

Written Evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into The UK's Engagement in Central Asia (ECA0009)

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Summary

- This submission addresses the committee's section: "*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?*".
- It does so by focusing specifically on Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan's respective relationships with Russia and China and the challenges and opportunities these present to the UK's foreign policy efforts. Some broader regional-applicable themes might be gleaned from these, while complexity and nuance is maintained.
- Specifically, Russia's war on Ukraine is weakening its influence in Central Asia to varying degrees, though often in highly specific and uneven ways, instead of a general waning. Meanwhile, China is seeking to develop closer ties to Central Asia, particularly through economic links. While aided somewhat by Russia's waning position, Beijing is not a candidate to be a straightforward "replacement" for Moscow.
- A UK approach, while offering economic investment and ties to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, should not overly rely on these as a means to build sustainable and meaningful relationships in the region as geography and the scale of investment and trade favour heavily Russia and China.
- Instead, the UK could offer targeted economic ties or projects that are compatible with helping Central Asian states diversify their dependence in specific economic areas away from China and Russia, in conjunction with collaboration on anticorruption, human rights, and strengthening democratic institutions. However, care should be taken about how heavily the UK "pushes" rather than collaborates on strengthening democratic resilience.
- A long-term recommendation is that Central Asia presents an opportunity for the UK to work in conjunction with like-minded states such as the US on a joint economic and policy approach towards the region. Central Asia geopolitically is a key area for such governments, who have identified Russia and China as strategic competitors, to engage, dissuade, and influence Beijing and Moscow, while also supporting the economic and democratic development of Central Asian states who otherwise would be left largely reliant on Russia and China.
- Leading the development of a multilateral approach would also enhance the UK's comparatively limited economic offering in Central Asian countries (when compared to China) and cultural-political ties (when compared to Russia).
- Each relationship is explored from an economic, political, and security perspective, with analysis then shifting to the challenges these contexts present to UK foreign policy, alongside the potential opportunities to be had.

A summary of the key findings for each relationship is listed below;

- **The Russia-Kyrgyz Relationship;**

- Russia-Kyrgyz relations will be shaped by two contrasting realities; Kyrgyzstan's heavy economic over-reliance on Russia, and a political trend to decouple from Russia.
- Russia faces two distinct challenges in maintaining Kyrgyz interests; the unconventional rise of Japarov and the effect of the Ukrainian war on Russian soft power.
- The failure of Russia to police Kyrgyz-Tajik relations, Kyrgyzstan's new eccentric leader, and the decline of Russian soft power can be leveraged by the UK to improve relations and realise strategic interests.

- **The Russia-Kazakhstan Relationship;**

- Historically, trade relations for Kazakhstan revealed a strong level of dependency on Russia. However, the war in Ukraine has led to a recalibration with the government looking to its Eastern and Western partners. We are also seeing trade having increased with Russia in specific markets, mainly those relative to electronics as Russia continues to require microchips for its war in Ukraine.
- While the Kazakh government remains against helping Russia bypass sanctions, the sanctions-busting business is strong within the country but will likely only be so in the short term. Given how the Astana International Financial Centre is based on English common law, the UK government can work with the Kazakh government in order to best assess how to mitigate the economic grey area here.
- Data reveals Russian influence in Kazakhstan to be only slightly on the decline, with support for Ukraine increasing to 22% from 10% in 2022, while the majority remain "neutral". Russian propaganda plays a key influential role and will remain an issue for the UK if seeking to increase its cultural influence. The majority of the public also still views Russia as a key trading partner and fears that replacing Russian trade with another partner, particularly China, could result in a negative reaction from Russia. However, the distance between Russia and the Kazakh government is increasing.
- Kazakhstan will be a key entry point for the UK seeking to improve relations with other Central Asian states. The country's influence in the region is substantial and is already making efforts to improve relations with other neighbouring countries such as Uzbekistan.

- **The China-Kyrgyzstan Relationship;**

- China is Kyrgyzstan's top investor and trading partner, causing over-reliance on Chinese loans and debt that match its overreliance on Russian trade. The

UK could offer investment but may struggle with competition and strategic challenges in this landscape.

- Promoting democracy and human rights in Central Asia is crucial, and collaboration with like-minded states can lead to a stable and sustainable joint long-term strategy instead of trying to engage in the economic sphere, where competition would be difficult against China and Russia due to geography and scale of financial aid respectively.
- **The China-Kazakhstan Relationship;**
 - Kazakhstan benefits from numerous investments from China alongside the BRI, however, Kazakhstan maintains slightly more negotiating power with China than its neighbours due to its strategic importance in the BRI.
 - As the world-leading supplier of uranium, Kazakhstan has huge potential in nuclear energy but does not have an operational nuclear power plant. The UK could consider aiding Kazakhstan to build such infrastructure (through finance, or technical experience built up from the UK's current ongoing nuclear power programme) in exchange for favourable access to Kazakhstan's uranium supply.
 - While Tokayev has led numerous democratization efforts in Kazakhstan since becoming leader in 2019, the UK should maintain a cautious balance between economic and political diplomacy. Several recent actions from Tokayev suggest that Kazakhstan will not tolerate relations with the UK that focus too heavily on political relations.

Evidence and Analysis

1. The Relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia

1.1. Overview

1.1.1. Kyrgyzstan, with its nearly 7 million inhabitants,¹ is the second poorest country in Central Asia, with a GDP per capita of \$1,276.² Its reliance on remittances, economic trade and imports, debt relief, regional security issues, development expertise, and old soviet networks has resulted in a significant reliance on the Russian state.

1.1.2. Personal remittances accounted for 32.7% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP in 2021,³ third in the world in terms of remittances as a percentage of GDP⁴ with 83% of remittances originating from Russia's⁵ 600,000 to 800,000 Kryrgyz migrant

¹ "Kyrgyzstan Population (2022) - Worldometer." Worldometer, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/kyrgyzstan-population/>.

² "GDP per capita (current US\$) - Kyrgyz Republic." World Bank, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KG>.

³ "Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) - Kyrgyz Republic." World Bank, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG>.

⁴ "Remittances as a share of GDP." TheGlobalEconomy.com, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/remittances_percent_gdp/.

workers.⁶ Registered migrants, in the summer of 2022, totalled 516,000,⁷ and generated more than the entire government's expenditure.⁸

- 1.1.3. Russian trade accounted for 70.5%.⁹ Russia's trade turnover increased by over 40% in 2022.¹⁰ In 2021, it imported \$1.78 billion¹¹ and exported \$387 million,¹² with the value of exports growing 2.5 times in 2022 to \$917 million.¹³
- 1.1.4. Russia has also played a significant role in Kyrgyzstan's debt relief. \$700 million worth of debt has been written off since 2005.¹⁴
- 1.1.5. Historically Russia has played a significant role in managing regional security issues. Most notably, concerning Kyrgyzstan's border conflicts with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has relied on Russia for mediation. For example, Putin hosted a meeting with both Tajik and Kyrgyz delegations in October 2022 to settle the border conflict.¹⁵ However, Russia's ability to patrol and manage its Central Asian allies has waned, with Kyrgyzstan cancelling a CSTO exercise due to the recent clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.¹⁶
- 1.1.6. Russia has also historically played a role in development. For example, Gazprom in 2014 acquired a Kyrgyz gas company,¹⁷ and has invested over 400 million in

⁵ Lillis, Joanna. "Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive." Eurasianet, March 11, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-to-suffer-as-remittances-from-russia-nosedive>.

⁶ Sharshenova, Aijan. "Mapping Russia's Influence in the Kyrgyz Republic." European Neighbourhood Council, September 2021, accessed March 21, 2023, <http://www.encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mapping-Russias-Influence-in-the-Kyrgyz-Republic.docx-1.pdf>.

⁷ Makhmutova, Evgeniya. "Kyrgyz Neutrality in Russia-Ukraine Conflict." Modern Diplomacy, October 15, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/10/15/kyrgyz-neutrality-in-russia-ukraine-conflict/>.

⁸ "Government spending" TheGlobalEconomy.com, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Kyrgyzstan/government_spending_dollars/.

⁹ "Объем внешнего товарооборота Кыргызстана составил \$931,4 млн – НАЦСТАТКОМ." Kabar News Agency, April 13, 2020, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://kabar.kg/news/ob-em-vneshnego-tovarooborota-kyrgyzstana-sostavil-931-4-mln-natstatkom/>.

¹⁰ "Объем внешней торговли Кыргызстана в 2021 году вырос на 31,4% - Национальный статистический комитет." TASS, November 2, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16232089>.

¹¹ "Kyrgyzstan Imports from Russia." Trading Economics, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://tradingeconomics.com/kyrgyzstan/imports/russia>.

¹² "Kyrgyzstan Exports to Russia." Trading Economics, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://tradingeconomics.com/kyrgyzstan/exports/russia>.

¹³ "Kyrgyzstan's 2022 Trade Turnover with Russia Hits Record High." Russia Briefing, January 24, 2023, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/kyrgyzstan-s-2022-trade-turnover-with-russia-hits-record-high.html>.

¹⁴ Khitakhunov, Azimzhan. "How Russia is Important for Kyrgyzstan." Eurasian Research Institute, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/how-russia-is-important-for-kyrgyzstan/>.

¹⁵ Teslova, Elena. "Russian president meets Kyrgyz, Tajik counterparts amid border dispute." Anadolu Agency, October 13, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/russian-president-meets-kyrgyz-tajik-counterparts-amid-border-dispute/2710834>.

¹⁶ Putz, Catherine. "Kyrgyzstan Cancels CSTO 'Indestructible Brotherhood' Military Exercises." The Diplomat, October 11, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/kyrgyzstan-cancels-csto-indestructible-brotherhood-military-exercises/>.

¹⁷ "Kyrgyzstan, Russia sign agreement on Kyrgyzgaz acquisition by Gazprom." Kazinform, April 10, 2014, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.inform.kz/en/kyrgyzstan-russia-sign-agreement-on-kyrgyzgaz-acquisition-by-gazprom_a2647331.

the Kyrgyz gas industry since 2016.¹⁸ Kyrgyzstan is also part of the Eurasian Economic Union and European Customs Union - both, of whose frameworks allow Russian-led developmental influence.¹⁹ Between 1995 and 2016, Russia provided 1.25 billion dollars in FDI, confused on manufacturing, power, motor vehicles and finance; for context, only Canada and China provided more FDI in the same period (2 billion dollars respectively) - predominantly in the mining industries for Canada and manufacturing and geological prospecting industries for China.²⁰

- 1.1.7. Historically, Russia has also leveraged its Soviet-educated political elites to both coordinate policy and maintain cultural influence.²¹ However, Russia may be unable to leverage such networks as effectively after Sadyr Japarov's rise into power.²² The 2021 Kyrgyz parliamentary elections resulted in a decisive demographic shift, with MPs mainly consisting of Generation X, known as 'the last Soviet children'.²³ The typical MP was 16 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed²⁴. Consequently, this is the first generation who attained their tertiary education and started their careers after the USSR, and hence, less attachment both politically and ideologically.
- 1.1.8. Consequently, the short to medium outlook of Russia-Kyrgyz relations will be shaped by two contrasting realities; Kyrgyzstan's significant economic over-reliance on Russia, and a political trend to decouple from Russia.
- 1.1.9. Apart from Russia's inability to manage regional Kyrgyz interests and its declining soviet network, Russia faces several two distinct challenges in maintaining Kyrgyz interests. These include; the unconventional rise of Japarov and the effect of the Ukrainian war on Russian soft power.
- 1.1.10. Firstly, Japarov has been known for his un-strategic and unclear foreign policy.²⁵ His stance on the Ukrainian War is ambiguous, and his relations with Russia are just as inconsistent.²⁶ Secondly, public sentiment on the Ukraine War has been

¹⁸ "Gazprom Kyrgyzstan talks gas supply, investments in country's gas sector" AzerNews, January 5, 2023, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.azernews.az/region/204619.html>.

¹⁹ Sharshenova (n 6).

²⁰ Komendantova, Nadejda et al, "Industrial Development of Kyrgyzstan: Investment and Financing" International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, October, 2018, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/files/2018-12/Industrial_Development_Kyrgyzstan-Investment_and_financing.pdf

²¹ Umarov, Temur. "Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer, or Drifting Apart?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 23, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88698>.

²² Engvall, Johan. "The "Last Soviet Children": Complete Takeover of Kyrgyz Politics." Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, December 15, 2021, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13697-the-%E2%80%9Clast-soviet-children%E2%80%9D-complete-takeover-of-kyrgyz-politics.html>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The Foreign Policy Centre. "Kyrgyzstan: Britain as a 'Force for Good' in Central Asia Working Group." accessed March 21, 2023, <https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Kyrgyzstan-Britain-as-a-%E2%80%98force-for-good-in-Central-Asia-Working-Group.pdf>.

damaging to Russian soft power. Over 70% of Kyrgyz attribute current economic hardships to the invasion.²⁷ Bishkek has had anti-war protests.²⁸ Surveys, although sparse in availability, also portray a mixed picture - just over half of Kyrgyz respondents blame Russia for the Ukrainian War, and a majority perceive the war to have a negative impact.²⁹

1.2. **Challenges for UK Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan**

1.2.1. The nature of the Russian-Kyrgyz relationship posits several challenges for the United Kingdom's foreign policy. The United Kingdom does not possess the undeniably strong economic and cultural ties Russia has over Kyrgyzstan. From the reliance on Russian remittances, trade, and loan forgiveness, to the historical ties of elites, Russia holds considerable influence. Finding purchase for deepening UK ties will be challenging given Russia's considerable, albeit likely waning, influence.

1.3. **Opportunities for UK Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan**

1.3.1. There are a few aspects the UK could leverage, however, in improving relations and realising strategic interests. Firstly, Russia has failed to adequately police and manage Kyrgyz-Tajik relations; with the United Kingdom's experience in border management, relations could be improved through this avenue.

1.3.2. Secondly, Kyrgyzstan's eccentric leader has shown interest in the UK. Notably, it a) requested a bilateral visit to the UK and b) attended the COP26 summit in Glasgow.³⁰ Coupled with his unclear foreign policy, the United Kingdom may be able to leverage this gap and offer engagement with the executive. Taking into consideration the changing of the political elites, the United Kingdom may be able to more effectively engage with senior politicians and administrative officers.

1.3.3. Lastly, although Russian reliance is undeniable, the decline of Russian soft power and the Ukrainian War could result in a desire to diversify economic reliance. The UK could position itself as a country which substitutes Russia's economic role in many ways, from offering development expertise and aid to supporting NGOs within Kyrgyzstan.

2. **The Relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia**

2.1 **Overview**

2.1.1. While influence over Kazakhstan has wavered since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has not diminished. How Moscow has maintained their influence is due to three key factors: trade relations, Russia bypassing sanctions, and Russia's political and

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Umarov (n 21).

²⁸ Wood, Colleen. "Kyrgyz Authorities Try to Head Off Protests With Restrictions." *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/kyrgyz-authorities-try-to-head-off-protests-with-restrictions/>.

²⁹ "Surveying Kazakh and Kyrgyz Attitudes on Russia's War." *Eurasianet*, September 6, 2022, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/surveying-kazakh-and-kyrgyz-attitudes-on-russias-war>.

³⁰ The Foreign Policy Centre (n 25).

cultural influence over the country. Moreover, Russia also remains a partner in other neighbouring countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan which have the capacity to influence the Kazakh government's decision-making process. Tensions are bound to develop as a result of those attempting to weaken diplomatic ties between Moscow and Astana.

2.1.2. **Trade;** Economic relations between the two countries reveal a significant level of dependency on Russia. In the first six months of 2022, Kazakhstan's economy saw an overall 3.4% year-on-year growth.³¹ In relation to Russia, data on foreign trade released by the Kazakhstan government reveal a dramatic 18.2% increase in machinery equipment and technology exports to Russia, going from \$471mn in 2021 to \$2.4bn in 2022,³² with mobile phones and electronics taking the lion's share at an estimated \$575mn between January and October.³³ Russia is also the main source in relation to food imports which increased to \$3.2bn in 2022 from \$2.6bn in 2021.³⁴ Critically, the government has maintained its pragmatic multi-vector foreign policy approach by working with both its neighbours and Western partners,³⁵ demonstrating an interest to diversify and increase trade with major partners such as China and the West. However, 2022 survey data revealed the majority of Kazakh citizens share concern over relations with China causing damage to economic relations with Russia.³⁶ This tells us that Kazakh citizens still understand the necessity of economic ties with Russia with a preference to avoid any decisions that could harm their economy.

2.1.3. **Sanctions Evasion;** Russia's interest in the circumvention of sanctions has placed Kazakhstan under pressure to abide by international law.³⁷ While the Kazakh government has repeatedly stated they do not want to help Russia evade Western

³¹ Anton Usonov, "Central Asia shows strong resilience to geopolitical turmoil", in *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development* (28 Sept. 2022), available <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/central-asia-shows-great-resilience-to-geopolitical-turmoil-.html>

³² Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (BNS), "Структура экспорта по основным товарным группам со странами ЕАЭС", (2021 and 2022), not available in English, accessed <https://stat.gov.kz/official/industry/31/statistic/6>

³³ Irina Osipova, "Re-export Hub. Will Grey Schemes of Sanctioned Goods Resale to Russia Harm Kazakhstan?", in *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting* (09 Feb. 2023), accessed https://cabar.asia/en/re-export-hub-will-grey-schemes-of-sanctioned-goods-resale-to-russia-harm-kazakhstan?_utl_t=ln

³⁴ BNS, *op. cit.*

³⁵ President of Russia, "Russian-Kazakh Negotiations", (28 November 2022), available [here](#); also see, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev and Emmanuel Macron held talks", (29 November 2022), available <https://akorda.kz/ru/kasym-zhomart-tokayev-i-emmanuyel-makron-proveli-peregovory-29101420>

³⁶ Central Asian Barometer, "Survey Question: Thinking about other countries, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of...Russia", in *The Diplomat* (02 December, 2022), accessed <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/does-the-eurasian-economic-union-have-a-place-in-central-asias-future/>

³⁷ Daniel Flatley, "US Warns Companies Against Doing Business With Sanctions Evaders", in *Bloomberg* (02 March 2023), accessed <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-02/us-warns-companies-against-doing-business-with-sanctions-evaders>; see also, Iain Marlow "US Is Closely Watching Russia's Attempt to Evade Sanctions, Blinken Says", in *Bloomberg* (28 February 2023), accessed <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-28/us-closely-eyes-sanctions-evasion-in-central-asia-blinken-says>

sanctions,³⁸ there are increasing instances of Kazakh businesses participating in parallel imports as well as allowing the country to become a logistics hub for re-exports such as rare earth minerals, chemicals, or microchips which serve to aid Russia's war efforts.³⁹ US Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained that the US has provided licensing to Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan in an effort to prevent businesses from participating in sanctions evasion, "so that they have time to wind down those activities and cut their ties with Russia."⁴⁰ As for the Kazakh government, they have yet to take regulatory action against businesses re-exporting potentially sanctioned items to Russia.⁴¹

2.1.4. **Political and Cultural Influence;** The involvement of Russia in the country's infamous event now known as "Bloody January" and Tokayev infamous "shoot to kill" order prevents us from characterising the President as one who stands entirely against President Putin's means of violence. However, actions taken by President Tokayev to create boundaries between Russia and Kazakhstan reveal consequential fracturing. For instance, on 14 March, under the jurisdiction of the Astana International Financial Centre, the Tokayev administration reportedly barred the Russian space company, TsENKI, from removing any assets and property from Kazakhstan. The government's decision came following the chief of Russia's Roscosmos space agency publicly criticising the Kazakh Communications Minister, who referred to the criticism as a "diplomatic miscalculation".⁴² With Tokayev being a staunch opponent to his kleptocratic predecessor and Russian ally, Nursultan Nazarbayev, his support for Russia is minimal and based on certain necessities, demonstrating a willingness to pursue a more democratic institution.⁴³ As for public support for Russia, recent surveys reveal the majority of Kazakhs support Ukraine, yet Russian speakers were found to be statistically more likely to support Russia given potential exposure to Russian state media propaganda.⁴⁴ While the majority remain neutral (59%),

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Irina Osipova, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ US Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi at a Joint Press Availability", (28 February 2023), accessed <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-kazakhstan-foreign-minister-mukhtar-tileuberdi-at-a-joint-press-availability/>; also see, Iain Marlow, "US Is Closely Watching Russia's Attempt to Evade Sanctions, Blinken Says", in *Bloomberg* (28 February 2023), accessed <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-28/us-closely-eyes-sanctions-evasion-in-central-asia-blinken-says>

⁴¹ Olzhas Auyezov and Mariya Gordeyeva, "Exclusive: Russians flood Kazakhstan with sanction-busting requests – sources", in *Reuters* (17 March 2023), accessed <https://www.reuters.com/business/russians-flood-kazakhstan-with-sanction-busting-requests-sources-2023-03-17/>

⁴² Aigerim Askarova Alexandra, "Скандал с дочерней компанией "Роскосмоса" в Казахстане прокомментировал глава Минцифры", in *Nur-Kz* (14 March 2023), accessed <https://www.nur.kz/politics/universe/2012832-skandal-s-docherney-kompaniy-roskosmosa-v-kazahstane-prokomentiroval-glava-mintsifry/>; also see, Euractiv, "Kazakhstan impounds Russian property at Baikonur Cosmodrome", (15 March 2023), accessed <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-impounds-russian-property-at-baikonur-cosmodrome/>

⁴³ Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, "Kazakhstan's president: We're moving full speed ahead toward reform", in *Politico* (20 September 2022), accessed <https://www.politico.eu/article/kazakh-president-we-must-flip-the-switch-of-reform/>.

⁴⁴ Demoscope, "A third of people in Kazakhstan are largely influenced by Russian propaganda of a war of aggression", (01 December 2022), accessed <https://demos.kz/poll-the-main-share-of-russian-supporters-in-kazakhstan-is-over-60-young-people-are-for-ukraine/?lang=en>

support for Russia did increase in 2022 to 22% from 10%, however, Kazakhstan has also been undergoing a mass influx of Russians since the war which could serve as a potentially influential factor.⁴⁵

2.1.5. **Multilateral Relations in Central Asia;** The Kazakh government has been the most outspoken Central Asian state against Russia's war in Ukraine, yet Uzbekistan has taken a largely neutral position out of fear,⁴⁶ while the Turkmen government recently began increasing pro-Russian propaganda.⁴⁷ However, Kazakhstan is strengthening its bilateral relations with Uzbekistan as a result of Russia's economic instability.⁴⁸ In December 2022, the two countries signed "40 documents on investment and trade-economic cooperation" at an estimated value of USD \$2.5bn.⁴⁹ At the same time, Uzbekistan rejected a "trilateral natural gas union" with Russia and Kazakhstan that was proposed by Putin.⁵⁰ With Uzbekistan offering the largest regional military and Kazakhstan having the largest economy, a strategic partnership between the two that forces Russian influence out will substantially re-calibrate the power dynamics in Central Asia in the long term.

2.2. Challenges for UK Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan

2.2.1. Kazakhstani businesses have taken action on the economic opportunity presented via Western sanctions against Russia. For the UK government, this will remain a manoeuvring challenge that will require attention from those involved in future trade deals. While the government has noted that they wish to avoid aiding Russia to evade sanctions, they have yet to stop individuals from conducting business in the economic grey area. It is advised that during future talks with Kazakh officials, the UK government provides guidance and/or tools to mitigate this issue.

⁴⁵ Demoscope, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine", (16 April 2022), accessed <https://demos.kz/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/?lang=en>; Radio Free Europe, "Kazakhstan Tightens Entrance Regulations Amid Influx Of Russians Amid Ukraine War", (17 January 2023), accessed <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-tightens-entrance-regulations-influx-russians/32227618.html>

⁴⁶ Philip Reeves, "Some Uzbeks are speaking out about Russia's war in Ukraine", in *National Public Radio* (02 January 2023), accessed <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/02/1146587558/some-uzbeks-are-speaking-out-about-russias-war-in-ukraine>

⁴⁷ Radio Free Europe, "Turkmenistan Turns Up Pro-Russian Propaganda, Warns Against Western Media, 'Agents'", (14 December 2022), accessed <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-pro-russian-anti-western/32176574.html>

⁴⁸ Dana Omirgazy, "Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan Sign Treaty on Allied Relations, Agreement on Border Demarcation to Foster Strategic Partnership", (23 December 2022), accessed https://astanatimes.com/2022/12/kazakhstan-uzbekistan-sign-treaty-on-allied-relations-agreement-on-border-demarcation-to-foster-strategic-partnership/?_cf_chl_tk=Uj8SPyorjDzqLtb5zB9KbpfNjG7FOK2ySrSEYPVbVk-1679830123-0-gaNycGzNDNA

⁴⁹ Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Agreements worth \$2.5bn signed at Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan business forum in Tashkent", in *Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, (21 December 2022), accessed <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/agreements-worth-25bn-signed-at-uzbekistan-kazakhstan-business-forum-in-tashkent-22115535>

⁵⁰ Radio Free Europe, "Uzbekistan Rejects Putin-Proposed 'Trilateral Natural Gas Union'", (08 December 2022), accessed <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-rejects-gas-union-russia-kazakhstan/32167559.html>

2.2.2. While public support for Ukraine has increased (22%), Russian propaganda via state media is a clear issue that will continue to influence those within Kazakhstan who speak Russian. This has the potential to impact UK engagement as businesses which are pro-Russia will view trade with the West more negatively. As the government has taken measures to block Russian state media in the UK, it would be beneficial to aid the Kazakh government in the mitigation of Russian propaganda.

2.3. **Opportunities for UK Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan**

2.3.1. As Kazakhstan is growing its influence as a result of the war in Ukraine, the country will serve as a key entry point for UK engagement with other Central Asian states, something Kazakhstan's recent efforts to strengthen bilateral trade relations with Uzbekistan highlight. These are agreements that the UK can seek to insert itself into. It also highlights that Kazakhstan is keen to diversify its bilateral relationships and so would be potentially receptive to UK overtures. Moreover, as Kazakhstan continues to grow its influence, the UK government has the opportunity to grow its political influence with the Kazakh government acting as a mediator for UK-Central Asian relations.

2.3.2. Based on Kazakhstan's multi-vectorial foreign policy, they are looking to improve current relations as well as build new ones. Stable economic relations will be highly sought after which presents this current point in time as highly opportunistic for the UK to begin negotiating strategic economic partnerships with Kazakhstan.

3. **The Relationship between Kyrgyzstan and China**

3.1. **Overview**

3.1.1. China is Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner for exports⁵¹ and the largest foreign investor, with a foreign direct investment inflow of approximately 335 million U.S. dollars in 2021.⁵² China has invested heavily in energy, transportation, and education in Kyrgyzstan too.

3.1.2. However, Kyrgyzstan's search for foreign investment has resulted in an over-reliance on economic and development assistance from China.⁵³ The Export-Import Bank of China (Exim) has become Kyrgyzstan's largest creditor due to the concessional loans extended to the country. As a result, Exim now holds

⁵¹ "Impost of goods from China to Kyrgyzstan exceeded \$4 billion in 2022 - AKIpress News Agency." Accessed March 11, 2023.

[https://akipress.com/news:694826:Import_of_goods_from_China_to_Kyrgyzstan_exceeded_\\$4_billion_in_2022/#:~:text=Import_of_goods_from_China,in_2022_-_AKIpress_News_Agency&text=AKIPRESS.COM%20-%20Import%20of%20goods,the%20National%20Statistical%20Committee](https://akipress.com/news:694826:Import_of_goods_from_China_to_Kyrgyzstan_exceeded_$4_billion_in_2022/#:~:text=Import_of_goods_from_China,in_2022_-_AKIpress_News_Agency&text=AKIPRESS.COM%20-%20Import%20of%20goods,the%20National%20Statistical%20Committee)

⁵² China Briefing. "China and Central Asia: Bilateral Trade Relationships and Future Outlook." Accessed March 11, 2023. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-central-asia-bilateral-trade-relationships-and-future-outlook/#:~:text=For%20exports%2C%20China>

⁵³ OECD (2019). Chapter 5. Investment in sustainable infrastructure in the Kyrgyz Republic in Sustainable Infrastructure for Low-Carbon Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus Hotspot Analysis and Needs Assessment, OECD, December 19. 127-148. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/8b30e9f8-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/8b30e9f8-en>

over 40% of the government's external debt. This highlights the increasing dependence of the Kyrgyz government on China and the rise in debt to it over time.⁵⁴

3.2. **Challenges for UK Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan**

3.2.1. UK companies may find it difficult to compete with Chinese companies that have established a strong presence in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, London as a global financial centre must find ways to provide investors with the opportunity to fund projects in Kyrgyzstan. London's advantages include well-developed financial markets, a sound market infrastructure, and a large pool of international investors.

3.2.2. As Kyrgyzstan strengthens its ties with China, it may become increasingly aligned with Chinese interests in the region, potentially at the expense of Western influence. The UK may need to navigate this strategic competition carefully to ensure that its interests in the region are not undermined.

3.3. **Opportunities for UK Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan**

3.3.1. Kyrgyzstan is looking for economic diversification. Chinese initiatives have increased the country's foreign debt to an exorbitant level, providing the UK with the potential and the opportunity to act as a "force for good."⁵⁵ The UK has been vocal about expanding green climate projects through the PGII, which could be one avenue for engagement. Therefore, the UK, as a short-term engagement, could highlight its position on environmental degradation and strengthen bilateral cooperation to reduce environmental degradation.

3.3.2. The UK should work with like-minded partners who are willing to invest in Kyrgyzstan, such as the EU. The EU has been collaborating closely with Kyrgyz authorities to establish a new cooperation agreement, which presents an opportunity for the UK to expand ties with Kyrgyzstan given its cordial relationship with the EU. Kazakhstan has already signed the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), and Kyrgyzstan is considering signing it this year, highlighting potential areas of cooperation.⁵⁶

4. **The Relationship between Kazakhstan and China**

4.1. **Overview**

4.1.1. Kazakhstan is the world's leading producer and supplier of uranium, with some estimates suggesting that the country produces 45% of the world's total uranium production,⁵⁷ In 2019, China invested approximately USD 14 billion in Kazakh oil

⁵⁴ Hurley, J., S. Morris and G. Portelance (2018). Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective. Center for Global Development Policy Paper 121. <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Gov.uk. "A Force for Good in a Competitive Age: Foreign Secretary Speech at the Aspen Security Conference." Gov.uk, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-force-for-good-in-a-competitive-age-foreign-secretary-speech-at-the-aspen-security-conference#:~:text=But%20a%20force%20for%20good,interests%20of%20the%20British%20people>.

⁵⁶ Interfax. "Top Stories." Interfax, 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/87046/>.

⁵⁷ Donnellon-May, G. "Powering China's Nuclear Ambitions". *The Diplomat*. September 20, 2022. [Powering](#)

and gas.⁵⁸ China imported four trillion tons of natural gas from Kazakhstan between January and November 2021⁵⁹.

- 4.1.2. Kazakhstan is one of the main beneficiaries of China's BRI⁶⁰, especially in the fields of transportation, e-commerce, high technology, and sustainability.⁶¹ The BRI has dominated East-West infrastructure building in comparison to similar prior programs supported by the US and Russia in Kazakhstan and has consistently been welcomed by the country's business and government elites.⁶² China's investment represents 4.7% of the total investment in the country. By June 2022, China had invested in the construction of 56 factories in Kazakhstan worth nearly \$24.5 billion.⁶³
- 4.1.3. Kazakhstan and China cooperate on numerous security issues. Both are founding members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO),⁶⁴ and their governments share repressive tendencies towards Uyghur ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.⁶⁵
- 4.1.4. Kazakh public criticism against Chinese expansion has grown in recent years. Anti-China protests occurred in 2016,⁶⁶ 2019, and 2021 in reaction to China's economic expansion in Kazakhstan's energy and agricultural sector, and its human rights abuses against Turkic and Kazakh Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁶⁷

4.2. Challenges for UK Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan

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⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Goldstein, E. "China's Kazakhstan Gambit". Harvard International Review. August 1, 2022.

<https://hir.harvard.edu/chinas-kazakhstan-gambit/>

⁶⁰ Kassenova, N. "How China's Foreign Aid Fosters Social Bonds With Central Asian Ruling Elites". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. December 07, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/07/how-china-s-foreign-aid-fosters-social-bonds-with-central-asian-ruling-elites-pub-88579>

⁶¹ Global Times. June 21, 2022. "Central Asia-China cooperation crucial to regional security and development: Kazakh ambassador (exclusive full interview)"

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1268696.shtml>

⁶² *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*. May 4, 2018. "Kazakhstan must look beyond the Belt and Road"

<https://www.iris-france.org/112196-kazakhstan-must-look-beyond-the-belt-and-road/>

⁶³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. June 2022. "Kazakh expert Bulat Sultanov: What is the genuine purpose behind the 'color revolution' instigated by US-led West in Kazakhstan?". [Kazakh expert Bulat Sultanov: What is the genuine purpose behind the 'color revolution' instigated by US-led West in Kazakhstan? \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/kazakhstan/)

⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. June 2022. "Kazakh expert Bulat Sultanov: What is the genuine purpose behind the 'color revolution' instigated by US-led West in Kazakhstan?". [Kazakh expert Bulat Sultanov: What is the genuine purpose behind the 'color revolution' instigated by US-led West in Kazakhstan? \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/kazakhstan/)

⁶⁵ Svoboda, E. "Has Kazakhstan Failed Xinjiang's Ethnic Kazakhs?". *Lawfare*. April 5, 2021.

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/has-kazakhstan-failed-xinjiangs-ethnic-kazakhs>

⁶⁶ BBC. April 28, 2016. "Kazakhstan's land reform protests explained". [Kazakhstan's land reform protests explained - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35611111)

⁶⁷ Jardine, B. et al. "Mapping Patterns of Dissent in Eurasia: Introducing the Central Asia Protest Tracker". The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. 2020. P.5-6. [2020-09-28-mapping-patterns-of-dissent-in-eurasia.pdf \(oxussociety.org\)](https://oxussociety.org/2020-09-28-mapping-patterns-of-dissent-in-eurasia.pdf)

- 4.2.1. While there has been increasing popular criticism of China's influence in Kazakhstan, the official line remains Sinophile, partially due to the BRI's significance for the country's economy and China's successful co-optation and gift-giving strategy towards political, military and business elites in the country.⁶⁸ As such, it would be difficult to garner Kazakh support on human rights concerns in Xinjiang, and Kazakh compliance with the issue.
- 4.2.2. The UK should aim to maintain a cautious balance between economic relations and political relations. Several political developments suggest that focusing on a liberal political diplomatic policy with Kazakhstan might backfire and provoke China. In September 2020, protests broke out after Tokayev's government declared that it would cooperate with China to combat "colour revolutions", a term used by authoritarian regimes to discredit liberal protests seen as being encouraged by Western powers.⁶⁹ Following the protests against fuel prices in January 2022 in Kazakhstan,⁷⁰ China proposed to increase law enforcement and security cooperation to oppose "external forces", an idea that was further approved by Tokayev and Xi during their meeting in September⁷¹.

4.3. Opportunities for UK Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan

- 4.3.1. Kazakhstan retains a certain degree of political autonomy vis-à-vis China. The BRI has increased Kazakhstan's dependence on China, but the dependence is reciprocal, as China strongly relies on Kazakh cooperation to hold up the BRI's success.⁷² Other factors, including the decrease in value of bilateral trade, investment, and Kazakhstani indebtedness to China⁷³ have demonstrated Kazakh resilience in maintaining its "multi-vector" policy by broadening its international partnerships.⁷⁴
- 4.3.2. The UK could increase its economic partnerships in the region, specifically in sustainability solutions in exchange for greater uranium supply to reach the UK's 2050 nuclear energy production targets.⁷⁵ Kazakhstan does not have a power plant, although president Tokayev is adamant to change this.⁷⁶ To secure stable

⁶⁸ Kassenova, N. "How China's Foreign Aid Fosters Social Bonds With Central Asian Ruling Elites". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. December 07, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/07/how-china-s-foreign-aid-fosters-social-bonds-with-central-asian-ruling-elites-pub-88579>

⁶⁹ Goldstein, E. "China's Kazakhstan Gambit". *Harvard International Review*. August 1, 2022. <https://hir.harvard.edu/chinas-kazakhstan-gambit/>

⁷⁰ Crossley, G. and Tian, Y. L. "China offers Kazakhstan security support, opposes 'external forces'". *Reuters*. January 10, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-offers-kazakhstan-security-support-opposes-external-forces-2022-01-10/>

⁷¹ Global Times. "China, Kazakhstan to jointly crack down on the 'three evil forces,' resolutely oppose interference by external forces". Sep 15, 2022.

⁷² Louthan, T. "A 'Bright Path' Forward or a Grim Dead End? The Political Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan". *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. January 6, 2022. p.12. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/louthan-1.pdf>

⁷³ *Ibid.* p.5

⁷⁴ The Astana Times. June 25, 2019. "Newly elected Kazakh President to focus on economic prosperity, multi-vector foreign policy and fight against corruption". [Newly elected Kazakh President to focus on economic prosperity, multi-vector foreign policy and fight against corruption - The Astana Times](https://www.astanatimes.com/news/newly-elected-kazakh-president-to-focus-on-economic-prosperity-multi-vector-foreign-policy-and-fight-against-corruption-2019-06-25)

⁷⁵ World Nuclear Association. N.d. "Nuclear Power in the United Kingdom". Updated January 2023. [Nuclear Power in the United Kingdom |UK Nuclear Energy - World Nuclear Association \(world-nuclear.org\)](https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/country-profiles---uk/nuclear-power-in-the-united-kingdom)

⁷⁶ Abbasova, V. "Kazakhstan Mulls Building Second Nuclear Power Plant". *Caspian News*. August 5, 2022. [Kazakhstan](https://www.caspiannews.com/kazakhstan-mulls-building-second-nuclear-power-plant/)

access to uranium supply, the UK could increase investment in nuclear infrastructure construction and provide, based on the experience of the UK's ongoing nuclear agenda, training to upskill Kazakh nationals in nuclear technology, construction and maintenance. Kazakhstan's enthusiasm towards building greater cooperation around renewable energy sources and raw materials⁷⁷ suggests that the UK could successfully use the upcoming signing of the new Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Kazakhstan and the UK to materialise this exchange.

5. **Overall Recommendation for the UK's Approach to Engagement with Central Asia**

- 5.1. The UK through its 2023 Integrated Review Refresh has accepted the changing realities of international relations, where several threats are emerging to the rules-based order that requires a coordinated response with close partners who are also interested in the region such as the US.⁷⁸ Central Asia provides a suitable platform for not simply UK engagement, but a concerted UK-US push alongside other democratic partners as the region presents a key area for engaging, dissuading, and influencing both Russia and China. Disengagement, or not enough engagement and resourcing from the UK, in this region will leave Central Asian states largely reliant economically and politically on China and Russia and so put at risk Central Asian efforts to diversify their state's economies and build sustainable democratic and human-rights focussed institutions.
- 5.2. Therefore exploring the potential for an integrated response with the US and other like-minded states will allow the UK to pitch a joint long-term strategy in Central Asia, which could enhance the UK's toolset and mitigate its current lack of equivalent economic clout in the region compared to China or political-cultural links compared to Russia.

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⁷⁷ The Astana Times. 9 February 2023. "Kazakhstan, UK Pledge to Strengthen Economic, Commercial Ties" Kazakhstan, UK Pledge to Strengthen Economic, Commercial Ties - The Astana Times

⁷⁸ US State Department, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity", 5 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/#:~:text=The%20United%20States'%20primary%20strategic,international%20investment%3B%20and%20has%20strong%2C>

