

Written evidence submitted by Mr Charles Garrett (ECA0005)

Introduction

I am a former British ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. I left HM Diplomatic Service in February 2023 having served as HMA Bishkek from July 2019 to October 2022. Before my posting to Bishkek, I served as HM Ambassador to Skopje and in a range of diplomatic postings in Cyprus, Hong Kong, Switzerland and Taiwan, as well as in King Charles Street.

I am submitting this evidence in my private capacity. I am submitting it in the hope that my recent perspective can contribute to this important inquiry and help the Committee make the right recommendations.

While sharing much of the history that has shaped them, the five Central Asian states differ greatly from each other. My evidence focuses on Kyrgyzstan, but some of it has wider relevance in the region. It is entirely unclassified.

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?

The key challenges centre on stability, security and the changing geopolitical environment.

Instability is a chronic threat. In Kyrgyzstan, popular protests unseated the president in 2005, 2010 and 2020. In 2010 around 100 protestors were shot dead by the security forces and scores were killed in subsequent ethnic violence. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have both also seen big public protests in the last 18 months with many killed.

A range of factors feed this instability. Endemic corruption, weak or non-existent democratic representation, repressive government control – all these generate anger in themselves and sharpen popular resentment at continuing economic hardship and inequality.

Regional security is also under threat from several directions. Serious armed conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border has twice broken out in the last two years with many fatalities on each side. There is little sign that the leadership of either side is equipped or genuinely minded to address the root causes; and the chances of repeat conflict are high. Changes in Afghanistan since August 2021 continue to present risk, even if the worst early fears have not been realised. The risk of increasing Islamist extremism, although not easy to pinpoint, remains. With the exception of a brief intervention in the Kazakh protests in January 2022, the main piece of security architecture in the region, the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation, has little credibility after ineffective or non-existent responses to successive security challenges (Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflicts, war between Armenia and Azerbaijan). And Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine has further reduced Moscow's credibility and ability to address security challenges in the region.

Climate change is introducing new, and exacerbating existing, security threats. Average temperature rises in landlocked Central Asia are estimated to be twice what other regions face because of global warming. Melting glaciers threaten the reliability of the water supply, adding to tension in border regions where recent conflicts have been triggered by disagreements over water management.

The changing geopolitical landscape presents both challenge and opportunity. Since independence these countries have, to a greater or lesser degree, seen Moscow as their main strategic partner. They have deeply rooted economic, political, social, institutional and cultural links and dependencies

on Russia, all of which exert a powerful influence over decision-making in Central Asia. But the disruption caused by Moscow's renewed invasion of Ukraine casts significant doubt over the reliability of those strategic links. Growing economic relationships with China may take up some of the slack. But the disruption has prompted Kyrgyzstan (and perhaps some of the other CA5) to look more seriously at developing a multi-vector foreign policy, in other words strengthening bilateral relationships with Turkey, the US, the UK and others so as to reduce reliance on Moscow and Beijing.

All these broad challenges are tied up with, and fed by, economic challenges. Kyrgyzstan (and other CA5 states) was already in a precarious economic situation because of global post-Covid economic pressures. These pressures have been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. And CA countries could yet be hit harder: in Kyrgyzstan, for example, around 35% of GDP comes from migrant workers' remittances from Russia.

What are the implications of this for UK foreign policy? In Kyrgyzstan there is appetite for more collaboration over some of these challenges. The government is keen for us to do more to build on our successful support for development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, for example in the creative industries where we have a strong track record. We should expand our programme support in this direction. The Kyrgyz would also welcome more collaboration on climate change following our successful joint work preparing President Japarov's delegation for COP26 where they engaged actively and effectively. Collaboration on climate change not only helps achieve UK climate objectives; it also helps strengthen wider Kyrgyz engagement in the rules-based international system. We could do more to engage directly on Afghanistan. We should also look at how we might help the Kyrgyz government prepare, should it win election to the UN Security Council as currently planned.

Success in this requires, in my view:

- More attention from senior figures in HMG, both official and ministerial.
- More resources in programme budgets. Our effort in CA has suffered in the readjustment after the FCO-DfID merger. For example, those changes left Central Asia, a key region for climate change work, out of major British climate programmes.
- A structure for regular senior-level engagement. Many international partners (the US, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, India) engage with the region through "CA5+1" meetings. These can be more efficient and impactful than bilateral meetings, and can also have the added bonus of fostering collaboration by bringing the region together. The UK does not have this structure.
- Greater collaboration with like-minded. Several democratic partners (notably the US, the EU, Japan, South Korea, Switzerland) share our view of risks and opportunities in CA. There is some of this already; but there is room to develop it.

What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with CA states in areas of mutual interest?

As suggested above, the opportunities include:

- Stronger potential contribution to the UK's Russia strategy.
- Greater positive impact on global challenges like climate change.
- Strengthening practical CA5 engagement with the RBIS. This is good as a general aim; even better if it encourages CA5 positions which support (or don't oppose) British positions.

- Possibly slowing the momentum behind the emergence of structures like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
- Reducing the risk of instability and insecurity by addressing their economic and social drivers.
- Encouraging the CA5 not to leave all their eggs in the Russian and Chinese baskets.
- Trade and investment, mostly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan but not only.

The only notable risk is probably the opportunity risk (if the UK devotes more time and resources to CA, does another region/relationship lose out?). But the current level of resourcing for UK work in CA is so modest, a significant increase would barely impact other regional efforts.

Where do the relationships between CA states and neighbouring countries, including the PRC and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK foreign policy, and where do they provide opportunities?

Challenges and opportunities from the relationship with China are relatively small. For example, high levels of sovereign debt owed to Beijing could exacerbate instability drivers. On the plus side, Chinese investment in infrastructure projects (like the China-Kyrgyz-Uzbek rail link) may potentially offer opportunities for British business.

The close relationship with Russia has offered some benefit, for example in economic development or in reducing the risk of instability. But that benefit has become significantly less clear since February 2022. The challenge, which is much greater than the opportunity, is that the relationship ties Kyrgyz and other CA5 decision-making much more closely to Moscow's policies (eg in the UN votes over Ukraine).

There is risk in the continuing development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which brings the CA5 together with China, Russia, India and others. That risk lies in the SCO continuing to develop into some sort of (partial) alternative to existing, values-based international organisations.

What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in CA states?

In short, not nearly as much as it could. Soft power offers the most fertile ground for influencing the development of CA5 states. And the UK, enjoying a unique reputation in many ways, is well placed to do this. Sadly, in recent years resources for soft power influence in CA have been cut. What more could we be doing?

- British support for the development of the creative industries in Kyrgyzstan has been one of our most successful programmes in Kyrgyzstan. Collaborating with globally recognised figures from the creative sector like Dr Martin Smith, we have secured Kyrgyz government support for new legislation and sectoral development. The potential in Kyrgyzstan is enormous. And the importance of this goes well beyond economic development: employment in this sector is more likely to benefit rural populations, women, the disabled and others often excluded from work opportunities; and the SMEs created through sectoral growth are often powerful advocates for the rule of law. Building on this, across CA, would be highly effective use of UK resources.
- Creative Central Asia was a programme started by the British Council some five or six years ago. It put the UK at the centre of developing national and regional collaboration in the creative industries and has been credited with catalysing the development of the sector. It fell victim to the British Council's pandemic-related difficulties. Reinstating this initiative would be welcomed across the region.

- Active official engagement in preparing for the World Conference on Creative Economy, the next iteration of which will be held in Uzbekistan, and then ministerial involvement at the event, would reinforce the UK's position at the heart of developing Central Asia's creative industries.
- Support for English language tuition. Most of the CA5's populations speak Russian as either a mother tongue or as a second language. Without English, their access to web-based information is almost wholly limited to Russian or Russia-influenced sources. With English, they can access a vast range of more objective sources. English is also important for economic development. We should be doing much more than the currently very limited (mostly through MOD funding) offer of English tuition.
- University places. Chevening is immensely influential as a programme, but limited in CA. Doubling the number of places available would significantly extend our ability to shape the future of these countries.
- Building on existing work to promote UK-based professional services, for example leveraging widespread respect for English law (eg through the Astana International Financial Centre) and expanding links with UK financial services (eg in the region's nascent Islamic finance sector).
- The newly established Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme. Some 3000 places were available in 2022 to Kyrgyz workers. I believe that is being increased for 2023. Continued expansion of this scheme would bring additional soft power influence as well as economic benefit and (albeit marginally) reduced dependence on the Russian economy.

What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with CA states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?

As I mentioned earlier, collaboration on concrete issues like climate change works well. One reason the Kyrgyz welcomed our pre-COP26 engagement was that the subject is less difficult for them than human-rights-related issues which are the general choice of western partners. We shouldn't avoid difficult subjects (eg the Kyrgyz failure to live up to obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities); but successful collaboration on less difficult subjects can build trust.

The Kyrgyz are bidding for a place on the UNSC in 2027-28. Helping them prepare may present an opportunity to encourage positive engagement in the RBIS.

Two visits (2019 and 2022) by HMG's UN Reform team to Bishkek showed that the Kyrgyz are open to engagement on this subject. We could do more with them and with the other CA5 states.

Multilateral efforts would be well suited to mutually beneficial, senior-level discussion with the Kyrgyz and other CA5 capitals through the CA5+UK structure I argue for above.

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