what it is. It used to be called Eastern Turkestan, and it is the same people pretty much. That is something that is psychological for us in the West. I don’t work on that but obviously I know what it is. There is also a very specific policy implication; the Governments of central Asia cottoned on to that and realised that there is a big no-no, and they really differentiate between my Muslims and your Muslims.

As we heard before, recognising that the Muslim community has a political role to play is another thing that the states do not do in central Asia. They tend to be very careful about crossing that border. In terms of China and why they do not use the security card there, I think that the ties with Russia are too strong, and they work so well. They read from the same book. They have been trained in the same way. A lot of the diplomats in central Asia have been trained in Russia. It is kind of serendipitous in that sense. The issue of Xinjiang has to do not only with China, but also with the fact that that is how Islam is perceived in the region full stop.

Q108 **Chair:** I am going to give you both a final minute to wrap us up before we run for our vote. Noah and Erica, did you want to come in on that?

Professor Marat: It is not just Uyghurs. There are ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs as well who are sent to labour camps. More so, there are ethnic Kazakhs’ family members who are currently living in Kazakhstan and migrated to Kazakhstan in the last 20 or 30 years. There are protests that take place sporadically in Kazakhstan among relatives of those imprisoned ethnic Kazakhs, not just in Xinjiang. It is not only that China doesn’t like it, obviously; it is also the Kazakh Government. They disperse and crash the protests and do not allow people to mobilise around the issue. We know that there is quite a bit of surveillance by China in central Asia on anything that has to do with even voicing opinions in support of Uyghurs who are ethnic Turkic people in China.

Chair: Noah—last word before we run to the Chamber for a vote and I have to bring this to a close.

Noah Tucker: To what Erica has said, I would add that I have had the privilege to get to work with some of the Uyghur community in Kyrgyzstan. There are many wonderful young people in it, and they are terrified of speaking up about this. They are terrified that if they are perceived as being pro-Uyghur or anti-China they may be kidnapped by the Chinese security services. Because many of them are also practising Muslims—the women wear hijab and men grow beards and things like that—they come to feel often that they are a double minority. They are not only threatened as Uyghurs, but also as Muslims that might be regarded as radicals. If you are a radical Muslim and a Uyghur, in anyone’s estimation it is a very dangerous position to be in.

Chair: Thank you. I am sorry to cut this short, but we have about four



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and a half to five minutes to get to the Chamber and vote. Thank you very much for your time and for joining us from Tbilisi, and for the previous session.