

Written evidence submitted by Sophie Ibbotson (ECA0002)

- What are the key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade and what implications do these have for UK foreign policy?
1. The UK needs to examine the Central Asian republics individually as well as collectively: although there are some regional similarities, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are both developing rapidly and now have much in common with states in the Balkans and Caucasus in terms of their current development status and political and economic trajectory; the challenges they face are very different to those in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, which by many metrics are failed states with few immediate prospects for improvement. Although a regional foreign policy strategy is helpful, there does need to be a sub-strategy for each country.
 2. Outdated and inadequate infrastructure is a challenge across the region. Extreme cold weather this winter highlighted the need to upgrade power generation and transmission, including in urban areas; but beyond this there are still large areas without mains electricity, drinking water, and sanitation, and which are poorly served by transport and communications infrastructure. International organisations such as the World Bank and Asia Development Bank have undertaken needs assessments and, in some cases, prepared master plans, but significant public and private sector investment is required to implement the projects. Large infrastructure projects in the region are also vulnerable to corruption — often at a state level — which deters investors. There are opportunities here for British companies, however, so long as they are given adequate support and export guarantees.
 3. All of the republics have young populations and are affected by high unemployment. Those who are in work are often underemployed and poorly paid. This pushes outward migration, causing a brain drain, social problems, and an over reliance on remittances from migrant workers, many of whom are in informal employment in Kazakhstan and Russia. The UK's seasonal worker visa has been popular in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as the wages and conditions are better than elsewhere. Increasing the worker quotas would be popular locally, as would making it easier to apply for an get UK visit, work, and study visas.
 4. Governance varies significantly between the countries and between their respective government ministries and institutions, but generally falls far short of what is required to run effective, democratic states. Corruption (including nepotism) is high; structures and processes are often not fit for purpose; and there is a lack of capacity and expertise. Donor-funded consultants provide copious strategy documents and recommendations which are not implemented, either due to lack of resources or failure to engage the necessary stakeholders in their vision. The UK can support capacity building in the public sector, but any such commitment needs to be well-targeted, long-term, and adequately funded if it is to have a quantifiable impact.
 5. Human rights are poorly understood and selectively observed. Whilst Uzbekistan has made some progress regarding religious freedom and forced labour, which is to be commended, there have been recent clamp-downs across Central Asia on political opposition and the press. Protests have been violently suppressed, allegations of torture are common, gender-based violence is a major problem, elections are not free and fair, and those accused of crimes do not receive fair trials. Previous attempts to link foreign investment or other forms of support with respect for human rights have been inconsistent, and in some case left the UK and its European allies open to allegations of hypocrisy.

- What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?
6. Despite its low levels of investment in Central Asia, the UK is nevertheless viewed by regional governments as a prestige partner. Economically, there are opportunities for UK businesses in education, financial services, and commercial law, as well as infrastructure, energy, and IT, and government support in these sectors would be welcome, too. High profile collaborations would increase political capital.
 7. It is unlikely that the UK can form meaningful partnerships on issues relating to security, organised crime, or human rights. Although there may be some areas of mutual interest in these topics, the UK does not have sufficient credibility or resources to contribute in a meaningful way, so efforts are best deployed in other areas.
 8. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan the regimes appear stable and commercial and political partnerships are, relatively speaking, low risk. That is not the case in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, where direct partnerships expose the UK to high levels of reputational and financial risk. The most effective way to de-risk partnerships is to engage in multilateral rather than bilateral partnerships, with third parties such as the EU and USA who have bigger budgets and more local influence.
- Where do the relationships between Central Asian states and neighbouring countries, including the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK foreign policy, and where do they provide opportunities?
9. Once the dominant economic and political power in Central Asia, Russia's influence has declined markedly over the past decade, and that decline has accelerated in the past 12 months since the invasion of Ukraine. That said, Russia is still an important regional stakeholder, with large numbers of military bases, substantial investments, and a dominant presence in organisations such as the CSTO and SCO. All the Central Asian republics need a friendly diplomatic relationship with Russia because they are dependent economically on the remittances flow generated by migrant workers. This is the reason why the republics have typically abstained from voting on UN resolutions against Russia this year.
 10. International sanctions against Russia, and the threat of secondary sanctions against countries working too closely with Russia, do provide opportunities for the UK. Supply chains have been interrupted, and Central Asian governments and businesses can no longer rely on Russian-owned banks, payment providers, digital technologies, etc. The UK can promote and supply replacement credit lines, suppliers and solutions, and provide exporters with guarantees.
 11. The decline in the Russian economy, and consequently reduced demand for migrant workers, is also an opportunity for the UK. In addition to expanding the existing recruitment of seasonal agricultural workers, the UK could also look to Central Asia for staffing other sectors experiencing worker shortages, including social care and construction. This would be mutually beneficial economically and would strengthen diplomatic relationships without financial investment.
 12. China is the biggest threat to the status quo in Central Asia; its influence is huge and growing, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where there is a lack of transparency about the size and terms of past investment deals, and where the poor investment climate leaves the governments with little choice but to rely on China. The UK cannot expect to counterbalance Chinese influence alone; the only way to do so is partnering with European and US allies to provide a viable alternative to Chinese investment, trade, aid, and security guarantees.

13. China's persecution of Muslims and ethnic minorities, in particular in Xinjiang, has largely been ignored by Central Asia's governments due to their economic dependence on China and a desire to maintain warm diplomatic relationships with Beijing. However, this issue is of concern to the general public, especially in Kazakhstan, and this provides an opportunity for the UK to champion human rights and build popular support. This requires speaking out against extraditions to China and providing safe routes for asylum seekers.
 - What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?
14. The British Council and the BBC are the two most effective soft power tools the UK has in Central Asia. They are highly respected by the regional governments, international organisations, and citizens alike, and offer exceptional value for money. In both cases, however, they are under-resourced, which means they are unable to fulfil their potential; and, as concerning, makes it look as if the UK government does not recognise their importance, or does not really care about investing in Central Asia where it matters.
15. British education is also highly regarded and is a means by which the UK can influence future generations of leaders in Central Asia. In particular I wish to highlight the work of the British Council in supporting English language curriculum development and teacher training; Cambridge Partnership for Education's role in the foundation of Presidential Schools in Uzbekistan; Chevening scholarships, which are hugely sought-after; and regional campuses / sister institutions run in Central Asia by the likes of Westminster University and Haileybury. Anything the UK can do to widen access to British educational opportunities, in Central Asia or in the UK, will be most welcome.
 - What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?
16. Leaving the EU has been catastrophic for the UK's reputation and influence in Central Asia. At best, Brexit is viewed as incomprehensible but possibly part of a bigger plan no one has yet been told about; at worst, we are a laughing stock. The behaviour of Boris Johnson and other high-profile government figures has also undermined the UK's credibility, especially when preaching about rules-based order. It will take significant time, money, and effort to restore respect.
17. The UK needs to identify a small number of multilateral institutions which already have a long track record and positive reputation in Central Asia, and to commit to working closely with them for an extended period (at least 10 years). These institutions might include the World Bank, EBRD, the World Health Organisation, and the EU. As the UK is able and willing only to invest very limited resources in Central Asia, efforts need to be focused on activities where the UK can add value through expertise, there is already stakeholder interest and traction, and we can deliver a positive, tangible outcome.
18. In 2022, Uzbekistan reaffirmed its commitment to WTO accession. The UK would be well placed to support Uzbekistan in preparing its bid and navigating accession negotiations.
19. Uzbekistan hosts >38,000 stateless persons (the largest number in Central Asia), and has stated its ambition to join and implement the UN Refugee and Statelessness Conventions. UNHCR supports this ambition, and the UK should do likewise. At the same time, an estimated 10,000 Afghan refugees are in bureaucratic limbo in Tajikistan, awaiting settlement in third countries. The UK can work closely with Tajikistan in UNHCR and other relevant multilateral institutions to accelerate these

refugees' resettlement, and at the same time should set a positive example by improving and implementing its own resettlement programmes. The UK is already a signatory to the Refugee Convention and needs to be seen to be implementing both the spirit and the letter of that convention if it is to foster respect for rules-based international order.

February 2023