



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**Countries at crossroads:
UK engagement
in Central Asia:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Tenth Report of Session
2022–23**

**Second Special Report of Session
2023–24**

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Foreign Affairs Committee

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Second Special Report

The Foreign Affairs Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2022–23, *Countries at crossroads: UK engagement in Central Asia* (HC 1158) on 10 November 2023. The Government Response was received on 11 January 2024 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

1. The UK Government is grateful to the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) for their Inquiry and subsequent report, *Countries at Crossroads: UK Engagement in Central Asia*. The report is timely. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), together with other Government Departments, has actively increased its engagement with the countries of Central Asia, including in response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.
2. The report helpfully highlights key themes which we have also identified as offering mutually beneficial opportunities or geopolitical challenges at this moment. Over the last two years, we have increased engagement in support of UK priorities in Central Asia including climate, development, education, trade, security and defence. At a time of unprecedented pressure, we have also sought to demonstrate political support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states.
3. In late November, the Foreign Secretary, shortly after his appointment, welcomed the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, as part of a five-day UK programme which included meetings across government, Parliament and business. This was the first ever official visit by a Kyrgyz Prime Minister to the UK. Shortly afterwards, the Foreign Secretary was pleased to meet the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Skopje. He met representatives from the Central Asian states at COP and will continue to do so. Lord Cameron's early contacts with Central Asian counterparts build on the success of the visit of the previous Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, to Kazakhstan in March 2023, the first visit by a British Foreign Secretary in 20 years.
4. Other Ministers are also active in stepping up high-level UK engagement with Central Asia. For example, over the past year, the FCDO's Minister for Europe, Leo Docherty, has visited all five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan twice) and is preparing for further visits in early 2024. Department for Business and Trade (DBT) Minister for Exports, Lord Offord, led a successful trade-focused visit to Uzbekistan in August and his departmental colleague, Nusrat Ghani, Minister for Industry and Economic Security, recently co-chaired the Intergovernmental Commission in Astana, Kazakhstan.
5. The UK's trade and investment relationship with Central Asia also continues to expand. Most recently, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkmenistan led a large delegation to London for a major Turkmenistan Investment Forum in November. Reflecting growing business interest in opportunities in Central Asia, some 300 British companies took part in the annual Uzbekistan British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC) in London at the end of November.

6. As the report recognises, renewed UK engagement builds on foundations established over more than 30 years since Central Asian independence. The UK remains one of the few countries to have Ambassadors and Embassies in all five Central Asian republics. Our presence on the ground supports engagement across many sectors. For example, the UK is proud of 20 years of peacekeeping cooperation in Kazakhstan. We have made progress in building collaboration on Higher Education across the region - the UK is the preferred destination for around a third of Bolashaq scholarship students from Kazakhstan. With the launch of a political dialogue with Kyrgyzstan in early 2024, we will have established annual strategic consultations with all five Central Asian republics. New opportunities are also emerging: the Seasonal Workers Scheme now brings thousands of Central Asians to the UK every year.

7. We also continue to coordinate with like-minded international partners on our engagement with Central Asia, notably the US, EU, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Recent G7 communiqués have highlighted the importance of increased engagement, using tools like the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to support the infrastructure development needed to boost Central Asian connectivity and address logistics vulnerabilities. We are also exploring opportunities for wider partnerships. For example, we have committed to work more closely with Türkiye on regional issues, including energy security and the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, as confirmed by the Minister for Europe during his visits to Türkiye in July and October.

8. This response addresses the Committee's recommendations in the order in which they appear in the 'Conclusions and Recommendations' section of its report.

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

Conclusion/recommendation 1.

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

a) A Central Asia 5+UK meeting is held in 2024, with the potential for follow-ups, to better understand how the UK can support regional cooperation. A single issue, such as renewable energy, should be identified for this meeting and result in concrete objectives for action.

Agree

9. We agree with the Committee's assessment of the importance of supporting cooperation among the five Central Asian republics (CA5). The CA5 themselves have made progress in recent years in intensifying their links in different sectors and at every level. The FCDO's objective is to encourage further collaboration. Greater regional integration - to foster sustainable economic development, trade, climate action and collaboration on energy and water networks - is essential for the region's stability, sovereignty and prosperity.

10. We are exploring opportunities for a Ministerial CA5+UK meeting in 2024 and considering the format and agenda most conducive to a productive discussion. We are also drawing on the experience of partners who have previously hosted meetings in this configuration to gain their insights and explore synergies. In July, Minister for Europe, Leo Docherty, invited the five Central Asian Ambassadors in London to discuss shared priorities. He intends to use this format for further exchanges on issues of regional interest.

b) An offer is made by the FCDO of high-quality capacity building for the diplomatic corps of Central Asian countries through a Diplomatic Academy, enhancing the skills required for greater regional and international cooperation, as recommended for other Asian countries in our 2023 report on the Government's tilt to the Indo-Pacific.

Partially Agree

11. We agree with the Committee on the value of sharing professional diplomatic expertise and will continue to consider opportunities for doing so on an informal basis with the five Central Asian republics. Examples of where this has already been done (or is being explored) include offering places for Turkmen MFA officials on existing English language training for defence forces and working with UK commercial providers and higher education institutions to build capability for Kazakh officials. The UK Civil Service College has recently visited Kazakhstan to discuss training opportunities.

12. However, setting up a Diplomatic Academy requires a significant investment in resources in terms of expertise, people, and funding. The FCDO International Academy's purpose is to build the capability of staff working internationally for the UK Government. Its resources and capacity are not currently sufficient to support the development of initiatives overseas.

13. It is worth noting that compared to many other Diplomatic Academies of like-minded partners, the FCDO International Academy is unique in that we train our country-based (as well as our UK-based, staff), some of whom have gone on to work for their national governments.

14. Chevening Scholarships are another valuable avenue for aspiring Central Asian diplomats to gain from exposure to the UK and our education system. A number of Chevening Scholars have gone on to roles in Ministries of Foreign Affairs or other ministries. Similarly, the Bolashaq scheme in Kazakhstan has been very successful in training bright Kazakh graduates in the UK, many of whom are now highly placed in the Kazakh government including at ministerial and senior official levels and in Kazakhstan's diplomatic corps. Bolashaq has also delivered a programme for Kazakh officials at the University of Oxford's Said Business School. The FCDO also supports The John Smith Trust, which offers fellowships to professionals from across Central Asia to develop leadership skills and gain insights into the UK political system, civil society and institutions.

Conclusion/recommendation 2.

All five Central Asian states are rightly proud of their distinct cultural heritages and histories. Each has unique assets and strengths and fiercely defends its sovereignty. It is important that the UK Government both respects and encourages the independence of the Central Asian countries from their dominating neighbours. The Government should develop tailored approaches to engagement for each one. However, it is also

important that the Government remains realistic about the extent to which countries are able to decouple from Russia at the current time and the varying levels of interest in doing so.

Agree

15. We have re-energised bilateral relationships with each of the five Central Asian states, including through partnerships in areas of mutual benefit, increased Ministerial engagement and formal dialogues. We have tailored approaches to each country, which are reviewed regularly. Further deepening of bilateral relationships is a priority for 2024.

16. Our goal is to support a sovereign, resilient and prosperous Central Asian region, better able to manage the political, security, social and economic challenges each country faces. This includes support for Central Asian states' efforts to diversify their political and economic relationships and balance pressures of different kinds from their larger neighbours. Central Asian leaders have made clear the importance they place on the United Nations Charter and on respect for states' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Conclusion/recommendation 3.

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

Partially Agree

17. We agree on the value of senior Ministerial engagement with Central Asian counterparts. As noted above, this has increased significantly, including with leaders: for example, the Foreign Secretary met the Kyrgyz Prime Minister and the Uzbek Foreign Minister in November; the previous Foreign Secretary met the Kazakh President during his visit to Astana in March 2023. We are actively exploring further opportunities for senior Ministerial engagement in early 2024, including through both inward and outward visits. The Foreign Secretary, who visited Kazakhstan as Prime Minister – the first UK Prime Minister to do so – will consider what further engagement would be appropriate. A detailed list of recent Ministerial engagement is at Annex A.

Conclusion/recommendation 4.

We agree that Russia's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's scramble to secure willing partners is a key concern of the UK and must influence foreign policy toward Central Asia. However, the UK's engagement with Central Asian countries and

the relationships invested in must not succumb, once again, to an approach dependent on a single issue such as Afghanistan, Russia or trade. There is now an opportunity to build an enduring relationship with the people of Central Asia.

Agree

18. Russia's illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine has put Central Asian countries in a difficult political and economic position. This is an important strategic moment, at which we are determined to help Central Asian countries strengthen their resilience and diversify their economies.

19. However, the UK's bilateral relationships with Central Asian countries go well beyond Russia as a single issue. These relationships matter to the UK in our efforts to foster an open and stable international order and to support UK trade and prosperity, development, climate, defence and security priorities. Current initiatives include:

- A dedicated £3m pa development programme in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan focused on **improving economic governance and supporting reform**.
- **Promoting peace and security**, including community level peace building and action against Gender Based Violence, through a £3.4m Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) programme (this will become the Integrated Security Fund from April 2024).
- CSSF funding also supports **safe and orderly migration** for Central Asian seasonal agricultural workers participating in the UK's Seasonal Workers Scheme (SWS), preparing them to travel to the UK and reintegrate into their home countries when they return.
- **Trade and investment**: opportunities across the region are growing fast. We are improving the region's business environment through hands on support and assistance, including with Uzbekistan's WTO accession. We are supporting British companies to win hundreds of millions of pounds of contracts, particularly in infrastructure, transport and mining. We are also working with UK investors in the region, where the UK regularly features as a top ten investor.
- Encouraging progress on **climate and biodiversity**; a major regional climate programme has just been agreed. This will have: (i) a regional component to support energy/water investments to support green transition delivered by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs); (ii) a national component to support Central Asian countries on emissions reduction; (iii) a component working with communities to support adaptation and resilience.
- Supporting progress on poverty reduction and the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), in line with the UK's global leadership on these issues.
- A new **private sector development programme**, the UK-Central Asia Green Inclusive Growth Fund, is under design and will launch in 2024. Subject to final approval, the programme is valued at £18 million over five years, and will seek to develop SMEs across the region, providing targeted business advisory

services and essential growth finance to support businesses to reduce carbon emission and create jobs. This support will be focused on disadvantaged groups and regions, including women and girls, and remote and rural areas.

- Building **societal cohesion** through education, critical thinking and media literacy to develop understanding of wide-ranging issues including **disinformation**, extremism, democracy, human rights and equality.
- Exploring opportunities for training and collaboration on **countering illicit finance**.
- **Building UN peacekeeping capability** (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), including through ‘train the trainer’ capability development with the UN-standard KazCent peacekeeping training centre in Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- Cooperating on **security issues**, including counterterrorism threats from Afghanistan.

Illicit finance

Conclusion/recommendation 5:

Illicit finance is an integral component of autocratic rule in Central Asian countries. The UK is a key node for Central Asian capital flight and a leading enabler of its corrupt elites. While the UK is careful not to interfere with the internal affairs of Central Asian countries by challenging the legitimacy of their autocratic regimes, the continuance of an under-enforced financial crime prosecution system in the UK constitutes an undeclared interference in the form of facilitation of kleptocratic autocracies.

Disagree

20. The UK has one of the world’s largest and most open economies, and London is one of the world’s most attractive destinations for overseas investors. These factors make the UK attractive for legitimate business, but also expose the UK to money laundering risk. The proceeds of corruption and kleptocracy are not welcome in the UK. Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Government has accelerated its pre-existing efforts to tackle illicit finance. In particular, we have:

- Passed the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022. These reforms included a new register of Overseas Entities to require those behind foreign companies that own UK property to reveal their identities;
- Passed its successor, the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act, in October 2023. This Act introduces world-leading powers which will allow UK authorities to proactively target organised criminals, the biggest reform to Companies House in its 180-year history, and new powers to deal with strategic lawsuits against public protection, known as SLAPPS, involving economic crime;
- Created a new unit within the National Crime Agency, the Combatting Kleptocracy Cell, which is focused on targeting corrupt elites and their wealth in the UK.

21. These measures will harden the UK against all forms of illicit finance entering this country. The Government's wider crackdown on money laundering is detailed in full in the 2023 Economic Crime Plan 2.

22. Separately, the FCDO is working with the Home Office to undertake an internal analysis of Serious and Organised Crime (including drugs) and illicit finance risks in Central Asia to inform HMG's future response.

Conclusion/recommendation 6:

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

Partially Agree

23. The Government has developed a sustainable funding model that demonstrates our commitment to tackling economic crime. We are investing in the National Crime Agency and have increased their budget year on year since 2019. This includes a new unit within the NCA, the Combatting Kleptocracy Cell, which is focused on targeting corrupt elites and their wealth in the UK.

24. The combination of the most recent Spending Review settlement and private sector contributions through the new Economic Crime Levy will provide funding of £400 million to Government bodies over the next three years. This includes £63m for Companies House Reform. HMG's economic crime related investments will be guided by the Economic Crime Plan 2 (ECP2), published in March 2022. Through 43 actions, ECP2 sets out how activity across the system will help to reduce money laundering and recover more criminal assets; combat kleptocracy and drive down sanctions evasion; and cut fraud. Our ambitious reforms include:

- i. Recruiting an additional 475 financial crime investigators,
- ii. Establishing a new Crypto Cell to combat criminal abuse of cryptoassets, and
- iii. Expanding the Combatting Kleptocracy Cell to target corrupt elites, their money, and their enablers.

Conclusion/recommendation 7:

We recommend that the Government:

a) *Offers assistance to each of the Central Asian countries in building their domestic capacity to tackle corruption and money laundering as a contribution to their economic development.*

Partially Agree

25. As the report highlights, tackling corruption and illicit finance is an important element for developing economic resilience and political independence. The report also notes the challenging geopolitical context. In the Department's oral evidence to the Committee, the FCDO outlined the capacity building support we are providing via law enforcement cooperation. The FCDO will continue to respond to new opportunities in Central Asia to apply the approach to illicit finance outlined in the White Paper on International Development.

26. We also recognise there is significant scope in some Central Asian countries to support governance reforms which strengthen checks and balances (e.g. work on public financial management; procurement reforms; reforms of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs); and working with oversight institutions such as supreme audit bodies). We are considering the next generation of interventions for a future governance programme - which would work at the national and sub-national levels on these issues. We are already (through the Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED) programme) running pilots to reduce corruption risks through: undertaking a PEFA (Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability) assessment in Uzbekistan; supporting public procurement reforms; and reform of State Owned Enterprises.

27. Protecting space for civil society is key for anti-corruption reforms to succeed. The UK is committed to supporting open societies and, through EGED, engages with civil society organisations to help them develop and ensure public participation in public policy. We are separately working with Kazakhstan to support the development of their financial intelligence capabilities, which includes training around illicit finance in virtual assets and Know Your Customer.

b) Encourages the National Crime Agency to send agents to liaise with Central Asian governments in developing cooperation on Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWO) and on bringing back stolen public assets from the UK.

Partially Agree

28. The NCA engages with multiple Central Asian law enforcement partners, through International Liaison Officers based in Posts in neighbouring regions and through UK-based teams supporting co-operation on Serious and Organised Crime threats, including illicit finance.

29. The NCA assesses the most effective means of improving the response in this area is to build and enhance secure police-to-police intelligence sharing routes, underpinned by international MoUs ensuring the security and appropriate use of intelligence shared through these routes. The NCA is actively promoting this through its ILO network. Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWOs) are only one tool in the UK's arsenal in tackling illicit finance and are considered in every case where the statutory threshold is met, in particular where there is no clear link between the property and unlawful conduct and / or where the respondent has accrued assets that are not commensurate with their known income. In some circumstances, their effectiveness may be dependent on the provision of evidence from foreign jurisdictions. We consider the utility of UWOs alongside a range of other traditional and non-traditional tactics, and utilise those tools and techniques which are most likely to lead to success. The NCA proactively seeks opportunities to return stolen assets where it is appropriate to do so.

c) *Ensures that Overseas Territory governments comply with the extended deadline of implementing public registers of beneficial ownership with full and free access to company data, not limited to single entries. There should be no further deadline extensions.*

Partially Agree

30. The Overseas Territories (OTs) with financial centres are committed to meeting international standards on illicit finance and tax transparency. Six OTs with financial centres already share company beneficial ownership information with UK law enforcement agencies. This source of information (Exchange of Notes) is highly valued by the National Crime Agency and others. For example, information provided by the British Virgin Islands helped secure the UK's first Unexplained Wealth Order. They also share tax information with HMRC and international partners.

31. In 2019–20, all inhabited OTs committed to introducing publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership. In 2020, the UK Government set out its reasonable expectation, in a written Ministerial statement (HLWS361/HCWS369), that these would be in place by the end of 2023.

32. The Court of Justice of the European Union issued a ruling in November 2022 which changed the international context and several OTs raised concerns around the legal implications of implementing a publicly accessible register of beneficial ownership. We continue to believe that all OTs could legally implement public registers of their own.

33. Given our differing legal views with those OTs, we have worked with them to find a way to make positive progress through an interim step towards fully publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership, as set out in written Ministerial statement (HCWS150). This interim step would be the implementation, in 2024, of Publicly Accessible Registers of Beneficial Ownership, with a Legitimate Interest Access filter, which would include access for media and civil society organisations. This will be pursued by the Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands and Anguilla. The UK Government will provide technical assistance as required to expedite and support delivery.

34. Montserrat, the Falkland Islands, St Helena, and Pitcairn have confirmed that they are continuing to implement a fully publicly accessible register of beneficial ownership, following in the footsteps of Gibraltar which introduced its own in 2020.

d) *Imposes Global Anti-Corruption sanctions designations on those whose origins of wealth can be tied to assets they have illegally seized and apply the Global Forum on Asset Recovery's Principles for Disposition and Transfer of Confiscated Stolen Assets in Corruption Cases (the GFAR Principles).*

Agree

35. The Government agrees that the Global Anti-Corruption sanctions regime is a powerful tool for combatting serious corruption around the world. We have used the Global Anti-Corruption Regulations in diverse country contexts to target serious corruption cases that have deprived citizens of public funds and resources. Imposing sanctions is one response among other tools and we will continue to use a range of approaches to combat corruption globally. We do not comment on future sanctions designations as to do so would reduce their impact.

e) *Ensures the Transatlantic Taskforce to tackle kleptocracy and Russian sanctions evasion, established in 2022, provides a special focus on sanctions evasion in Central Asia, by ensuring that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation updates Parliament with a special report on the action taken.*

Disagree

36. The Russian Elites, Proxies, and Oligarchs (REPO) Task Force was launched by the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the US, and European Commission to share information and coordinate action to isolate and exert unprecedented pressure on sanctioned Russian individuals and entities. Since the creation of the taskforce following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, REPO members have coordinated a [range of restrictive measures against Russia](#), including blocking and freezing more than \$58 billion worth of sanctioned Russians' assets in financial accounts and economic resources. In March, REPO members issued a [joint global advisory on Russian Sanctions Evasion](#) to help ensure more effective implementation of sanctions and promote compliance.

37. The Taskforce has played an important role in the global response to the invasion and the UK has consistently engaged at Ministerial and official level with the REPO Taskforce and will continue to do so as we coordinate efforts and share information. REPO is just one forum in which we coordinate with our partners on tackling sanctions evasion. REPO, however, does not have the mandate to undertake regionally focused work on sanctions evasion and is therefore not the appropriate forum to progress this recommendation, although this is an issue the UK is prioritising through other channels. In recent months we have also worked closely and effectively with our partners to increase diplomatic pressure on third countries regarding this issue. This has included official visits to Central Asia to discuss sanctions evasion, including two visits conducted jointly with the EU and US in April and November 2023 and considerable Embassy-led engagement with governments and companies operating in the region.

Conclusion/recommendation 8.

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

Partially Agree

38. We are taking steps to address Russian attempts to evade sanctions via Central Asia. We have stepped up diplomatic engagement, sending three official delegations to the region in recent months to highlight the risk of sanctions evasion, complementing significant in-country engagement by our Embassies. As noted above, two of these visits were conducted jointly with the EU and US, in April and November 2023. This is producing results, with a number of countries in the region committing to take action on controlling the export and re-export of sensitive sanctioned goods to Russia. As part of the Economic Deterrence

Initiative (EDI), announced by the Prime Minister as part of the Integrated Review Refresh, we are also providing training to Central Asian governments and businesses on the risks of sanctions evasion. We have used this funding to increase FCDO diplomatic resource in the region with new sanctions-focused roles.

39. We will, in addition, continue to use our powers to designate individuals and entities in third countries involved in evading our sanctions. For example, the package announced on 6 December 2023 included designations against a range of third country entities involved in supporting the Russian military, including the Uzbek-based entity OOO MVIZION. Such actions ensure that these actors cannot access the UK financial system and send a clear signal of our determination to take action against those who seek to undermine our sanctions.

40. Separately, we continue to prioritise helping Central Asian countries to diversify their economies, making best use of their natural resources and young populations. We are committed to removing barriers to trade and promoting an enabling environment and free trade practices in Central Asia, which will support British business, while also attracting inward investment to the UK. For example, the Committee's report highlights the role played by the UK in the creation of the Astana International Financial Centre, which uses English law to support businesses in Kazakhstan and the wider region. We are also encouraging Central Asian countries to play a full and active role in the WTO where they are members (Kazakhstan), and to accede where they are not (Uzbekistan).

41. The UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) supports developing countries' (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) integration into the global economy by creating stronger trade and investment partnerships and strengthening supply chains. The scheme offers one of the most generous sets of trading preferences of any country in the world. It reduces tariffs, cuts administrative burdens for small businesses and helps create jobs.

42. As noted in evidence that the FCDO submitted to the Inquiry, UK Export Finance (UKEF), the Government's Export Credit Agency, has a strong appetite to support projects and UK exporters in Central Asia, and is pursuing commercial opportunities across sectors including energy, mining, and infrastructure, for example:

- In Kazakhstan, UKEF has at least £4bn market risk appetite;
- In Turkmenistan, UKEF appetite is £2–3bn;
- In Uzbekistan, UKEF appetite is £2–3bn (subject to debt sustainable lending criteria);
- In Tajikistan, UKEF has a £1–£2bn market risk appetite (subject to a waiver by the IMF or World Bank for any transaction);
- In Kyrgyzstan, UKEF is considering support on a case-by-case basis (subject to debt sustainable lending criteria, a country review, and for foreign exchange-earning projects only).

Human rights and the environment

Conclusion/recommendation 9:

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

Partially Agree

43. Central Asia will be one of the regions of the world most affected by climate change and it is already under considerable water stress. We agree that consideration of the potential environmental impact resulting from the construction of the Qosh Tepa canal in northern Afghanistan is a key issue for both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The UK has offered assistance to the Uzbek Government as they seek to negotiate the equitable use of Amu Darya with the Turkmen Government and the Taliban. This offer was declined, the Uzbek Government being confident in its current trilateral negotiations; the British Embassy in Tashkent remains in close contact with Uzbekistan about the negotiations and we will review our offer as appropriate.

44. Separate from the negotiations over Qosh Tepa, we continue to engage with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to understand how they might mitigate impacts from the diversion of water from the Amu Darya, and encourage efforts to resolve the issue diplomatically. Water is a shared resource in Central Asia, and countries in the region must work together to resolve issues and ensure good management of resources. We are developing a Central Asia regional climate change adaptation and mitigation programme, which will include a focus on regional water and energy cooperation (further details below).

Conclusion/recommendation 10:

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

Partially Agree

45. We are preparing a new business case for a climate change adaptation and mitigation programme in Central Asia, with a focus on regional cooperation on water and energy, which will complement the UK's diplomatic engagement and regional convening power.

This business case will draw on World Bank Country Climate and Development Reports for Central Asia as well as wider analytical products where these are available. We are also exploring programme and policy options to address methane leakage in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan - following their announcement at COP28 that they would join the Global Methane Pledge - including through new UK global programmes to address methane emissions in development. We welcome the fact that other development partners, e.g. USAID, are also heavily engaged on these issues.

46. We will continue to work with other Government Departments leading the UK's international conservation work, such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and explore potential additional support to nature and biodiversity activities in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, in particular, has an important role to play in protecting the Great Steppe ecosystem - one of the largest grasslands in the world, home to unique species and part of the *Great Asian Flyway* for migratory birds.

Conclusion/recommendation 11.

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

Partially Agree

47. The UK Government closely monitors Chinese human rights violations in Xinjiang and members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang continue to suffer serious violations of their human rights by the authorities of the People's Republic of China. We note that the five Central Asian states did not sign a UK-led joint statement at the UN in October 2023 on the situation in Xinjiang, instead signing a separate statement offering support for China's actions. We will continue to raise the issue with Central Asian partners. We also work with UNHCR to encourage Central Asian governments to bring their asylum procedures in line with best international practice and the Conventions which some have signed.

Conclusion/recommendation 12.

The crackdown on human rights defenders as well as the repression of Pamiri culture and Ismaili religion in Gorno-Badakshan in Tajikistan is a particularly concerning example of human rights abuses by the Tajik Government. *We recommend that the Government supports the call of the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues for an impartial and transparent investigation according to international standards and takes steps to prevent tensions and escalation of violence in Gorno-Badakshan. It should raise this situation formally with the Tajik Government bilaterally and press them to implement recommendations to be made in the Universal Periodic Review follow-up report due in March 2024. We further recommend that the FCDO add Tajikistan to the list of priority countries included in its annual report on human rights. The Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan should be also considered for inclusion.*

Partially Agree

48. We continue to work closely with like-minded countries to lobby Tajikistan to improve its protection of human rights, not only in Gorno-Badakshan (GBAO) but across the country. The UK raised this issue in a statement at the OSCE in May 2022, calling for restraint, refraining from excessive use of force, incitement to violence and for a thorough investigation into recent events in GBAO. This statement was subsequently supported by the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues. The issue was also raised in our bilateral political dialogue with Tajikistan in March 2023. We will continue to raise Gorno-Badakshan at senior levels in the Tajik government.

49. We regularly review the countries included in the UK's Human Rights Priority Countries list. This list is generally in place for an extended period and has countries with both positive and negative trajectories. The FCDO is closely monitoring human rights developments in each of the five Central Asian countries and will continue to review the inclusion of Tajikistan.

Conclusion/recommendation 13.

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

Partially Agree

50. The UK Government remains committed to eradicating all forms of modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking (MSHT) in line with achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 by 2030. The UK works with international partners to reduce the risks for those most vulnerable, particularly women and children, and to ensure that victims and survivors are provided with the support they need to begin rebuilding their lives. The UK's international priorities on MSHT include eliminating forced labour in supply chains, tackling the worst forms of child labour, and ending the exploitation of women and girls.

51. We engage through bilateral and multilateral fora to find ways to tackle forced labour in global supply chains and ensure workers benefit from high labour standards domestically and internationally. In 2021, under the UK's G7 Presidency, G7 members committed to eradicate the use of all forms of forced labour from global supply chains. Under Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, commercial businesses who operate in the UK and have a turnover of £36m or more are required to report annually on the steps they have taken to prevent modern slavery in their operations and supply chains. This was landmark legislation at the time and the UK was the first country in the world to introduce such provisions.

52. The UK has consistently supported the UN Guiding Principles (UNGPs) on business and human rights, which are widely regarded as the authoritative international framework to steer practical action by Governments and businesses worldwide on this important agenda. In response to the UNGPs, the UK produced a National Action Plan (NAP). We are clear we expect all UK businesses to comply with all applicable laws; identify and

prevent human rights risks; and behave in line with the Guiding Principles - including in their management of supply chains here and overseas. The UK supports voluntary human rights due diligence approaches by our businesses to protect human rights and the environment across their operations and supply relationships, as steered by the UN Guiding Principles and the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises.

53. We have welcomed the steps taken in Uzbekistan to eradicate systemic forced labour in the cotton fields. We also fully support multilateral efforts, through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and others, to eliminate forced labour in Turkmenistan. The ILO recently visited Turkmenistan and is working closely with the Government of Turkmenistan. During the UN Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights, the UK recommended that Turkmenistan “introduce legislation which prohibits the use of forced labour and establishes preventative mechanisms and appropriate oversight structures, working closely with the ILO”.

Conclusion/recommendation 14.

Civil society organisations act as a bastion against totalitarianism and a counter to foreign disinformation. We welcome the UK Government’s support of civil society organisations in Central Asia. However, this support needs to be fit for purpose and accessible to those organisations that need it most. We recommend that the reporting requirements for civil society organisations receiving funds from the UK Government are amended so as to provide for an appropriate level of accountability needed and allow the maximum agency in their operations.

Partially Agree

54. We recognise the importance of supporting civil society organisations in the five Central Asian countries and aim to work flexibly to ensure that this support fosters greater sustainability and resilience within organisations and within wider civil society. In line with our intention - as laid out in the International Development Strategy - to take an increasingly locally-led approach, we will continue to look at how to improve our funding practices with local partners. This will include ensuring that we have robust but appropriate ways of measuring progress, whilst also safeguarding UK taxpayer investments. However, our approach must continue to be risk-based, with assurances in place consistent with a “do no harm” principle.

Conclusion/recommendation 15:

The situation for human rights, and the environment for human rights defenders, may be different in different Central Asian countries, but there is evidence of a negative trajectory in all of them. This is a situation which cannot be ignored in the UK’s bilateral relationships. We have not seen evidence to support the rhetoric that agreed universal human rights are at times at odds with cultural heritage. We welcome the work we saw in various Central Asian countries in which the FCDO is engaging effectively on important human rights issues. However, there is still much work to be done to bring consistency to the UK’s messaging on human rights in the region. We recommend that countries included in the Developing Countries Trading Scheme be rigorously assessed against qualifying criteria and that incentives be provided to adhere to them - wishful thinking and vague reference to convention bodies is not enough. The Government should be fully prepared to suspend trading arrangements with countries that

fail to meet the conditions and clearly communicate thresholds for this action. Industries closely connected to particular human rights abuses should receive specific attention. UK ambassadors should be key sources of information in this scrutiny. We recommend this action is coordinated with the EU and US.

Partially Agree

55. The UK monitors compliance with the requirements of the Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) on an ongoing basis using a range of sources including reports from international convention bodies, reports produced by international organisations and reporting from the FCDO's diplomatic network. Where countries systematically commit serious human and labour rights violations - and dialogue has failed to produce progress - the Government may vary or remove a country's trade preferences as a measure of last resort and once other channels have been exhausted. The UK advocates publicly (where appropriate) and privately on human rights across the region; working closely with likeminded partners. We are aware that we have to balance public statements on human rights with an approach to ensure we do no harm.

56. Any decisions to suspend preferences will be thoroughly assessed, bearing in mind the impact it could have on the most vulnerable and whether the suspension would impact the violation in question. The Government may consider the nature, scale, impact, frequency and pattern of violations. If trade preference suspensions are being considered, the Government is legally committed to a warning, assessment and suspension process including seeking representation from the beneficiary country. The Government may also use other mechanisms such as sanctions to target trade involving particular industries or individuals. Any decision to take action will be based on the UK's independent assessment procedures, but implementation of the decision will involve engagement and communication with a range of partners, including the EU and US.

Young people, education and soft power

Conclusion/recommendation 16:

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

a) Support the establishment of permanent offices for the British Council in Dushanbe and Bishkek—as recommended in the Committee's 1999 report. The British Council must be adequately resourced to take advantage of the opportunities presented to it in a part of the world transitioning from Russian to English as its second language of choice.

Partially Agree

57. We agree with the Committee on the value of education and the particular role which the UK can play in developing English language and Higher Education collaborations. The UK is a significant supporter of education, notably girls' education, including through our contribution of £10 million of UK ODA to the Global Partnership for Education.

58. The British Council is a key soft power asset – projecting UK influence overseas through its work in arts and culture, education and the English language. This was outlined in the Integrated Review and subsequent IR Refresh. The FCDO is providing £511m Grant-in-Aid funding (£396m ODA and £115m non-ODA) to the British Council for the Spending Review period 2022–25. The FCDO works with the British Council to agree high-level geographic and thematic grant-in-aid allocations. The FCDO will ensure it takes into account the Committee's views via this process, ensuring a balance of competing geographical priorities in the tough fiscal climate.

59. In an increasingly digital age, the British Council's impact should be judged by its operational – rather than its physical – presence. Across Central Asia, the British Council retains a physical presence in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while other countries in the region are able to access cultural engagement and teaching activities digitally, where this is possible.

60. The British Council does not judge opening further physical offices as the most cost-effective way of achieving impact in the Central Asian Republics. However, local staff resource in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (dependent on additional funding) would help to build relationships with key stakeholders, develop country insight and scope programme opportunities, working from Embassy platforms initially, or from partner institutions.

61. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the British Council offers grant-funded programmes in English, education and the arts and delivers a growing number of UK qualifications across both countries. Programmes include providing direct support to teachers of English through our Online Teacher Community, supporting transnational higher education, alumni network development, and support to the Creative Economy. The British Council delivers UK qualifications in Kyrgyzstan through an Independent Testing Centre and is exploring options for similar arrangements in Tajikistan.

62. Funding constraints across the British Council and FCDO mean that there are unrealised ambitions, including the ability to scale up existing work and respond to host government desires to raise levels of English language for young people entering the workforce, with a corresponding demand for significant upskilling of English teachers within a holistic framework of system reform. The British Council's 'Next Generation' research confirmed for Kazakhstan in 2024 on the attitudes and aspirations of young people can be used to inform future programme priorities.

b) *Galvanise its support of the creative sector in Central Asian countries by sending a high-level ministerial delegation to the World Conference on Creative Economy in Uzbekistan in 2024.*

Agree

63. The creative industries are an increasing government priority for both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Given the inclusion of UK creative economy specialists on the World Conference on Creative Economy (WCCE) steering committee, we agree that UK ministerial engagement at the conference in Uzbekistan in October 2024 is desirable.

64. British Council Uzbekistan plans to work with the Uzbekistan government's WCCE delivery partner, the Arts and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), to support international participation, share insights and help shape the programme. We also support Central Asia's creative sector via the British Council's Creative Economy programme which works with the next generation of artists and creative entrepreneurs. Its aim is to provide the research, tools, space and connections that creative communities need to flourish.

c) Expand the numbers of Chevening scholars from Central Asian countries initially to 40 per year by 2025, and better support the visa application process for students.

Partially Agree

65. We welcome the Committee's observations on the value of Chevening Scholarships in the region and the ambition to increase numbers of awards annually. The FCDO's allocated Chevening budget covers awards made across 140 countries and territories, and scholarships are highly prized around the world by individuals and as a tool for soft influence. We regularly engage with our extensive and active network of alumni across Central Asia.

66. The FCDO will support efforts to increase places across Central Asia by helping our five Embassies to seek new partnerships to supplement core funding and boost places. In addition, an internal review of the Chevening allocations process is being carried out and is due to conclude in mid-January 2024. We will keep the allocations process under review and commit to taking the recommendations of the Committee into account.

d) Enhance engagement with the Uzbek Government, and other governments where invited, on education reform.

Partially Agree

67. Supporting the Uzbek and Kazakh governments to achieve their education reform ambitions is a key part of the British Council's and FCDO's work in Central Asia. The FCDO welcomes that the UK education system is regarded as world-class, and is committed to working closely with the Uzbek, Kazakh and other governments in the region on education reform. In addition to British Council work in Uzbekistan, the UK also supports the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). The UK is contributing £10m between 2023–27 to improve the quality of and access to early childhood education.

68. In Uzbekistan, British Council work includes:

- Working with the Ministry of Pre-School and School Education (MPSE) to develop a strategy for public education development, advising on the national English curriculum delivery strategy, undertaking English Impact research

to identify and understand English language levels and skills of 16-year-old students - and collaborating on English proficiency tests for teachers that will develop capacity and offer new incentives;

- Providing support to the professional development of around 5,000 English teachers to date through its Online Teacher Community platform (OTC), which provides new Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses and offers professional exchange and networking opportunities regionally and internationally, as well as devising a new module on international assessment for Pre-Service teacher training in 18 universities in Uzbekistan;
- Co-chairing the national English Reform Steering Group aiming to coordinate the efforts of major English reform stakeholders. In 2023, the pilot CPD programme is working with schools across the country to develop CPD portfolios that work for English teachers in public schools and develop Good Practice Guidelines - ensuring schools are the hubs of CPD activities. The British Council also participates in the Local Education Group under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and was a signatory of the National Compact for Uzbekistan; and
- Working with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations (MHESI) to support quality assurance, university governance, internationalisation and inclusion in Higher Education and promoting the growing number of Trans-National Education (TNE) partnerships between the UK and Uzbekistan.

69. In Kazakhstan, British Council work includes:

- Work to inform Ministry of Enlightenment initiatives for the development of English teachers. A Working Group is preparing a package of recommendations for the Ministry to consider. This focuses on in-service and pre-service teacher development and is intended to facilitate wide-scale uptake of best practice development activities.
- Online Teacher Community platform, which continues to provide modular training courses and peer-support opportunities to teachers of English and has already reached some 3,500 teachers in Kazakhstan, around 70% of these from rural communities. This initiative was recently extended to pre-service teachers-in-training and the programme has been taken up formally, with full integration into the curriculum by 12 pedagogical universities.
- Supporting the internationalisation of Higher Education in Kazakhstan, a priority of President Tokayev and the Ministry of Higher Education. In particular, the British Council supports new university partnerships by joining selected UK and Kazakhstani universities together to establish dual degrees and Masters. Transnational education is at an early stage in Kazakhstan but there are already a number of universities offering English language degrees and dual degrees with UK and other universities, and the ambition of the Ministry of Higher Education is very high.

Conclusion/recommendation 17:

The Migrant Workers Scheme is highly effective, with benefits for the UK, the workers themselves and the societies they are returning to. We see huge potential for this to be expanded for agricultural workers and other trades. *We recommend that the Government reviews its ability to issue visas and provide more options, including application centres closer to the populations that require them. In order to enhance the benefits of the programme we suggest that the Government considers an additional element to provide vocational training as well as cultural experiences for those workers visiting the UK.*

Partially Agree

70. Seasonal labour has long been part of the UK's rural economy, and while DEFRA offers long term support to increase the use of domestic labour, the Government is clear that it also needs to support the horticulture sector.

71. The Government recognises the importance of a reliable source of seasonal labour for crop production, and that it is a key part of bringing in the harvest. A key source of seasonal labour is the Seasonal Worker visa route, which allows a pre-defined number of overseas workers to come to the UK for up to six months to support horticulture growers during peak production periods, whilst maintaining robust immigration control. We have seen interest in the Seasonal Worker visa route from possible applicants in Central Asia increase as options in other traditional markets, such as Russia, have become less appealing.

72. The UK Government does not operate a general migrant workers scheme. The Seasonal Worker Scheme is specifically for the UK Agricultural sector and currently provides up to 45,000 workers per year to harvest edible and ornamental produce - and a further 2,000 workers for poultry in the run up to Christmas. The goal of this immigration route is to provide the workers needed to enable the UK Agricultural sector to operate, and to support the food supply chain. However, we recognise the associated benefits of the scheme for workers recruited from Central Asia, which do include an increased understanding of the UK and the agricultural systems used here. This intangible benefit supports wider UK goals for the region.

73. The UK CSSF supports a project with the International Organisation for Migration which supports orientation courses run by the Labour Ministries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to prepare seasonal workers for their time in the UK. This includes basic information so that they understand their rights and responsibilities, as well as simple information about life and work in the UK. There are plans to expand this project next financial year, to increase the support provided to seasonal workers, both before travelling to the UK and in reintegrating when they return to their home countries.

74. The Government currently has no plans to expand or amend either the purpose or scope of the Seasonal Worker route. However, the FCDO will continue to monitor the impact of the scheme within Central Asia, considering the clear benefits of exposing ordinary citizens from Central Asia to life in the UK - and not least the favourable comparison with the conditions of migrant workers in Russia.

Security, drugs and violent extremism

Conclusion/recommendation 18:

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

Partially Agree

75. The UK is committed to upholding and promoting fundamental human rights in Central Asia, as elsewhere in the world. We work closely with civil society organisations across the region, including through the Integrated Security Fund (ISF), Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED), EECAD Resilience Programme (ERP) and other bilateral programmes, and will continue to prioritise the promotion of meaningful civil society activity and the meeting of human rights obligations.

76. We raise human rights issues regularly bilaterally, in multilateral fora and in coordination with like-minded partners. Human rights form a crucial part of our annual political discussions with Central Asian countries.

77. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are both on the UK's list of Human Rights Priority Countries (HRPCs). We review this list annually. We also support human rights and reforms through our programme funding. For example, we supported the revision of the labour code in Uzbekistan to better tackle gender-based discrimination. Our five Embassies in Central Asia maintain close links with local and international human rights NGOs and civil society actors, promoting good governance through our policy and programme work.

Conclusion/recommendation 19.

Russian disinformation is a threat to both the UK and its Central Asian partners. The insidious messages spread by the Russian state have a powerful impact on how the older generation views the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and the nature of UK engagement in their countries. It also poses a threat to the attempts of Central Asian states to protect their sovereignty, especially in areas with high numbers of ethnic Russians such as in northern Kazakhstan. There is potential for the UK Government to support the governments and civil society in the region in combatting such disinformation.

Agree

78. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2023 highlighted the importance of Central Asia to the Kremlin's ambition to restore Russia as a Eurasian and global power. Russia exploits its political, security, economic and societal ties and dependencies in the region and uses the predominance of Russian language traditional media and online media platforms to exert influence. Through these means, Russia is able to promote its views and spread disinformation to oppose progress on democracy, human rights, equality and societal openness.

79. The FCDO is actively responding to this challenge through policy and programmatic approaches. In support of the HMG Integrated Review Refresh's aim to "tackle the root causes of risks through upstream action overseas, including supporting others to build their own resilience", the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Directorate's Resilience Programme (ERP) is specifically aimed at supporting societal resilience to Russian interference in neighbouring countries and works with partner governments, media and civil society to achieve this. We are currently working with our Embassies and international partners in the region to extend the programme to Central Asia.

80. In 2022, the FCDO also established the Information Threats and Influence Directorate (ITID) to challenge disinformation, propaganda and information operations by state actors and to enhance our reach to key audiences globally. EECAD is working closely with ITID to prioritise and develop its activities in Europe and Central Asia on the basis of UK national security interests. This work is heavily focused on building insight into Russian, and others', information operations, supporting international coordination and responses, providing governmental capacity building and delivering strategic communications to counter hostile states' malign narratives.

Conclusion/recommendation 20:

The Government should proceed with caution when engaging with Central Asian governments on the issue of terrorism and military to military cooperation. The threat of terrorism is often used as an excuse for tightening the authoritarian grip of the state on its own people, opening the door for Chinese surveillance technology with the potential for misuse. Moreover, there is evidence that the threat of terrorism is used to encourage foreign investment in security infrastructure. We encourage the Government's focus to be on the offer of training to Central Asian armed forces, initially in English language and in the ethical dimensions of conflicts, with the offer of training from the UK's Islamic advisor to Central Asian militaries.

Partially Agree

81. Counter Terrorism cooperation and UK Defence Engagement are two separate strands of HMG's work in Central Asia. The UK Ministry of Defence's (MOD) engagement in Central Asia, for those states that are constitutionally able to do so, already includes support for the development of UN Peacekeeping capabilities. Examples include our work with Kazakhstan's Peace Operations Centre (KAZCENT); pre-deployment support for Kazakh UN Mission contingents; specialised training (also for Kyrgyz and Tajik personnel) that supports potential new missions; and a highly successful English language training programme which has trained more than 1300 students across the region over the last six years. However, since a contribution to UN Peacekeeping is not universal to all Central Asian Republics, UK MOD activity will necessarily include facilitating and encouraging wider regional security cooperation, as well as peace-building and conflict mitigation measures. UK Defence in Central Asia is already planning to continue a series of courses / symposia for regional military personnel on the Law of Armed Conflict and ethical dimensions of operations. The team will seek to involve the UK Armed Forces Islamic Religious Advisor in this event.

82. Separately, the UK has developed its counterterrorism relationships in Central Asia since 2021 to help mitigate against the risk of terrorism from Afghanistan. Any cooperation

is balanced against the risks identified by the Committee - and we are working with the relevant Ministries to enhance their human rights compliance, including lobbying for partner countries to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture.

Conclusion/recommendation 21.

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

Partially Agree

83. The illicit drug market costs UK society an estimated £22bn per year and is linked to around half of all homicides, with 95% of heroin thought to come from Afghanistan. In April 2022, the Taliban announced a ban on the use, cultivation, production and trafficking of narcotics in Afghanistan. We are working closely with like-minded partners to assess and monitor the implementation and effects of this announcement. No impact on UK drug markets has been identified to date.

84. UK agencies are also highly alert to the threat from synthetic drugs, including synthetic opioids like fentanyl. Along with law enforcement partners, the UK Government stands ready to respond to the threat from synthetic drugs. The Home Office is coordinating work across government to monitor and respond to the risk from synthetic opioids to the UK.

85. We are further strengthening the UK's domestic defences against money laundering through the second Economic Crime Plan and Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 (see above).

Trade and Investment

Conclusion/recommendation 22:

There are opportunities for increased trade and investment for UK companies in Central Asian states. Policies on investment should be clearer and calibrated to its efforts to curb corruption in-country and in the City of London, its ministerial engagement programme, its ethical principles and work to ensure the resilience of critical supply chains. Ministers should be alive to the opportunity to improve standards of corporate governance through encouraging listing of firms on the London Stock Exchange. We recommend that the Government produces a strategy for its approach to trade and investment in Central Asia. This strategy should be clearly communicated to the business community in the UK and relevant interlocutors in the region. We encourage the involvement of Central Asian civil society in any resulting arrangements to help ensure ethical standards are maintained.

Agree

86. We agree that it would be beneficial to further demonstrate the UK Government's approach and commitment to UK businesses and Host Governments in Central Asia, to continue to build confidence and relationships in the region, and therefore trade.

87. The UK's approach to trade and investment in Central Asia blends foreign policy objectives with trade targets, focusing on strategic campaigns on sectors that have high prosperity value, strategic tie-in, and opportunity to improve standards (taking UK strengths into account). Education, Critical Minerals, Infrastructure and Capital Markets are cornerstones of our approach to Central Asia.

88. In **Kazakhstan**, there is potential for collaboration on critical minerals, where we have an MoU, signed by the previous Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, to support Kazakh efforts to diversify supply chains and increase investment in production and processing capacity. We have agreed a Road Map of activities to take this MoU forward. We are deepening our higher education links - and signed an MoU between the Kazakh Ministry of Science and Education and UK Department for Business and Trade. The UK remains a top 10 investor in Kazakhstan with total investments over £16 billion. In 2022 alone, the UK invested almost £550m, and overall trade volumes reached £2.7bn.

89. In **Uzbekistan**, Lord Offord, DBT Minister for Exports, visited from 21 to 24 August to boost economic ties and met Ministers from the Ministry of Investment and Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Four Uzbek Deputy Ministers covering Trade, Education, Transport and Digital Technology visited the UK for the 27th Uzbek British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC) on 28 and 29 November, to speak to British businesses about opportunities to expand trade. During UBTIC, Lord Offord signed a bilateral Trade Plan with his counterpart, Deputy Minister Abidov, outlining how we will work together to expand trade in the coming year. The UK financial sector is supporting Uzbekistan's privatisation of some 20 State Owned Enterprises. We are scoping opportunities in major infrastructure projects in Uzbekistan with UKEF. UK businesses are engaged with Uzbekistan's mining sector and UK education institutions are exploring opportunities to expand transnational education partnerships. Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Uzbekistan was £430 million in the four quarters to the end of Q2 2023.

90. In **Kyrgyzstan**, our efforts to support UK companies seeking opportunities in the mining sector were amplified during Prime Minister Japarov's visit to the UK in November. As part of the visit, an MoU was signed on critical minerals with the British Geological Survey and a significant infrastructure deal was signed with a UK company. In **Turkmenistan**, we are supporting UK companies hoping to secure large deals in water infrastructure. In **Tajikistan**, British companies are open to trade opportunities, including in green transition technologies and infrastructure.

Conclusion/recommendation 23:

The investment environment in Central Asian states is still far from attractive to many would-be investors. There is much more the UK Government could do to improve the situation. *We recommend that capacity building for civil servants and practical assistance in policy and legislation formulation be a central offer made by the UK to Central Asian states. This should be calibrated to complement UK initiatives to support reforms to regional trading infrastructure and policies.*

Partially Agree

91. The UK's Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED) programming supports improvements to the business environment, including through support to

e-commerce to promote Central Asian (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) horticulture products to global markets and SMEs' access to global e-marketplaces, as well as supporting the reform of State-Owned Enterprises in Uzbekistan.

92. DBT also provides targeted, non-ODA support to help Central Asian countries address areas of regulation or process which are discouraging international businesses and investors. In addition to technical barriers to investment, lack of awareness of the opportunities in Central Asia among UK businesses remains a key barrier to investment and exports. DBT will continue its work to promote opportunities in this region.

93. We also work closely with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and international partners to deliver reform, prosperity and stability in the region.

Conclusion

Conclusion/recommendation 24:

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

Partially Agree

94. The Government is committed to greater engagement with Central Asia across the spectrum of HMG equities. We agree on the value of senior Ministerial engagement with Central Asian counterparts and have set out how senior Ministerial engagement has increased significantly in the past year. We are exploring further opportunities for senior Ministerial engagement in early 2024, including through both inward and outward visits.

Conclusion/recommendation 25:

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

Partially Agree

95. The UK's ambition and effort - both in terms of resource and senior engagement—in building deeper bilateral relationships in Central Asia is on a positive trajectory. Ministerial engagement has increased. Our footprint across the region and in London has expanded significantly in recent years, with increasing numbers of UK-based staff in the region and in the FCDO's Eastern Europe and Central Asia Directorate, to reflect the bolder approach that we are taking in Central Asia.

96. Our deepening and broadening engagement with the Central Asian countries also allows us to broach topics openly and frankly, as we do with other partners. We regularly

raise issues such as human rights and sanctions circumvention in private bilateral discussions, as well as through multilateral channels such as the Universal Periodic Review process in the UN Human Rights Council, and the OSCE—or through targeted visits such as those outlined above on sanctions.

Conclusion/recommendation 26:

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

Agree

97. Recent history in Central Asia has shown that the region can be subject to high levels of instability, whether as a result of severe weather conditions, overspill effects of conflicts elsewhere in the region, or domestically driven political shocks. For this reason, the UK maintains a high-level regional strategy which defines core priorities for our work in Central Asia. The current strategy was intended to cover a five year period; this period has seen huge global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (and its resulting economic consequences for both the UK and the countries of the region) and also conflicts which have had major repercussions for the region, whether Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine or events in Afghanistan. Given these significant shifts, we are updating this strategy to reflect current realities and to enable us to make clear choices which benefit the interests of the UK in the region. We recognise, in particular, the challenges that the economic situation has brought, and the consequences this has had for the stability and predictability of our programme spend for the region, and we are working to address this.

98. Our investment in recent years in our relationships in Central Asia at all levels – with states and also with civil society and the wider public – has increased the profile of the UK and leaves us well positioned to respond to the changing circumstances across the region.

Conclusion/recommendation 27:

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

[Addressed below with 28]

Conclusion/recommendation 28:

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

Partially Agree (to 27 and 28)

99. Human rights and governance are vital elements of the UK's work in Central Asia. Both in public and in private we are working to help Central Asian institutions strengthen fundamental rights and freedoms for citizens. We support the development of civil society to effectively hold governments to account. Doing so will enable these countries to strengthen their own resilience and reduce their vulnerability to external and internal pressures.

100. Our Embassies in Central Asia, where feasible, maintain close links with local and international human rights NGOs and civil society actors, promoting good governance through our policy and programme work. We regularly raise human rights concerns with the governments of the region and are working to develop stronger inter-parliamentary exchanges as we seek to strengthen the role of parliaments around the region and share UK best practice.

101. We also work through multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe, which aims to embed human rights in legislation, institutions and practice - and coordinate our lobbying efforts with like-minded partners such as the EU, US, Germany and France. Encouraging progress on reform is a key message in our diplomatic engagement. We regularly raise cases of corruption, the vulnerability of electoral processes, independence of the judiciary, freedom of assembly and other restrictions on civil society, and freedom of expression, including media freedom.

102. Our work on reform extends beyond governmental engagement. The UK supports civil society and independent media in each country. We work closely with international partners and other international actors to encourage reform and address violations when they arise. The OSCE also plays a role in encouraging these countries to adopt higher standards of human rights. As described above, we have cooperation on economic reforms with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via the Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED) programme, which will be extended to Kazakhstan in 2023/24.

103. Corruption remains a substantial risk across the region. The Central Asian states' records on governance and meeting international democratic standards have also shown slow progress, as election monitoring reports from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have illustrated.

104. The UK has notable interests in extractive industries in Central Asia, but our prosperity interests in this region increasingly extend beyond fossil fuels. In Kazakhstan, for example, we are focusing on sectors including critical minerals and education. Inclusive economic development, with a focus on broad based private sector growth in a

business-friendly regulatory environment, is a vital ingredient for the long-term resilience of these countries. Likewise, economic diversification and access to international markets will increase regional prosperity and resilience.

ANNEX A – Table of key UK Ministerial Engagement - December 2023 – July 2021

Date	Country	Engagement
December 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	Foreign Secretary call with Kazakh Foreign Minister Nurtleu
	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty co-hosts 5th UK-Uzbekistan Political Dialogue with Deputy Foreign Minister Usmanov
November 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	DBT Minister Ghani visit to Astana, Kazakhstan for 10th UK-Kazakh Intergovernmental Commission and meeting with President Tokayev
	KYRGYZSTAN	Kyrgyz Prime Minister Japarov visit to the UK and meeting with Foreign Secretary and DBT Minister of State Ghani
	UZBEKISTAN	27th Uzbekistan British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC) in London hosted by DBT Minister for Exports Lord Offord
	UZBEKISTAN	Foreign Secretary meeting with Uzbek Foreign Minister Saidov at OSCE Ministerial, Skopje
	TURKMENISTAN	Baroness Nicholson Prime Minister's Trade Envoy meeting with Batyr Atdayev, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers at the Turkmenistan Investment and Development Conference
October 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty visit to Kazakhstan for annual Strategic Dialogue with Deputy Foreign Minister Vassilenko
September 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	Minister for Armed Forces James Heappey visit with meetings including the Kazakh Deputy Defence Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister, and Uzbek Minister for Defence and Secretary of the National Security Council
	UZBEKISTAN	
August 2023	UZBEKISTAN	DBT Minister for Exports Lord Offord visit to Uzbekistan

Date	Country	Engagement
July 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	DBT Minister of State Minister Ghani address to Kazakhstan-British Business Forum, London
	UZBEKISTAN	Uzbek Foreign Minister Saidov visit to UK, including meetings with the previous Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, Security Minister Tom Tugendhat and DBT Minister Earl of Minto.
	TURKMENISTAN TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty visit to Central Asia, including meetings with the Turkmen Foreign Minister, Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Deputy Prime Minister, and representatives from the UN and EBRD in Ashgabat; and the Tajik Deputy Prime Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister, Commander of the Border Guard and civil society in Dushanbe.
June 2023	TURKMENISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty call with Turkmen Ambassador Yazmurat Seryaev.
	KAZAKHSTAN UZBEKISTAN KYRGYZSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty visit to Central Asia, including meetings with Kyrgyz Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Kazakh business leaders and civil society representatives, and Uzbek senior officials
	KAZAKHSTAN UZBEKISTAN KYRGYZSTAN TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty breakfast for Central Asian Ambassadors, London
	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Goldsmith meeting with Tajik Ambassador Rukhshona Emomali
	UZBEKISTAN	DBT Minister for Exports Lord Offord meeting with Uzbek Ambassador to the UK
May 2023	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad meeting with Uzbek Special Representative for Afghanistan Ismatullah Irgashev
	TURKMENISTAN	Turkmen President Serdar Burdimuhamedov and Foreign Minister Rasit Meredov attended HMTK's Coronation

Date	Country	Engagement
April 2023	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad meeting with Sadiq Safoyev, First Deputy Chairman of the Uzbek Parliament
March 2023	KAZAKHSTAN UZBEKISTAN KYRGYZSTAN TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty met the Kazakh Deputy Minister of National Economy, Uzbek First Deputy Minister of Energy, Kyrgyz Minister of Energy and Tajik Deputy Prime Minister in London.
	KAZAKHSTAN	Foreign Secretary visit to Astana, including meetings with President Tokayev, Prime Minister Smailov and Deputy Foreign Minister Vassilenko.
	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty met Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister Sharaf SHERALIZODA at the UK-Tajik Political Dialogue
	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Goldsmith met Tajik Energy Minister Jumah in margins of UN Water Conference, New York
	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty call with Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Gayrat Fazilov
February – March 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	Baroness Nicholson, PM's Trade Envoy visit to Kazakhstan - met Trade Ministers and key trade contacts
February 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	DBT Minister for Investment Lord Johnson, meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Aidarov at the UK-Kazakh Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Investment, London.
January 2023	KAZAKHSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty meeting with Special Representative of the President of Kazakhstan for International Cooperation Erzhan Kazykhan during inward visit to UK

Date	Country	Engagement
December 2022	KAZAKHSTAN	Previous Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty meeting with Foreign Minister Tileuberdi and Deputy Foreign Minister Vassilenko during visit to London for the UK-Kazakh Strategic Dialogue.
	KAZAKHSTAN	PM Trade Envoy Baroness Nicholson meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi during UK-Kazakh Strategic Dialogue
	KYRGYZSTAN	Visit of Kyrgyz Deputy Prime Minister Baisalov to UK, including meeting with FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty
	KAZAKHSTAN TAJIKISTAN UZBEKISTAN	Previous Foreign Secretary James Cleverly meeting with former Kazakh Foreign Minister Tileuberdi, Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin and Uzbek former Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov in margins of OSCE Ministerial, Poland
November 2022	KAZAKHSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty meeting with Kazakh Ambassador Ilyassov
	KYRGYZSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty meeting with Kyrgyz Ambassador Djusupov
October 2022	KAZAKHSTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Leo Docherty call with Kazakh First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Rakhmetullin
April 2022	UZBEKISTAN	Minister for the Armed Forces James Heapey met Uzbek Ambassador to the UK Said Rustamov
March 2022	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad meeting with Uzbek Ambassador to the UK Said Rustamov
January 2022	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad meeting with Tajik Ambassador to the UK Rukhsona Emomali

Date	Country	Engagement
December 2021	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister for Europe Wendy Morton call with Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Fazilov
	UZBEKISTAN	Meeting between FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad and Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Fazilov in London during UK-Uzbek political dialogue
September 2021	KAZAKHSTAN UZBEKISTAN	Minister for Armed Forces James Heapey visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, with meetings including Kazakh Defence Minister Bektanov, Uzbek Defence Minister Kurbinov, and Uzbek Deputy Speaker Sadiq Safojev.
	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad call with Tajik Foreign Minister Muhridin
	UZBEKISTAN	Previous Foreign Secretary Liz Truss call to Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov
	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad call to Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Fazilov
	UZBEKISTAN TAJIKISTAN	Visit by FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad, with meetings including Uzbek Deputy Prime Minister Sardor Umurzakov, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, Uzbek Minister of Justice Ruslanbek Davletov, Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister Muzaffar Huseynzoda
August 2021	TAJIKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad call to Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister Salim
	UZBEKISTAN	FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad call to Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov
July 2021	UZBEKISTAN	Visit by FCDO Minister of State Lord Ahmad to Uzbekistan, for the South Asia Connectivity Conference. Meetings with Special Representative for Afghanistan Ismatillah Irgashev, Foreign Minister Kamilov, Justice Minister Davletov.