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I am submitting the evidence because I feel the UK should have a more provocative in the region for security, safety and global peace.

Geographically, the region sits at the heart of Eurasia and, historically, made up half of the ancient Silk Route that made Central Asia strategic. It served as a pivot for geopolitical transformations within the world island. After the breakup of the former Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, also known as Central Asian Republics (CARs), became independent. Added to it, natural resources: gas in Turkmenistan; oil, gas and uranium in Kazakhstan; uranium and gas in Uzbekistan; hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan added fierce competition among global powers called "New Great Game". Central Asia became a global chessboard due to the intense competition

between the global powers in which Russia and China came together to have a firm grip over the region.

After independence, Central Asian republics urgently needed loans and investments to jumpstart their economies. However, they fell short of the World Bank and IMF's requirements, especially in human rights and the rule of law. CARs also remained autocratic following their independence and shared political, ideological and economic legacies with the former Soviet Union. Additionally, the multilateral lending agencies did not view them as part of the Global South, which was deemed a priority for assistance until recently.

Russia, for its part, is focused on not letting the CAR region—its "backyard"—be drawn close to Europe and America by taking the lead in regional military affairs and security of the region. China, on the other hand, took advantage of the situation for its hegemonic pursuits and filled up the gap carefully via loans without conditions. While Russia assumed leadership in the region in security matters while China led in economic relations and the exploitation of hydrocarbons. China has perhaps the most prominent economic footprint in the CARs region, principally owing to its massive project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing also regarded CARs as vital for its security in Xinjiang and as a gateway to the markets of Eurasia, Europe and Russia. Because the rise pro-Uyghur sentiments in CARs – given their proximity to the mainland – was a matter of grave concern for China, and after 2001, Beijing labelled America's heightened activities in CARs as "U.S.'s Grand Strategy for global domination" to "contain the rise of China".

The establishment of the second Taliban regime in Afghanistan and rising terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region can have security implications for Central Asia. During the first Taliban regime, terror outfits like Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) came into existence. These terror outfits became active in Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Given the fragile borders with Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban-2 will create a potential refugee crisis, growth in drug trafficking and terror acts with the growth of radicalisation. Though Central Asia has experienced these threats in the past, they can use them for increased government control of the society and civil society groups in the region.

Previously, Russia was seen as a source of stability, security, and territorial integrity in the Central Asian region, which was seen in January 2022 with the Russian-led CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan after protests

broke out. Russia-Ukraine War and sanctions on Moscow have prevented European goods from reaching CARs via Russia, and the resource-rich CARs have lost access to their export markets in the West.

Another challenge CARs face is internal fault lines like border disputes between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that have displaced populations in lakhs. Ethnic tensions are rising within the Central Asian state, as seen in Uzbekistan recently. Corruption, human rights violations, no rule of law and a greater inclination towards authoritarianism can add to the region's fault lines.

The security issues emanating from Afghanistan, political turbulence within and from Russia, and China's growing hegemony in the coming decade will be perceived differently. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has made the rulers of CARs believe that the UK and EU are unreliable partners compared to Russia and China. However, the Russian aggression in Ukraine severely impacted the economies and created fear of sovereignty. Given the Russian population living there, Kazakhstan is more concerned about its sovereignty. In 2020, the Russian duma deputy, Yevgeny Fedorov, stated that Kazakhstan must return those territories to Russia, where Russians live. This will impact U.K.'s foreign policy in general and the E.U. in particular; however, Russia will remain distracted in Ukraine, and its grip over CARs has already weakened. With the realignment in the geopolitics of Central Asia underway, the U.K. can take it as a strategic opportunity to advance its regional interests.

The Central Asian states are also in constant flux with political reforms being introduced, except Turkmenistan. The U.K. can initiate convergence with these states on political and economic reforms via consultations. This will help the "heart of Eurasia" to tilt towards democracies rather than allowing Central Asia to remain under the grip of totalitarian states like China, Iran and Russia. We have seen changes in the economic and political systems from inside Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that positively impacted UK-Central Asia relations. The U.K. should first use its soft power like trade and investments rather than democracy.

According to estimates, more than 2.5 million labourer migrants from CARs worked in Russia before the war. Remittances from migrant workers contribute 26.7, 31.3 and 11 per cent to the GDPs of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, respectively. The U.K. government has already started hiring workforce from CARs to address the shortage after Brexit. However, the seasonal workers from Central Asia always complain about little savings, but conditions are much better than in Russia. The U.K. can work on the issue of seasonal workforce with the Central Asian states, which can help to build trust between the two geographies.

Central Asian Republics are trying to have a multi-vector foreign policy to further diversify their political and economic relations with countries in Europe and Asia. The U.K. can leverage its significant competitive advantage by helping the Central Asian states to diversify their relations. However, as the rulers of Central Asian states are very much averse to democratic reforms, the U.K. should only guide them in judicial and legal reform and institution building.

China is expanding its security role in Central Asia, and Russia is still a significant player. The CARs are sceptical of China and Russia. Still, their influence will increase in the region in the coming decade. Central Asian governments are most likely to adopt surveillance technologies and other authoritarian practices from China, which is the biggest challenge for the U.K. and other democracies. Russia and China have monopolised the connectivity and impacted the rejuvenated multi-vector foreign policy of CARs. This will seriously challenge the U.K.'s foreign policy and other countries in extended neighbourhoods. To have connectivity with Central Asia, the U.K. should engage with like-minded countries of Eurasia for new connectivity routes that can be reliable, resilient, and diversified without the hegemony of China and Russia. This will help the U.K. to have a say in the vast hydrocarbon reserves in the region. Indeed, enhanced connectivity with Central Asia and broader Eurasia is essential to promote regional stability and unlock economic opportunities for all countries, including the U.K.

Another field where the U.K. and Central Asia can work together is the region's security and stability. There should be a joint initiative between Central Asian Republics and the U.K., like the U.S. C5+1 initiative. This initiative should include regional peace, ethnic harmony, infrastructure and resilient and reliable regional connectivity. However, the U.K. has yet to push for such a strategy.

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