



Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 5 September 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Sir Chris Bryant; Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer; Henry Smith

Questions 109 - 173

Witnesses

I: Charles Garrett OBE, Former UK Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan; and Erlan Dosymbekov, Managing Partner, Ernst and Yong (EY) in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

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

Written evidence from witnesses:

The FCDO - committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/121001/html/

Mr Charles Garrett - committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/119190/html/



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Charles Garrett and Erlan Dosymbekov.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee looking at the UK's engagement in central Asia. Thank you to both our guests for joining us today. Could you kindly introduce yourselves?

Charles Garrett: My name is Charles Garrett. I was British ambassador to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan from 2019 to 2022, and I left the Foreign Office in February this year.

Erlan Dosymbekov: My name is Erlan Dosymbekov. I am the managing partner for Ernst and Young in the Caucasus and central Asia. Central Asia particularly includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. I am also the chairman of the Foreign Investors' Council here in Kazakhstan and the European Business Association of Kazakhstan.

Q109 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Garrett, have senior Ministers neglected central Asia?

Charles Garrett: I don't know whether I would choose the word "neglected", but certainly Britain could achieve a lot more with greater frequency and quality of senior official and ministerial time.

Q110 **Chair:** In terms of not just ministerial time but the basic resourcing—the size of our posts, where we have posts, the number of staff we have—is any of that adequate to what you believe to be the potential of the region?

Charles Garrett: It has all grown up slightly piecemeal over the years since the independence of those five countries. For example, the opportunities that are available in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were recognised with significantly staffed and resourced embassies. The embassy in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan was set up only in 2010, after the ethnic clashes in Osh that year persuaded the Foreign Office that it was time to have someone on the ground there, rather than covering it from Kazakhstan.

While parts of the network in central Asia are well resourced, other parts are run on a bit of a shoestring, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are very much in that category. But across the board, I would say there is insufficient resources given to the programmes and other diplomatic activity.

Q111 **Chair:** Mr Dosymbekov, how do you see the UK from the region? Does it feel like we are giving enough attention to the region, and what do you think the UK has to gain from investing significantly in central Asia?

Erlan Dosymbekov: I think the UK has done if not enough then large amounts. The connection between the UK and Kazakhstan in particular has been very strong in the last 20-odd years. If you look at the overall investment, it is quite sizeable compared to some other countries. Obviously, there are opportunities in the region, which is rich in natural



HOUSE OF COMMONS

resources and is now diversifying its economy across countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular. There are lots of reforms happening. In Uzbekistan, the legislative base is becoming a lot more transparent. There are many, many opportunities here.

In terms of whether or not the UK has done enough, obviously I think it could do more, particularly with the carbon-neutral agenda in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and some other large projects that are happening or will be happening. The UK is held in high regard here. If you look at some of the state-owned companies and banks, their boards of directors have a lot of UK citizens on them. Like I said, the connection has been relatively strong over the years, and the UK is considered to be if not the largest then at least one of the most consistent investors in the region, particularly in Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan is opening up, as you know.

Q112 **Chair:** Do you think the UK has clear objectives for what it wants to achieve in central Asian countries?

Erlan Dosymbekov: It has been pretty consistent. I think there is an objective. I have been in touch with the UK embassy here for a long time, and it seems like the ambassador in particular pays a lot of attention to what is happening, particularly with the ESG agenda right now and the development of entrepreneurship, where the UK could be pretty useful by sharing experience. There is an agenda. There is a goal, I believe. However, unfortunately, during the covid times, followed by the war in Ukraine, there has been a bit of a slowdown overall in the region economically, as you know.

On the other hand, in central Asia in particular and through the Caspian, some of the transportation routes have become a lot more important in terms of imports and exports, and in that way, Kazakhstan and other central Asian countries, as well as the Caucasus, are gaining a lot more prominence right now. I think the UK is watching this, at least from my discussions with the British business community and the ambassador here. I think you are watching this very closely and looking for opportunities, but on the other hand, I believe that more dynamic investment activity, on the operational level at least, could be more useful.

Q113 **Chair:** Charles, is our focus just seasonal labour and trade, or do you think we have meaningful objectives that we are trying to achieve in our partnerships with these countries?

Charles Garrett: No, we absolutely do have meaningful objectives in central Asia, and stability is right at the centre of that. It really does not serve British interests if instability becomes more of a threat and more of a reality in central Asia, so putting money into, for example, strengthening border communities to try to mitigate the risk of the kind of border conflict we have seen between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is money well spent. We do put quite a lot of effort into that.

Q114 **Liam Byrne:** Mr Garrett, if we could and should be doing more, what is the prize beyond stability that we are trying to unlock for the UK?



Charles Garrett: I think there is a lot we can do in terms of responding to the desire expressed, to a greater or lesser degree, by all five central Asian countries for what they call a multi-vector foreign policy. In other words, they all have a very deep and broad connection with Moscow, for historical reasons—it's a social, economic, cultural and historical relationship—and they of course have powerful commercial links with Beijing, but they have all said, at times, that they would like to diversify those relationships. I would say that that has not always been necessarily an open door.

One of the opportunities, I would say, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year has been that people in power—certainly in Kyrgyzstan and, I sense, in other countries in central Asia—feel that that is a bit of a missed opportunity: they should have been doing more to develop relationships with the UK, the US, the European Union and others over previous years and would like to do more about that now. So that is something we should be doing.

There are many other areas, because of course stability is not just about border conflict and so on; it's also about reducing the risk of popular unrest, for example. There are many ways we can work with the countries in central Asia to strengthen public resilience and reduce the risk of unrest. One of those ways is through the kind of work we have been doing with small and medium-sized enterprises and in the creative sectors as well. This has not only powerful benefit for the economies of those countries; it also has a social impact, because a lot of the smaller businesses that we have been able to support employ women, for example, are active in rural communities and not just in the big cities, and include people with disabilities and so on. That kind of thing can have a stabilising effect as well at grassroots level. So that is very important work.

Q115 **Liam Byrne:** So in supporting a multi-vector foreign policy, do we help to constrain an over-mighty Russia by helping to ensure that central Asian countries have greater agency and autonomy than perhaps they had in the past?

Charles Garrett: It is not necessarily helpful to see this in the context of constraining Moscow, because the connection to Moscow is incredibly powerful. You have only to look back at 9 May this year, when all five heads of Government were in Moscow for Russia's celebration of the end of the second world war. None of them really wanted to be there, but they all went there, no doubt because of immense pressure from Moscow. I see it less in terms of constraining Moscow and more in terms of opening up other avenues for them and finding opportunities for mutual benefit—for example, in the field of climate change or other UN business.

Q116 **Liam Byrne:** We heard a lot when we were there about the virtues of British soft power and how British soft power is under-invested in. Is that your perspective, too? Do you think that soft power investments do have a yield, and if you were investing more, where would you put it?



Charles Garrett: Yes. They absolutely do have a yield, and I saw that. When I first went out in 2019, the British Council still had an initiative called Creative Central Asia, which was a really excellent initiative for getting the countries of the region to focus on the opportunities—their economic opportunities and development opportunities in that field. It worked extremely well and it also developed collaboration and co-operation between the countries, which, again, is very useful in terms of our wider objectives.

So that sort of thing has been very effective in the past. It withered during the pandemic, and the British Council hasn't been able to resurrect it since. That is somewhere that Britain has a fantastic reputation, frankly, and we are not doing enough to exploit that and influence people through that channel.

The English language is another area where we could be doing a lot more. An enormous amount of money is put into supporting Russian language training in parts of the region. Very little money goes into English language training. Of course, everyone you teach to learn English has a much wider range of sources they can draw their news from online. If they only have Russian, they only get RT and other Moscow-based resources. So those are two areas, but there are many others and we should be putting a lot more money into that. I should mention Chevening.

Q117 **Liam Byrne:** Is the seasonal agricultural workers scheme another opportunity? If so, how would you enhance that?

Charles Garrett: It is. So long as the Home Office is confident that that is not trading over its need to control immigration into this country, expanding that scheme for central Asian nationals is a very good way of having a contribution to the economic side—as economic migrants in the UK, they earn a whole lot more than they do in Kazakhstan or Russia—as well as opening their eyes to the west. They would see an example of a country that is run on a democratic basis with the rule of law.

Q118 **Liam Byrne:** So the creative economy, English, Chevening, and labour agreements are four opportunities for soft power.

Charles Garrett: Yes.

Q119 **Royston Smith:** You talked earlier about wanting to diversify away from China and Russia. Is there an advantage to doing business with UK businesses that we should be exploiting more than we do?

Charles Garrett: Yes, there almost certainly is. The area of business collaboration, whether it is investment or import/export, is fraught with difficulties. One of the biggest challenges, certainly from a Kyrgyz point of view—it is perhaps a problem to a lesser extent in other parts of central Asia—is that the lack of rule of law means that you are walking through a minefield. Your investment, resources and time are always at risk. The big opportunities there lie in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which are much bigger and richer economies and have a longer track record of connections and collaboration with British businesses.



Q120 **Royston Smith:** Where would British businesses get that information? Where would they see that as a market, and then where would they potentially start down that road but then find it is all too complicated? Do they already know that, or do they not even look in that direction?

Charles Garrett: Businesses in some sectors already know about it. If you are in the mining sector, central Asia is on your radar, probably quite significantly. In other areas, it depends on networking or conversations with business sector associations, like British Expertise International, which has run some very good seminars and meetings on business opportunities in central Asia for their members. That kind of outreach from British embassies in the region can be quite successful in getting businesses in Britain to focus on opportunities in central Asia and telling them about the realities of doing business there.

Chair: Mr Dosymbekov, do you want to come in on any of those points?

Erlan Dosymbekov: Yes, I agree that British soft power may have an influence here, particularly when it comes to developing our entrepreneurship. Mr Garrett mentioned the creative industries; this is something that Kazakhstan is taking a very close look at. I understand that the UK has a great amount of experience here. Sharing that with Kazakhstan and promoting it here would be very useful.

In terms of financial services, in central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular, as we have talked about diversifying the economy, unfortunately financial and business services are not getting as much attention. They have not had as many projects as some other services, such as transportation or logistics, for understandable reasons. However, Kazakhstan has created the Astana International Financial Centre, which has its own tax regime and its own legislation. English law is applied there for dispute resolution in particular. They have hired about 500 judges from the UK to work in the Astana International Financial Centre. There is clearly development in that area as well.

All of that put together creates a good opportunity, on the back of the existing experiences, to penetrate further into Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and even Kyrgyzstan to a certain extent, which, as Mr Garrett said, has a much smaller economy.

In terms of how we get this information, there are large investors in the country not only from the UK but from other parts of the world. In Kazakhstan it has always been multi-vector, and we have lots of companies from different parts of the world. In the last 10 or 15 years, Kazakhstan has attracted \$300 billion in foreign direct investment. These countries—Kazakhstan in particular, and Uzbekistan too—also go on roadshows. They go to places like London, they meet with businesses, and they try to sell investment opportunities in this part of the world. That is also a reliable yet less known source of information.

Q121 **Graham Stringer:** Being ambassador must be fraught with a lot of ethical dilemmas when you try to pursue human rights from a country



with a liberal history. How do you maintain trust while pursuing an agenda that the country is not that sympathetic to?

Charles Garrett: It is a very good question, and it is one that, throughout my time as ambassador in Bishkek, I had to keep at the front of my mind because, unlike many other countries in the world, you do not carry much credit when you arrive as an ambassador from Great Britain in that part of the world, especially in the field of human rights because, although they know you might kind of have a point, they are not inclined particularly to listen to you in a constructive way.

One has to take a more nuanced approach, and I found that the best way of doing it was not to criticise head-on, or to address things head-on even, but to find different ways into human rights issues. For example, we had a very successful project on eradicating torture in prisons, which was a major human rights problem in Kyrgyzstan. That project did some very good work, and it was something the Government were keen to engage on, because it was not something they found difficult. But there are other human rights issues—especially personal ones involving individuals who have been imprisoned unfairly, for example—where a direct head-on approach might get the wrong kind of response; there would not only be a firm rejection in the context of that particular case, but it would have a negative impact on other things that the embassy was trying to achieve, so one needed to approach that sort of thing very carefully.

Another way that I found was quite effective on the human rights side—especially in areas like inclusion of people with disabilities or women’s rights, for example—was to work through projects that were designed to develop small and medium-sized enterprises and focus those on ensuring that the employment generated by that work benefited those people. You are kind of doing it under the radar; you are making a difference on important human rights issues, but without attracting the kind of negative response that you could in other areas.

Q122 **Graham Stringer:** You have partially answered my next question, which was to ask you for a solid example of success in human rights. You talked about torture in prisons, and it seems slightly strange that the Government were keen on that but had not done it themselves. Can you expand a bit on how you achieved that success?

Charles Garrett: I suspect the reason they were keener on that than they were on engaging on individual cases of human rights transgressions was because they were able to distance themselves to some extent from it. They were able to admit that the problem of torture within the prison system existed because they could lay the blame at the door of the people operating within the prison system, so it was not actually reflecting directly on them or judges, for example. They are able to stand back and share with us any sort of joy at a successful outcome.

Q123 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Erlan, can you tell us whether, while pursuing commercial interests, you have come across situations where that has made human rights issues worse? How do you avoid that



situation?

Erlan Dosymbekov: I personally have not come across major violations in this area. Referring to Kazakhstan, in particular, and maybe looking at a lighter version of human rights, if you wish, there seems to be a growing awareness, particularly when it comes to large local businesses and the way they treat their employees in the areas of wellness and other support that companies could provide. They are starting to use more and more experiences that come from the west and, luckily, we have a lot of western companies here that, as part of their employment policies, include human rights in the first place. Companies are following those experiences.

When it comes to smaller businesses, obviously there are businesses that could violate. I have not come across it myself, but I could say that, generally in Kazakhstan, and in Uzbekistan for that matter, there is growing awareness. These countries are trying to follow western standards and understand that this is something they will be scrutinised for sooner or later. There is a culture that is shaping up, and it is improving.

Q124 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Can I ask both witnesses to explain very briefly, because we are running out of time, what would be the consequences of disengaging at least partially?

Charles Garrett: Do you mean in a diplomatic sense?

Graham Stringer: Diplomatic and economic considerations, yes.

Charles Garrett: There would be—Erlan will be able to speak to this with more authority than I can—economic disadvantage from disengaging from an economy like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. There are British companies that have very significant interests there, and there are opportunities that they would be missing out on.

Diplomatically, I think we would not be able to influence the kind of objectives that we have been aiming for in central Asia around stability and so on, and around strengthening democracy, the rule of law and so on. We would lose that ability.

We would also not be answering the Government's request for support in developing their multi-vector foreign policy, and we would be missing out on opportunities in the international organisations of which countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members. For example, it was only through the efforts of the British embassy in Bishkek, working with the UN Development Programme, that we were able to persuade the President of Kyrgyzstan to attend COP26 in Glasgow, which was a very effective step forward in raising awareness and understanding of the problems of climate change in central Asia and gave a good push to our international efforts as President of the COP system. We would be missing out on opportunities like that, and I think it would be a mistake to do that. With additional resources—not all that much—one could identify and do something about other, similar opportunities.



Q125 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Erlan, can you answer the same question?

[Liam Byrne took the Chair]

Erlan Dosymbekov: Yes. Obviously, disengaging would not be good for any of the countries in central Asia. As I said, Kazakhstan has had a long connection with the UK—for many years now. UK companies are pursuing economic interests here. There are lots of opportunities, and many other countries are investing in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and even Kyrgyzstan. If the UK were to disengage, you would stand out as a major country that had no relationship, at least economically, with Kazakhstan for the time being.

I would also look at the matter not necessarily in the context of the Russian and Chinese influence that Mr Garrett covered in his responses, but from the point of view of providing a balanced opportunity for central Asian countries, not only from Russia and China, but western countries, of which the UK is a major player.

Disengaging would not be good for us, and there are lots of opportunities here for the UK. There are businesses from the UK in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, so I do not think it would be a good thing for them to have to pull out all of a sudden and forget this part of the world at least for now.

Recently, I met the US authorities, particularly export control and financial control representatives, who came to Kazakhstan basically to check on how we were doing in complying with the sanctions applied by the US and the European Union. We had a similar conversation. My message to them was that if there were any ambition that western countries, particularly the US, wanted to realise in this part of the world, the central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan, would be the platform for doing it, particularly given how open the Government and the people of Kazakhstan are to foreign investors, and how welcoming they have been all along.

Q126 **Chair:** Thank you. Excuse our subtle change of Chair. Before I bring in Sir Chris Bryant, can I just check one point? What is your view of the role the UK can play in helping to drive a healthier, cleaner business environment in this region?

Erlan Dosymbekov: As I said, it is all about setting the right example and sharing experiences. These countries are big on developing their local entrepreneurship, which unfortunately has not been developed to the required standard just yet. Countries such as the UK can share their rich experience of providing the framework for entrepreneurship development. Here, we talk particularly about creative industries—that is a very specific example—but 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.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As I said, Kazakhstan has had a long connection with the UK. We have a lot of respect for British businesses. There are boards of directors that contain people from the UK. A lot of attention has been paid to the UK as an existing investor and a country that could help develop expertise and experiences. Kazakhstan looks for some UK experiences to be used here, so that we can create a healthier, more sustainable and consistent environment for businesses, including entrepreneurs.

Q127 Sir Chris Bryant: When we were in Tashkent and Astana, we were shown Parliament buildings. I think it was in Tashkent that they had a white carpet throughout the Parliament building, which suggests that not many people go there. I got the feeling in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that there was a bit of uncertainty about whether to go more democratic and more open. What is your assessment, particularly of those two countries?

Charles Garrett: That has been a question ever since independence at the beginning of the '90s. In all the countries, bar possibly Turkmenistan and, more recently, Tajikistan, there has been quite a debate about how much political freedom to allow and whether to go for a more parliamentary or a more presidential system. In Kyrgyzstan, they changed from a parliamentary system to a presidential system—

Q128 Sir Chris Bryant: Sorry, when you say presidential, you mean presidential without the normal checks and balances.

Charles Garrett: Exactly, with a bit of a nominal parliamentary check and balance, if you like. They changed from a more active, larger Parliament to a smaller Parliament with a much more heavily weighted presidential office about three years ago. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as far as I am aware, it is much more heavily weighted towards the presidential side; it has been for a long time. But this is a live debate; it is not something that is a closed book.

Q129 Sir Chris Bryant: Is that problematic in itself for the way in which contracts are awarded, because it is a system that is more open to corruption?

Charles Garrett: I am not sure how much more open to corruption it is, actually. I think that corruption has flourished to a large degree in all those countries since independence, regardless of what type of system they operate. You are right in the sense that, in a stronger Parliament, you do get more scrutiny and more people speaking out, but in the case of Kyrgyzstan, which arguably has had the strongest Parliament and the most freedom for MPs to speak out, it has not been a significant brake on corruption.

Erlan Dosymbekov: In Kazakhstan, in particular, there have been changes lately with the current President, who specifically said he would like to empower Parliament to have a lot more flexibility. It is probably happening slowly but surely. There is this new Kazakhstan concept where there are political reforms, which are obviously tied to the relevant economic reforms, and there is growing understanding that economic

reforms are not going to have any effect if they are not backed by the proper political reforms that we have talked about for a long time.

When it comes to state procurement rules and contract awarding, Kazakhstan in particular is looking at this very closely. There have been some improvements to the state procurement rules.¹ They have cut down the number of cases where you can make single-source purchases from a very large number to 200 or something like that, which still needs to be improved, but at least they are looking into it. There are also relatively strict anti-corruption laws in all these countries; whether or not they are followed in practice 100%, of course that is a question mark, but at least there is this awareness. You hear very often about these corruption cases that are being pursued by the Government. I think it is improving, at least in Kazakhstan.

For Uzbekistan, we will see how it goes. It is a relatively new—well, it's an old country, but with new reforms happening pretty much as we speak. There is a different level of development when it comes to comparisons between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but they should follow suit. There is this realisation that, without proper political reforms and sufficient democracy, which will probably never be as much as in some of the most democratic countries in the west—at least, not now—the economic reforms will not yield any tangible results.

Chair: Thank you so much. We have to wrap up there, but thanks to you both because you have set the stage brilliantly for our next session with the Minister and Foreign Office officials. I thank you both for your evidence and testimony this afternoon, which have been extremely useful.

Charles Garrett: Thank you.

Erlan Dosymbekov: Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Leo Docherty MP and Chris Allan.

Q130 **Chair:** Minister, welcome. Mr Allan, would you like to introduce yourself?

Chris Allan: Absolutely. My name is Chris Allan. I am the director for eastern Europe and central Asia at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I have been doing the job for only about five months. I was previously ambassador in Tashkent for four years, from 2015 to 2019, so I have some longer-term familiarity with the region.

Q131 **Chair:** Thank you. Minister, we might as well open the bowling with a basic question about how you would define UK strategy in central Asia. You are someone who has travelled and studied a lot throughout the

¹ The witness wanted to provide the following additional information at the beginning of the sentence: "For example, in the case of the Sovereign Wealth Fund".



region. It is a region you have known well for many years. How do you define the principal objectives of the UK's central Asia strategy today?

Leo Docherty: Thank you very much, Liam. I think at its heart is renewed engagement. You will have noticed this, but it is interesting to note that when the Foreign Secretary travelled to Kazakhstan in March, he was the first Foreign Secretary to have travelled there for 20 years. If, like me, you have a long-standing interest in central Asia—I know you do, Chair—it is curious to note that even while we were engaged very significantly militarily in Afghanistan, which neighbours that region, the rate at which our Ministers engaged and travelled across the region waned.

First and foremost, our approach and strategy is to engage and work with those countries to help them meet the challenges they face that are of concern to us all. The geopolitical reality is that these countries are sandwiched between two behemoths—China and Russia—on which they are substantially dependent for trade and with which they have extremely deep commercial relationships, which is only to be expected. Given that reality, where we have an opportunity to offer something unique is in helping them build their institutions in the post-Soviet era and helping them improve their human capital, particularly with regard to the English language and education.

That is at the heart of our approach—to engage, to help them build resilient, developed economies and to develop their human capital. That is where we can actually compete. 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. I am sure you will have seen that in your travels, not least to Uzbekistan. That is our approach.

Q132 **Chair:** Can I pursue that for a second? I am especially keen to try to understand what the prizes are that you are trying to unlock. When the Committee was discussing at the beginning of this inquiry, one of the things a number of us were interested in is whether there is an opportunity to, for example, recontain Russia, given the ambitions for a multi-vector foreign policy.

I know you will have read Lord Curzon's 1889 travels through central Asia, which was about the beginning of the Russian empire in central Asia. Now what we are watching across central Asia is the end of that extraordinary history. How do you see the prizes that we are trying to unlock for the UK, and to what extent is it a question of trying to ensure that there is not an overmighty Russia? Where does that loom in that set of objectives?

Leo Docherty: I think we have got to be very clear that the prize is ensuring the stable development and prosperity of central Asia states. That is very good for them—and it is good for us, because it adds to the likelihood of there being peace in the region and their being resilient in terms of their interactions with their mighty neighbours.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When it comes to things like votes in the UN, their ability to take a view that is more in line with their own or with international norms, rather than being dominated by their neighbours, is in everyone's benefit. We have to be very clear about this: the prize is in developing prosperous, secure, stable and developed countries. That is something they want, and it is something we want.

Chris Allan: We have a description of our overall goal for the region, which is a sovereign, resilient and prosperous central Asia. The words "sovereign" and "resilient" are important there in the context of the Russia question that you posed: countries that are better able to manage the political, security, social and economic challenges that each country faces.

As the Minister just said, the prism of the conflict in Ukraine and Russia's resurgence, let's say, in its wider region is the most important prism through which we are currently looking at the region. I can say a little bit more about how this fits into a wider strategy on Russia in the closed session that we will have briefly after this.

Digging a level deeper into what this means we try to do in the region in order to deliver its ongoing stability and institutional strength, we focus very much on supporting better economic governance in the region, boosting political reform—promoting, therefore, democracy, prosperity and human rights—and boosting trade and investment between the UK and the countries of the region, which is something that comes right at the top of their list of priorities for their relationships with us.

Q133 **Chair:** Thank you. Minister, it is obviously a very big and diverse region, with a very different set of interests. How do you prioritise your own engagement with the different nations of central Asia? How do you deal with that difficult question of where to spend the time?

Leo Docherty: As the junior Minister responsible for this region in the Department, it is my job to go to all countries, and that is what I did: I have been to all five central Asian states this year. In a way, I think it is very important that there is a deliberate non-prioritisation, in the sense that we have to turn up, engage and speak to all of them. It would be a justified criticism of our approach over the last two decades that routine engagement from Government Ministers travelling throughout central Asia was not taking place, which is perplexing, as I have said, given that we were very significantly involved militarily just south of that region. So I have had a deliberate focus on travelling to all five states.

Diplomatically, it is very interesting. They are very keen to meet and talk. It is not about me turning up and telling them what we think about central Asia; it is about meeting up and listening on behalf of the Government as to their priorities. Of course, they are very diverse, as you know. The conversations one has in Tajikistan will be different from those in Kazakhstan. For example, in Tajikistan there are some very interesting discussions about hydroelectricity and climate change, whereas in Uzbekistan, it being the most populous country in the region, there is a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

very significant demand for English language. So I have a deliberately equal approach in terms of determination to travel and listen.

Clearly, if you look at all five countries in terms of their economic importance and population, Kazakhstan is our foremost trade partner and Uzbekistan is the most populous, has the most potential in terms of teaching English and has the biggest demand in terms of exporting British education, if I can put it like that. But it is very important that we have a very equal approach in terms of engagement. In the new geopolitical reality that we find ourselves in with Putin's invasion of Ukraine, it is very interesting that these states want to have conversations that they would not otherwise have had a couple of years ago.

Q134 **Chair:** How undermining was it for both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to land in the Kyrgyz Republic to refuel and not bother getting off the plane to meet their interlocutors?

Leo Docherty: In a perfect world, clearly, an opportunity might have been created, but it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the constraints of the Prime Minister's diary. He is an extremely busy man, and I would not presume to speculate as to what he should be doing in terms of his travel arrangements. Clearly, as much top-level engagement as possible is really important, because that is what other states are doing. I know that Chris—

Q135 **Chair:** It was a curious contrast to the conduct of some other foreign leaders who stopped over to refuel, but we will perhaps turn the question around. What are your ambitions for ministerial engagement across HMG over the next year?

Leo Docherty: I am very ambitious. I will continue travelling. I know the Foreign Secretary will be making his plans, and I think we anticipate that our attentions at the highest level might be given to this region. Clearly, I cannot speculate or pre-empt prime ministerial attention, but this is, I think, held in very high regard in terms of senior leadership.

Chris Allan: I can give you a forward look of the things we have in the diary at the moment, if that would be helpful.

Chair: Maybe drop us a line with those, just in the interests of time.

Chris Allan: Yes, I am happy to do that if it would be easier.

Q136 **Chair:** Minister, other countries like the US, and indeed the EU, have initiated a central Asia 5+UK format to help conduct some of their engagement. I do not think we have done that. Why not, and do we have plans to do so?

Leo Docherty: We haven't. We do not have any plans. We have an absolutely open mind. I have had discussions bilaterally about this, and there is some appetite in the region. Clearly, at the moment, we are immediately focused on bilateral engagement, but I certainly do not rule it out. I am very keen to explore it. Chris, do you want to add anything?



Chris Allan: I agree with that. Some countries that have used this format may have used it once or twice. It tends to be an occasional thing, rather than a very regular thing, not least because bringing all five Foreign Ministers or, in some cases, Heads of State from the central Asian countries together is not a simple proposition. But certainly, as and when the opportunity emerges, it is something we would be open to.

Q137 **Chair:** What is the toughest conversation you have had in your engagement over the last period?

Leo Docherty: We have had some tough conversations about human rights with Foreign Ministers and deputy Foreign Ministers in the region and tough conversations about the war in Ukraine.

Q138 **Sir Chris Bryant:** The Foreign Secretary visited Astana in February and met with Tokayev. What came out of that? What practical result was there for the UK?

Leo Docherty: That was very positive. It was part of the newly created strategic dialogue that we are having, which the Foreign Secretary chaired in London in December; I will be chairing the next round of that in Astana in early October. In terms of practicalities, he signed a critical minerals MOU, which is a good framework for our ongoing discussions about that issue. We also signed an MOU on green hydrogen, and there was a third on—remind me what the third was?

Sir Chris Bryant: Maybe you can write to us about the third.

Leo Docherty: Yes. It was a positive discussion, and it demonstrated a commitment to a re-energised routine engagement, which is very important and will be a good platform, especially when it comes to discussing Kazakhstan's concerns about security, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its export of energy into Europe, with 10% of oil coming from Kazakhstan, and its central role as the energy superpower of the region.

Chris Allan: I think part of the question was about what has come out of that meeting. It set up a more intensified regularity of engagement between the two countries. We have the UK-Kazakh strategic dialogue in October, we have an intergovernmental commission on trade and investment in the autumn, and we are working to finalise the umbrella framework for all our co-operation, called the strategic partnership and co-operation agreement, which is in its final stages.

As the Minister said, all that includes issues such as defence engagement, critical minerals, education and climate co-operation. We have invited Kazakhstan to join our flagship development programme across the region, which is called Effective Governance for Economic Development. The Foreign Secretary also signed an MOU with his Kazakh opposite number to include them in that programme. It looks at institution building, to improve economic reforms—to improve the business environment, in short.

Q139 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Was there any discussion about kleptocracy in



Kazakhstan?

Leo Docherty: Yes, there were discussions about sanctions evasion, particularly, and kleptocracy. 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.

Chris Allan: That is an important part of our ongoing conversation with the Kazakhs, which includes helping them to do as much as they possibly can to push back on the domestic risks from corruption and money laundering—including through the use of the Astana International Financial Centre, as a legal platform using English law, to allow commercial transactions to take place without some of the risks that might otherwise be apparent.

Of course, in terms of our own actions back here in the UK to clamp down on any illicit finance that we see to have made its way to these shores, there have been a number of individual cases, which I am sure the Committee is aware of.

Q140 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Yes—don't tempt me. We had a rather less optimistic view, when we were in Kazakhstan, of the attempts to tackle corruption, because a broadly autocratic system that hasn't quite decided how much it's going to allow checks and balances is intrinsically more likely to lead to financial corruption. We faced quite a few British companies or we were being told about quite a lot of British companies that were saying that one of the difficulties is that it's difficult to do safe trade.

Chris Allan: For what it's worth, I recognise that characterisation, and it is for exactly that reason that we have placed a very high priority on investment in building economic reforms and transparency. E-government, e-procurement, is one example I would give as having been particularly effective by requiring—for example in the case of e-procurement—the whole process to be transparent and online, thus eliminating many of the opportunities for corruption that otherwise exist in the process. But you're right about the broader context.

Q141 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Just on sanctions evasion, one of the things that the Kazakhs were saying to us fairly frequently was, "One of our difficulties is that our route for everything used to be through St Petersburg and it can't be now." What work have the UK Government done on trying to assist alternative routes through to the west for products and materials, bearing in mind that the Caspian sea is a very costly route?

Leo Docherty: That would be the ultimate—the middle corridor, which the EBRD have done some conceptual work on. That's certainly something of interest, but that's decades away.

Chris Allan: There are two parts to that question. First, on sanctions circumvention, we have been very actively engaged with the Kazakhs and the Uzbeks in recent months. There have been two visits to the region, to both those countries: one at senior level in the spring and then one by a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

group of experts in Kazakhstan in July. There was an extremely positive reception, very constructive conversations and very real signs of progress, I would say, in both countries on the problem.

The second part of your question was about alternative routes for goods into and out of central Asia. The Minister mentioned the middle corridor. There is, as you would expect, increasing attention being paid in both Government circles and industry to developing the middle corridor. As you say, the infrastructure is not at this stage anything like sufficient for it to be a serious volume route into and out of central Asia—for hydrocarbons as well as freight trade.

However, politically, the G7, as you may have spotted earlier this summer, included a statement, in its communiqué, on its commitment to developing that route, so we are trying to send the right sorts of political signals. We are also speaking to some of the major commercial players and the regional governments, who would need to be involved in the infrastructure investments required, particularly in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, to develop the trans-Caspian route.

Q142 Sir Chris Bryant: I have two other quick security questions, if that's all right, Chair. One is on water security. Obviously, if you dam up a river that starts in one country so as to provide water to your people and you thereby prevent water from getting to the next country, that is potentially a source of massive conflict in the future. What discussions have you had about that?

I will just bung them both in. The other is about Afghanistan, because obviously, Kyrgyzstan has played a significant role, or rather the region has played a significant role in trying to have some kind of discussions with the Taliban. I am not sure that we are quite as keen on the Taliban's efforts in Afghanistan as the Chair of the Defence Committee was—or, no doubt, as you, Minister—but how important is the region to discussions about Afghanistan for the UK?

Leo Docherty: On that, Sir Chris, it is of central importance. We have a good dialogue with central Asian states about our shared security concerns in Afghanistan, and we recognise their deep and long-standing expertise as neighbours and countries with real concern about the potential spread of extreme groups on the fringes of the Taliban, if you like, endangering their own people. That is a very active discussion. I had good discussions about regional security during my visit there, so that is of great value to us and to central Asian states.

Sir Chris Bryant: And water, because you stood in front of a dam—

Chris Allan: Yes, that is very much still an issue for the region for the reasons that you gave. It is also a topic of conversation with most of the Governments of the region, if not all.

On the specific topic of dams, the issue is during the dam fill period. We have encouraged countries upstream to have constructive conversations with countries downstream about how water is managed during that fill



period, as well as afterwards. It is worth noting that major dam projects that bring hydroelectric potential have significant economic opportunity for the region, too, particularly for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where otherwise, economic opportunities are relatively limited. That has governed the region. We have been looking pragmatically to support it through a programme called CASA-1000. We have also—

Q143 **Sir Chris Bryant:** That is troubling if it is all paid for by China.

Chris Allan: True. The CASA-1000 programme is a World Bank consortium fund, in which the UK has been a major part, and therefore it is definitely not just China. For what it's worth, we are also working through a multi-donor World Bank programme on a series of international initiatives, which tend to go through the multilaterals, that support better water resource management across the region. As you will have found, as well as the dams problem, there is a significant issue with water management—in particular, irrigation and canalisation that is not always efficient or as efficient as it could be, with significant water loss causing downstream desertification issues. Getting that water management right and improving the Soviet-era infrastructure that causes the problems is a big focus of our work with multilateral organisations in the region.

Q144 **Saqib Bhatti:** Minister, what results have you seen from anti-money laundering capacity building in the central Asian countries?

Leo Docherty: In Kazakhstan, we have seen quite a robust response in their approach to ensuring that the management of their banking system is free of that kind of activity. They are very keen to ensure that, reputationally, they are seen to be doing the right thing, and I was quite impressed by the measures taken. As the major economy in the region, they are definitely taking robust steps to prevent their banking system being used for money laundering, so that was quite impressive.

Chris Allan: I can give you a couple of quick examples. We provided training last year to build the capacity and resilience of Kazakh financial institutions, after which the Treasury has been in regular contact with the Financial Monitoring Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan in relation to further support, including looking in particular at the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force, or FATF, for Kazakhstan.

Q145 **Saqib Bhatti:** What about the other central Asian countries? Have you done much capacity building there as well? Have they been receptive?

Chris Allan: We certainly have done with Uzbekistan, but I think it is better if we write to you with some details on that, if that's okay.

Q146 **Royston Smith:** Is any conditionality placed on developing in-country trading arrangements, in the areas of human rights, governance or the environment, in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan? If so, what are the red lines and how would the Government want to enforce them?

Leo Docherty: That is a great question. At the heart of our assistance programme is economic governance for economic development. Improvement in governance is contingent on the donation of that money.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The whole purpose is to ensure capacity building, and to ensure that measures to tackle corruption, for example, or to encourage transparency in the way business is done, are woven into the way the programmes are taken forward. That is included by design. That is why it is called the economic governance for economic development programme.

Chris Allan: I have some quick examples. In Uzbekistan, the sort of programmes under the overall economic governance umbrella that we have undertaken, are based on evidence and include reforms to the labour code, the development of a code on youth rights, the green economy and strengthening civil society in key economic sectors. We have looked at women's empowerment across the region. That includes building women-led small enterprises, and more generally, women's participation in the workforce.

On the question of conditionality, generally our aid programmes in this space are not conditional per se. The best example I can point to is the developing countries trading scheme, which you will have heard about. It is a set of trade preferences that have been extended to developing countries, including in this region, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

It 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.

Q147 **Royston Smith:** That is all very worthy and very British, and all to be expected. How is that received by people of authority in the countries we are discussing?

Leo Docherty: In my experience, it is received well, because they actually want institutional development and a properly functioning, just economy that allows entrepreneurs to create wealth and people to be employed, and do not want the tax base embezzled by people who do not want the greater good of the population. In my experience, it is received well. How about you, Chris?

Chris Allan: The developing countries trading scheme, in particular, is a global offer and is a very generous set of preferences. We have not received significant pushback from the recipient countries on the basis of that element of potential, if you like, conditionality.

On the broader question of how we approach the countries, I think you heard from the previous witness that programmatic offers in areas where the Government have particular focus—for example, reducing corruption and economic empowerment—are a way into some of the harder conversations that we want to have. In many countries of the region, in recent years we have been pushing at a relatively open door in building institutions and capacity in many areas of human rights.

Q148 **Royston Smith:** To talk about human rights, Minister, what human rights discussions have you had with your opposite numbers in your



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recent visits?

Leo Docherty: I had them across the board, pretty much. We are very happy to have a frank discussion. We speak respectfully but clearly and they listen. What is interesting is that they are keen to ensure that they improve the situation. They do recognise the reputational risk internationally that poor human rights can have. When it comes to the case of Uzbekistan, for example, regarding the historical use of child labour in the cotton harvest, that was something that, through working with allies, they actually managed to reduce by a very large degree.

Our approach is to talk very candidly in private to point out the necessity of the justice and the benefit of ensuring that human rights are protected. But what is interesting when you have these conversations is that they actually get it themselves. The example I gave was a case where they wanted to change because they recognised that it was useful to them—it was good for their people and for the economy—and also very important for their international reputation. Of course, you have a much better understanding of that, Chris.

Chris Allan: No, I know you have been a veteran of many of these conversations, too. I just want to make it clear that, for all that we are saying about the relatively constructive conversations that we can have, we remain clear that we have significant human rights concerns across the region. In particular, I would highlight freedom of expression and freedom of political involvement as being the two areas where there has been the least progress across the region.

Chair: Sir Chris, do you want to extend this into questions about forced labour?

Q149 **Sir Chris Bryant:** My understanding is that you are intending to table amendments to the Modern Slavey Act to tackle forced labour in supply chains from countries as Turkmenistan. Is that right?

Leo Docherty: I wasn't aware of that, but I could find out.

Chris Allan: It certainly remains our intent to focus on the question of forced labour in supply chains, in the right sorts of ways, in our engagement with Turkmenistan.

Leo Docherty: I cannot comment on the amendments.

Sir Chris Bryant: It sounds like you are at the edge of your knowledge in this area, which is fine. I'm not having a go, but—

Leo Docherty: I am happy to admit that I am not aware of the amendments that you just talked about.

Q150 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Okay. There is not much point in my asking more on that then, I think, but it would be really good if you could write to us on that, because it is one of the areas of significant human rights concerns.

Chris Allan: We are very happy to do that.



Q151 **Saqib Bhatti:** In terms of early warning analysis for what is happening in central Asian countries, have there been any indications of any future atrocities?

Leo Docherty: Future atrocities—

Saqib Bhatti: Yes, are there any countries at risk of future atrocities at the moment?

Leo Docherty: Like what?

Saqib Bhatti: In terms of human rights atrocities, what is your early warning analysis telling you in those countries?

Chair: For example, if you think about the civil disturbances in places like Osh that cost the lives of many people not so long ago, are there other risks like that that loom large on your risk register for the region?

Chris Allan: May I? Obviously, the Kyrgyz-Tajik border remains the most likely source of instability within the region. We saw conflict there last year. We are pleased that the Presidents of both countries were able to get together, I think in June, and that there is diplomatic progress. We do our best to address the consequences of that conflict through programmatic activity, under what is known as the CSSF—the conflict, stability and security fund, which I am sure you will have come across—looking, for example, at the impact on women and girls of that localised conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.

A lot of the issues there are long standing—some of them are centuries old—relating to access to water and pastures, and, of course, are confused further by the complex border arrangements that the countries inherited from the Soviet Union. We also have some close dialogue on counter-terrorism associated risks with some of the countries in the region, but I would rather go into more detail on that in the closed session afterwards, if that is okay.

Q152 **Saqib Bhatti:** To follow up on that, just in terms of in-country staff, what kind of training do they receive and what support do they get in terms of where atrocities may occur?

Leo Docherty: First and foremost, it is important to note that we have boosted the number of people on the ground. That is important; there are more people across our missions in all five countries, even over just the last five years.

Chris Allan: On Uzbekistan, we have doubled the number of UK-based staff in the last few years—which makes me a bit annoyed, because I wanted more when I was ambassador—to include, certainly, members of staff from parts of Government who are expert on the issues you have just alluded to, particularly in the security space. So the footprints in some of the key countries in the region—in the security space, with relevant skills—has been increasing.

Q153 **Saqib Bhatti:** I am going to move on to resources and climate change.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What work is going on to support Turkmenistan on the issue of methane emissions and climate change?

Leo Docherty: When I was in Turkmenistan recently, that was one of the main focuses of discussion. They understand that they have a significant problem that it would be in their interests to address. We would like to work with them and we had a good discussion about that. Clearly, we are still in the foothills of any meaningful collaboration, but it was good that at least we have had an opportunity to talk about this. That will be only more important as we move forward, and we will keep it on the agenda.

Chris Allan: One specific thing that we are doing this year and next year is supporting the update of Turkmenistan's national inventory of greenhouse gas emissions, using FCDO international programme funding. We hope that it will look particularly at the problem of methane emissions to which you are alluding. As the Minister said, it is a talking point in all our high-level ministerial conversations.

Q154 **Saqib Bhatti:** Broadening this out to central Asia and renewable energy, what is the offering in central Asia and how does it differ to what we do with the Gulf states?

Leo Docherty: Sorry, I didn't quite get the question.

Saqib Bhatti: In terms of how we are supporting them to develop renewable energy.

Leo Docherty: Oh right, okay. We have a strong appetite. The Foreign Secretary signed a green hydrogen MOU with Kazakhstan. Clearly, as a major hydrocarbon exporter, there is an understanding in Kazakhstan that increasing their renewable output could have a very significant impact on not only their own climate goals, but their economic prosperity. All five countries are suffering the dire consequences of climate change. Chris, do you have programmes that attend to that?

Chris Allan: Yes, there are a couple on renewable energy. In particular, I mentioned the significant investment we have made in developing Tajik and Kyrgyz hydroelectric resources through a programme called CASA-1000. We are also currently developing a new regional programme that will focus on climate energy and water security across the whole region, including further efforts to take advantage of the significant hydroelectric potential in the region. The final thing is that DBT's regional work, including through its trade directors in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has pivoted towards renewable energy and the energy sector from the fossil fuel sector almost entirely over the last couple of years.

Q155 **Saqib Bhatti:** The other part of the question was about the difference in our offering to central Asia versus the Gulf states.

Chris Allan: Globally, DBT has pivoted, and that would include in the Gulf, to focus much more on renewable energy and—you are probably familiar with this—to move away from the fossil fuel sector. So I wouldn't describe that as a difference.



Q156 **Saqib Bhatti:** Is there greater opportunity in central Asia now?

Chris Allan: In renewable energies?

Saqib Bhatti: Yes.

Chris Allan: Certainly the opportunity there is increasing significantly, as it is elsewhere. One important area of opportunity, and this is particularly true in central Asia, is energy efficiency, because the region inherited really under-efficient—inefficient—infrastructure historically. It is among the least efficient consumers of energy in the world; that is true of gas infrastructure as well as electricity infrastructure. There are major investment opportunities in up-to-date transmission infrastructure that could make a significant difference. That is probably more of a focus of our efforts in central Asia than it might be in the middle east.

Chair: Can I move on, then, to our strategy for influence? We heard a lot both from the panel earlier and while we were travelling through the region that better use of soft power is a huge opportunity for the UK. One of the ambassadors in the region described English as a strategic enabler. We have heard about how fostering a more creative economy, spreading English language teaching, and the work of the Chevening scholarship programme and the seasonal agricultural workers scheme are all important levers. Obviously, the British Council has been skinned to the bone in the region. It has had less and less funding. Could you just tell us a little bit about how you see the role of our institutions, such as the British Council and universities? How do you see the forecast for funding for them and the stability of their funding over the next few years to help them expand what seems like some extraordinary work?

Leo Docherty: It is extraordinary work. It is hugely important. There is a very big demand for it, as you will have seen. They already reach an amazing number of people: 2.8 million people in Kazakhstan in '21-22. They train a large number of teachers: 2,500 in Kazakhstan during that period and 4,000 in Uzbekistan. I have met the staff in Tashkent, for example. It is hugely important.

There is a huge appetite for it and it is a huge strategic enabler, especially when it is coupled with the export of other forms of British education, such as that of the University of Westminster and others that are fulfilling the desire of young Uzbeks to receive a global standard of education. Clearly, budgets are tight, but it is a priority and we will always seek to have more resource going there. We recognise that it is hugely important. Chris will know that from his time as ambassador not just in Uzbekistan but elsewhere.

Q157 **Chair:** How are you going to de-risk the work of the British Council for the future? I will be honest: my takeaway from listening to its representatives is that the funding is so cut now but it is also so unpredictable. They would not put it in these terms, but it sounded to me like they are at risk of really falling below a critical threshold of what they can do. How do you guard against that risk?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Leo Docherty: We have got to be clear. Over the spending review period '22-25, we will provide the British Council with £511 million.

Q158 **Chair:** Globally?

Leo Docherty: Globally. It is a substantial budget. Clearly, central Asia is compelling in terms of its importance and its significant demand signal, so that is a balancing act of management. That is about us ensuring that we give it the priority that it needs.

Chris Allan: The settlement is there across the SR period. The size and the model for how the British Council uses its money overseas is fundamentally a decision for the council. What we do is help it prioritise and I, with the council, certainly underline the importance of investment in central Asia. As the Minister said, I could not be more of an advocate of their work in the region from my time in the region. They are tremendously impactful, certainly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where they retain a UK-led, on the ground presence and very significant impact programmatically as well as in English language teaching—training the teachers, updating the curriculum, doing the examining. Their profile across the countries is hugely impressive. And do not underestimate their digital footprint and impact, where their audience reaches is also truly impressive.

Q159 **Chair:** But is your steer, then, that it should be investing more of that £550 million in central Asia?

Leo Docherty: That is for it to decide.

Q160 **Chair:** But what is your steer to it, as it were?

Leo Docherty: I think there is a compelling case for putting more resource into central Asia.

Q161 **Chair:** What about the BBC World Service? In terms of just ensuring that people in central Asia have access to the truth, there are very few alternatives that are better than the BBC World Service. I think the BBC World Service has a grand total of one journalist in Uzbekistan. How do we think about expanding the footprint of the BBC World Service on the ground in central Asia?

Chris Allan: First, securing access to Uzbekistan for that BBC World journalist took some time and I am not sure how easy it would necessarily be to increase the numbers over a period of time. However, I do view it as extremely important that we retain a strong BBC offering to audiences across the region. That includes, as the BBC has shifted its output from radio to digital content, ensuring that digital content going out in the form of podcasts in Kyrgyz and Uzbek continues to hit the audiences that we need to hit, as well as in the languages that are still used across the region, including Russian, to ensure that we are using the asset that the BBC offers to counter some of the disinformation that otherwise permeates the region in that language.

Q162 **Chair:** In five years' time, would it be your hope that there is a bigger



HOUSE OF COMMONS

BBC World Service presence in central Asia?

Leo Docherty: It would seem logical, in the sense that there is a growing young population that demand the content.

Q163 **Chair:** Yes. I have to say that I was stunned by the market for “Peaky Blinders” in Uzbekistan—obviously, as a Birmingham MP, that is something I want to encourage. What is the realistic scale of ambition for expanding the BBC World Service in the region? Should we try to double it or triple it? Given the importance of English as a strategic enabler and the BBC as a trusted news brand in a world where disinformation is rife, what is the ambition level that we should think about?

Leo Docherty: There is a robust ambition. This is all in the context of the changed security context of the last year and a half. These are archetypal middle states, to use the Foreign Secretary’s terminology. There is a competition of ideas. It is a contested region in that regard. Turning up with not just the English language but the World Service is very important. There is certainly an institutional ambition.

Chris Allan: To give another example, where the budgets are more directly within our control—Chevening is a good example—we are increasing Chevening scholarships across the region from 23 last year to 31 this year. Perhaps it is an indication of the sort of ambition that we would have, wherever we are able, to boost the numbers of staff and the allocation of resources in line with our wider strategy.

Q164 **Chair:** Okay. What about the seasonal agricultural workers scheme? Has that been a good thing, a force for good?

Leo Docherty: It has been a very good thing. More than 12,000 have participated. It has been a great opportunity for them and very good for our economy. In terms of the people-to-people links and the understanding that these people acquire of the United Kingdom, it is a very good thing.

Q165 **Chair:** What conversations have you had with the Home Secretary about expanding that scheme?

Leo Docherty: We will definitely keep that under review.

Chris Allan: It is reviewed annually. Every year our pitch to the Home Office is to continue it and expand it as much as there is capacity to do so in the broader scheme. The advantages of it are not limited to growing the people-to-people links or the skills that these workers bring back to the countries; it also offers an alternative to migration to Russia, which is a very significant worker migration flow, as you will know, from the region. It forms a significant dependency for some of the countries of the region where significant proportions of GDP in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are contingent on remittances sent back from those workers.

Q166 **Chair:** It is a compelling case. What has the Home Office said to you? I remember, in my two years as a Home Office Minister, the relationship between the Home Office and the Foreign Office is always one of total



harmony.

Leo Docherty: Well, that is the case today, I am pleased to report.

Q167 **Chair:** How are you getting on?

Chris Allan: In this case, it is a relatively rare meeting of minds. There are strong domestic reasons to want to expand this route for seasonal workers. The programme overall has expanded from 2,500 to 40,000 visas. That is from 2,500 in 2019 to 40,000 in 2022. That is global, but central Asian workers make up significantly the largest contingent, which is interesting in and of itself. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive from pretty much every perspective. The overstay rates, for example, have not been of significant concern to the Home Office and therefore they have been ready and able to expand the scheme, and we too have been keen to see it expanded over the period.

Q168 **Chair:** Will it continue to expand, in your estimation?

Chris Allan: I would not be willing to commit to that because I honestly do not have a good sense of where the Home Office will come out next year, but that would be my hope.

Q169 **Chair:** Okay. In terms of co-ordination with allies, can you tell us, Minister, a little bit about the conversations that you are having with partners like the US and the EU? We were very struck when we were in the region by the tempo of engagement from the US and a number of significant European partners. What kind of conversations do you have? What kind of co-ordination mechanisms do you have? And how do you see that evolving?

Leo Docherty: You make a good point. On my recent visit, the EU summit had just happened in Kyrgyzstan, so it was on the agenda. We do co-ordinate with allies. I had a very good discussion with Terhi Hakala, the EU special representative. We do liaise with our allies and like-minded countries as a matter of course, because we share the same priorities across the region.

Chris Allan: One good example is that those visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that I mentioned, relating to sanctions circumvention, were joint with our EU and US counterparts. As well as the Minister's own engagement with the EU special representative, there is a more systematic group that is chaired by that EU special representative and that we join, as well as US, Japanese and South Korean counterparts. That is obviously focused on central Asia.

We co-ordinate through the G7 and work closely with central Asian states at the United Nations. You may have gathered that there is a UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, the UNRCCA, which we engage with on a multilateral basis too. The OSCE is probably the last one I would mention as a very significant player in the region, and there is co-ordination with both other area OSCE members, in terms of programmatic support for the OSCE missions in the region, and the countries of central Asia under the OSCE umbrella more broadly.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Does the dialogue include trade?

Chris Allan: The dialogue with our EU partners would certainly include trade, yes.

Chair: Sanctions evasion?

Chris Allan: Yes.

Chair: Human rights?

Chris Allan: The agenda will vary from meeting to meeting, but I do not think it is bounded. It would address whatever issues anybody wanted to bring to the table.

Q170 **Chair:** Minister, would you say that the lack of engagement before your arrival, by the sound of it, has left us at the back of the pack of our international partners? That was the summary description given to us in evidence.

Leo Docherty: No, I think not, because of the unique interest they have in British culture and English language, and also an acknowledgment in terms of our diplomatic approach. I think they regard us as a partner that is willing to listen and co-operate, rather than dictate. I think “back of the pack” is not quite the right way to describe it.

Chris Allan: For some years, we were one of only four or five countries to have diplomatic missions in all five central Asian countries. Although engagement has risen and fallen through the years, we have had at least a consistent and structured engagement with most of the countries of the region throughout the period, so I would agree that “back of the pack” is unfair.

Q171 **Chair:** It feels like this is also quite a fast-moving and fairly fluid foreign policy; there has been a lot of change over the last year, and obviously all kinds of opportunities lie ahead in the year to the come. How do you think the Government can now begin to crystallise the long-term direction and objectives, both for trade and for the other agendas that we have talked about today? How do you create a real clarity of signals?

Leo Docherty: For our part, we are the diplomats; our job within that is to show that clarity of signal by turning up regularly, listening, discussing shared priorities, and receiving the leaderships of all these countries in King Charles Street and in our capital and discussing those same things. It has to go both ways. We have to embed a much more routine schedule of diplomatic engagement and diplomatic hospitality for their leaderships coming here.

Chris Allan: We are putting in place, quite deliberately, frameworks for our relationships with each country. I will very quickly run through those. With Kazakhstan, I mentioned the strategic partnership and co-operation agreement that we are currently in the final stages of negotiating; we have had a regular ministerial dialogue with the Kazakhs since 2013. With the Uzbeks we have a partnership and co-operation agreement signed in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

2019, and there are annual ministerial strategic dialogue talks too. With the Tajiks we have a political dialogue; the first one of those was in March this year.

Leo Docherty: Which I actually led.

Chris Allan: You led that, signing an MOU formalising that. Back in 2022, Lord Ahmad initiated the first political dialogue with Turkmenistan. We have the first one planned with Kyrgyzstan later this year.

Leo Docherty: Yes, which I proposed. And I will be travelling back to Kazakhstan in early October.

Q172 **Chair:** Is there now more that we can do to ensure that the business community is clearer and has heard those signals about the future trade opportunities? I do not know whether you see it as Government's job to help drive business and trade growth in the region, or whether, frankly, it is down to business to get its act together. But how do we ensure that the business community has heard the strategic ambition and intention?

Leo Docherty: I think that is absolutely part of our role, and we have DBT people in missions in all of those countries. There is a huge amount of work done here. There are things like, for example, in the case of Uzbekistan, the annual meeting of UBTIC, which this year will be in London. It is absolutely part of our core business, and officials liaise very closely with DBT colleagues on that.

Chris Allan: Yes, with both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan we have Government structures that support annual business and Government meetings, where, if you like, the Government help provide a platform for businesses to meet and engage. We help to explain what we think the opportunities might be within the countries concerned. As you will know, DBT has export advisers around the UK who are able to access the expertise that sits out in the international network and help inform British exporters of the opportunities that exist in the countries of the region as well. There is a significant amount of Government support towards making that happen.

However, I would say that businesses, in my experience, listen most to the other businesses that are already present in the markets of the region. All of this works best when they are not simply hearing from Government—for all that we play a role in pointing to the opportunities—but when they are hearing from businesses that already have a presence. Kazakhstan is a really good example of that working successfully; there are a couple of very big investments, such as Shell in oil and gas, and BAE's investments in Air Astana, which pull with them supply chains that build the ecosystem where British businesses follow one another in and create quite a significant trading relationship.

Q173 **Chair:** We have those structures in Kazakhstan, but is there a plan to expand the availability of those structures across the region?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chris Allan: There is an intergovernmental structure in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Those are the two countries where we see the most significant trade growth opportunities.

Chair: I am conscious, Minister, that you have a Westminster Hall debate to get to.

Leo Docherty: I have, although Chris will stay with you.

Chair: We are grateful for that. Minister, thank you. We will end the public session there.