

Written Evidence by Tony Blair Institute (ECA0012)

TONY BLAIR INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE

1. The following submission represents the views of experts in the Geopolitical Team at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). It brings together the insight of internal experts on Central Asia, wider geopolitics, international security, cyber policy and global political leadership on foreign affairs. It also draws on long-standing engagement with external experts, policymakers and other stakeholders.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. As the UK charts a new course globally and seeks to extend its engagement and influence abroad, Central Asia should be a priority region. However, the UK maintains only modest economic interests with the five Central Asian states and limited defence ties.
3. Given their increasing importance, the UK government should formulate a proactive, constructive and informed new strategy of engagement with Central Asian states, informed by our values through the pillars of security, trade and diplomacy:

Enhancing Security for Central Asia

4. Support Central Asian governments to strengthen their border security, especially with Afghanistan, to mitigate the spread and influence of Islamist terrorism.
5. Support Central Asian governments to counter Islamist radicalisation, especially among youth populations in the region with an emphasis on preventing the diffusion of extremism online.
6. Support Central Asian governments in combatting Russian disinformation and offer alternative technological infrastructure to compete with China.

Accelerating Trade & Economic Growth in Central Asia

7. Support the European Union establishing a 'Middle Corridor' for Central Asian countries with a view to channelling exports via the Caucuses and Turkey rather than through Russia.
8. Continue to institutionalise trade flows with Central Asian countries through establishing and expanding trade agreements, such as the UK-Uzbekistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

9. Support Central Asian governments to design technology regulatory policies underpinned by openness and that stimulate innovation and the growth of globally-connected digital economies.
10. Support emerging talent in technology driven sectors in Central Asia, including through opportunities for engagement with UK counterparts while ensuring exposure offers long-term benefits for both the UK and Central Asian states.
11. Support Central Asian states' integration into the global green economy, particularly through lubricating trade in rare minerals.

Deepening Diplomacy & Social Engagement in Central Asia

12. Invest more in diplomatic engagement with Central Asian countries, including through offering governance training programmes.
13. Support and recognise governments undertaking liberal and democratic reforms and support the strengthening of civil society through mechanisms such as the British Council.
14. Support the British Council expanding its presence in Central Asia and ensure the BBC World Service has stable, long-term funding to serve populations across platforms in regional languages.
15. Support the expansion of university collaboration in the region and presence of British post-secondary education institutions.
16. Expand consular services in Central Asia and improve transportation links between the region and the UK.

B. RESPONSE TO INQUIRY

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?

17. Russia is the traditional dominant power in the region, considering the Soviet legacy and prevalence of the Russian language. While Central Asian states greatly value their sovereignty, they too understand that Russia's influence places a limit on their policy options. China has also been making visible inroads into Central Asia, providing economic support to complement Russia's role as the region's dominant security partner. Although there are no clear indications of a tussle over Central Asia, most Central Asian states are keen to balance and hedge between Russia and China and the West. The imperative for UK foreign policy here is to keep that balancing act going and prevent the region from tilting entirely into a shared sphere of influence under China and Russia.

Challenges

18. One of the greatest challenges facing Central Asia is the increase in Islamist extremist and terrorist activity across the region. The Taliban takeover has caused the region to be once again threatened by insecurity. There are currently 23 terrorist organisations in Central Asia who all support an Islamist ideology and are mostly splinter groups of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Daesh. This is particularly an issue in Tajikistan, which shares a 1400km mountainous border with Afghanistan, where many terrorist groups have been harboured by the Taliban. These organisations are active in both physical and online terror-related activities. In Central Asia, the combination of young populations – due to high birth rates – and considerable proportion of Persian and Uzbeks speakers (the two languages spoken in Afghanistan and Central Asia) makes the region fertile for online radicalisation by Islamist groups via social media.
19. Geopolitics remains an ongoing challenge with large powers competing for influence across the region following the independence of states and more currently as a consequence of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia, China, Iran, India and the West, as well as Turkey, Pakistan and the Gulf States, are trying to gain influence over the region. Central Asian states particularly face security threats from immediate neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Instability in their region makes them vulnerable and elicits concerns about their dependencies on their powerful neighbours such as Russia and China.

Recommendations

20. UK foreign policy should prioritise supporting Central Asian governments in their efforts to protect young people from Islamist radicalization, both within communities and online and also support stronger border control mechanisms to prevent terrorist organisations from spreading from less stable countries, especially Afghanistan. The UK's considerable experience countering extremism domestically offers useful best practices, as does the sharing of advanced border service technology.
21. Most Central Asian states pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, meaning there is likely a willingness to decrease their dependency on Russia and China. This is only possible, however, if the UK and other likeminded countries expand their relations in key areas such as trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), people to people relations, and through engagement in multilateral organisations as well as helping to strengthen civil society. A new approach by the UK and its allies requires a credible, informed and substantive strategy to support, one underpinned by supporting Central Asian states addressing key challenges and cognizant of the region's geopolitics.

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

22. Opportunities exist in Central Asia for the UK to deepen ties in both trade terms and culturally. The more proactive engagement of other European countries in the region evidences the untapped potential for UK-CAS trade. According to the Henry Jackson Society, Italy exports three times as much to Kazakhstan and Germany four times as much as the UK across similar focus sectors (machinery, electronics, furniture). The UK

has taken some steps toward greater economic cooperation, including the signing in 2019 the United Kingdom-Uzbekistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), ensuring the UK and Uzbekistan continue to grant each other most-favoured nation (MFN) treatment for trade.¹

23. Central Asia offers vast multi-metal mining opportunities which should be of greater interest to the UK. The UK can accelerate trade in large quantities of lithium, which Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have in large quantities, and uranium, where Kazakhstan has 15% and Uzbekistan has 2% of the world's uranium reserves – making them second and eighth, respectively, among world leaders.²
24. WTO accession is on the agenda for Central Asian States as a way to be better bolstered against economic shocks. There appears room for the UK to contribute to WTO accession for these countries.

Challenges

25. There are several multilateral institutions that have economic and security cooperation projects between Central Asian states and their neighbours such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. As a consequence, the key challenge in this area of policy is that the combination of the deeper ties Central Asian states have with Russia and China and their authoritarian tendencies in governance leave any UK policy in this area at higher risk of failure.

Recommendations

26. There is often a significant mismatch between the tech policies of Central Asian states and the infrastructure present. Central Asian states rely on Chinese and Russian infrastructure but are not keen on adopting Chinese or Russian tech regulation ideas wholesale. In this regard, the UK should expand its priorities set out in the Cyber Strategy 2022 for global cyber leadership to Central Asian states, including cyber capacity building and exporting its whole-of-government technical offer.
27. Central Asia has a growing community of promising tech talent. Kazakhstan, in particular, has exceptional computer scientists that face limited opportunities at home and hence become aspiring tech entrepreneurs abroad. The UK should consider developing a partnership pathway where the UK can access and benefit from Central Asia tech talent, with a view to mutually benefiting both countries. This aligns with the UK Integrated Review's objective of growing the UK's strategic advantage in Science and Tech by attracting global talent to the UK. Any new channels for aspiring technology talent should ensure skills learned and networks developed also serve the Central Asian region and that mobility opportunities do not contribute to brain drain.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/united-kingdom-and-uzbekistan-sign-partnership-and-cooperation-agreement>

² [I \(unec.org\)](https://www.unec.org/)

28. Central Asia has been overlooked in analyses of critical material for renewable energy technologies and could be a missing link in the global green energy transition.³ The UK government can play a leading role in this process, helping Central Asian states maximise their natural resources and reinforcing the UK's global leadership in climate policy.
29. Economically, the Central Asian states are dependent on the post-Soviet infrastructure and fast-growing populations of these countries are working in the Russian Federation as migrant workers. Approximately 2.4 million Tajiks citizens work in Russia, while over 4.5 million nationals of Uzbekistan are migrant workers in Russia. So, the remittances of these migrant workers is a key factor in the GDP of these countries, especially for Tajikistan.
30. China and Russia are the largest trading partners of Central Asian states, yet states like Kazakhstan are keen to balance and avoid overreliance. The UK should look at the key concerns flagged at the C5+1 multilateral forum and other areas of cooperation which can offer opportunities that the UK might be able to take up. However, it is unlikely that the UK alone will be able to rip and replace China's or Russia's communications infrastructure offering but Central Asian states' desire to diversify is something that should be monitored.

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?

31. A strong Sino-Russo relationship in the region complicates UK efforts to deepen relations in the region, meaning policymakers should be looking for instances where China and Russia are not effectively meeting Central Asian countries' needs or imposing excessive demands.
32. It is unreasonable to expect these countries not to have a strong relationship with China and Russia and to manage both carefully. However, they are looking for other partners and Britain could be a balancing element in the region if we choose to exert ourselves, both economically and politically.

Challenges

33. Many Central Asian states have a deep reliance on China for both technological supplies and government support. Between 2007 and 2020 China offered 59 government-led training programmes which officials from all five Central Asian countries participated in – 24 of these programmes were conducted in the area of security. Chinese companies like Hikvision, Dahua and Huawei also sell surveillance technology to Central Asian countries. In 2019 Uzbekistan signed an agreement with Huawei worth \$1billion to

³ [How Central Asia can help the global energy transition | NUPI](#)

build surveillance operations in the country, whilst Chinese company China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation supplied a police command centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan free of charge.

Recommendations

34. The UK should support the EU in advancing the so-called “middle corridor” which would allow Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan to export goods to Europe via Azerbaijan/ Armenia/ Georgia and through Turkey rather than relying on the “northern corridor” through Russia. The “northern corridor” currently facilitates the bulk of Central Asian trade with Europe and has been disrupted by the war in Ukraine. This would limit Central Asian countries’ reliance on Russia for export to Europe and would also be in the interest of China as it facilitates faster China-EU trade, which might undermine Sino-Russo alignment in the region. The UK could support through development finance in concert with EU or US initiatives.
35. Whilst the UK may not be able to provide direct warnings of the use of Chinese technology, it can support countries grappling with digitalisation to build the full range of legal and strategic communications expertise they need to engage with the international debate and to implement agreed frameworks in line with the Cyber Strategy 2022. In particular the UK can provide guidance on best practical and regulatory solutions for innovation-promoting data governance as well as leverage its reputation as one of the global top 3 exporters of cyber solutions and cyber expertise to provide mutually beneficial coordinated support.

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

36. In 2021 the UK and five Central Asian states celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. However, according to recent engagement with Central Asian Ambassadors, the UK’s role in the region has significantly reduced in recent years. Dialogue between the UK and Central Asia needs to increase. At present, the UK has no coherent strategy for engagement with Central Asian states.
37. The UK has a strong reputation for aid in the region, particularly in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but it has also increased arms sales to Turkmenistan. According to the Henry Jackson Society, the UK has considerable soft power drawn from educational services and the creative arts. The British Council operates in Kazakhstan, promoting and enhancing social entrepreneurship, social leadership and active civic engagement.⁴ The BBC World Service began operations in Central Asia following the end of the Soviet Union. BBC Azeri, BBC Uzbek and BBC Russian, BBC Persian/Tajiki began in Central Asia in 1994 and radio broadcasts Central Asian states in Kazakh and Kyrgyz began in 1996.

⁴ <https://active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/where-we-work>

38. Many young Central Asians are receptive to liberal values and their cultural preferences are often aligned to the West. A process of reform is underway in certain Central Asian countries, with ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, including the rewriting of Kazakhstan's constitution following unrest last January. There is an opportunity for the UK through meaningful engagement to ensure these reforms lead to democratization, rule of law and civil society.

Challenges

39. Progress in reform across Central Asia is mixed. Tajikistan is lagging behind, mostly due to an enduring civil war, but also because of their ongoing battle with terrorism. Turkmenistan remains highly autocratic and the least liberal. A lack of engagement by the West in Central Asia, chiefly with young people – risks regional isolation, greater influence from authoritarian neighbours and the spread of terrorist organisations.

40. Cuts to BBC World Service foreign language radio services announced last year would have affected output in Central Asian languages.⁵ However, the recent Integrated Review Refresh included £20 million to protect the World Service's 42 foreign language services for two years.⁶ The UK should offer a commitment to long-term, locked-in support for foreign language services, including in Central Asia.

Recommendations

41. There is limited information with regard to views of the UK amongst the populations of Central Asian countries. A 2021 British Council survey questioned global populations on perceptions of Britain, but no Central Asian countries were included for interviews.⁷ Subsequent research by UK entities should prioritise at least one Central Asian country. The British Council should explore opening permanent offices in Central Asian countries, in addition to Kazakhstan.

42. In Tajikistan, there are no consular services and the UK embassy in Dushanbe is not able to provide British visas. Therefore, citizens of Tajikistan have to either travel to Kazakhstan or Turkey to apply for and obtain their UK visas. By providing consular services, improving English language services and holding cultural events through the British Council, the UK has an opportunity to promote its soft power in Tajikistan and other Central Asian states.

43. There are no direct flights from Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to the UK, whereas the rest of the Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, have direct flights to the UK. The Government should work with the private sector to address this issue and connect all Central Asian countries to Britain.

⁵ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/02/02/the-bbc-world-service-shuts-several-foreign-language-radio-services>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-agreed-to-keep-bbc-world-service-on-air>

⁷ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/view-other-side-perceptions-uk-abroad-2021>

44. Many young Central Asians come to the UK for education and employment. Since Brexit, the visa restrictions have been eased to allow a limited number of Tajiks, Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks to come and work in the UK. Cooperation between Western and Central Asian universities and think tanks have increased in recent years. The UK government should take advantage of the opportunity presented by these Western-facing nature of populations in Central Asia and invest more in education programmes and partnerships.

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46. We would be pleased to offer further evidence to the committee or to answer any follow-up questions.

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