

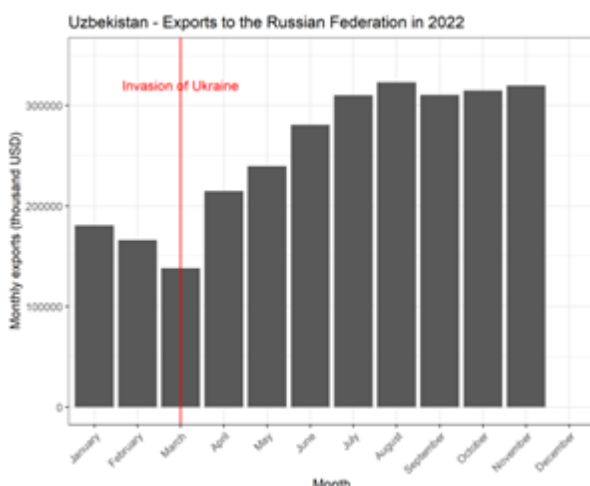
## Written evidence submitted by Partners Governance Practice Ltd (ECA0016)

**Global Partners Governance Foundation. Global Partners Governance is an international development organisation based in London.** Since its establishment in 2005, GPG has conducted institutional strengthening, parliamentary support, anti-corruption and decentralisation work in various regions of the world, including Middle East, Africa, Asia and the Balkans. In Central Asia, GPG carried out capacity building programmes in the Kyrgyz Parliament (2016-2018) and was engaged in a project to establish a Parliamentary Human Rights Committee in the Uzbek Parliament (2020-2022). GPG has also conducted several research projects in the region, working with Central Asian academics and researchers and developed an extensive research portfolio, advising FCDO on several policy areas. We carried out five research reports since 2021 (See annex for a list of the 5 reports prepared by GPG/F as well as the methodology used by our research teams).

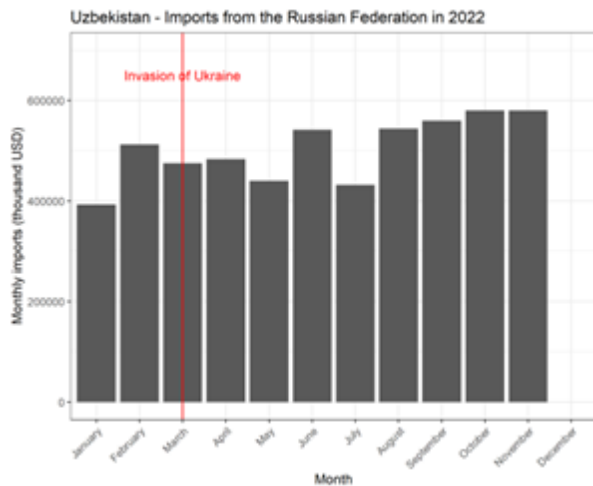
**Summary.** The submission responds to the inquiry about UK's diplomatic activity and soft power influence in Central Asia, examining priorities and challenges to deepen UK's engagement with the region in several areas, to pursue mutually beneficial objectives. The states of Central Asia face several challenges, including economic pressures, border disputes and the risk of radicalisation. Geopolitically, the war in Ukraine has weakened the role of Russia as a security guarantor, and China's efforts at filling the vacuum is causing anxiety. The region is also witnessing social Islamisation, a trend that will bear significant political implications in its next 10-20 years. These developments open a new context full of risks and opportunities for the UK's diplomatic engagement with the region. We will offer recommendations for UK's foreign policy at the end.

### Key regional trends: Economic and political developments

- 1. Central Asian states face significant economic and social pressures, yet have also displayed resilience amidst the global shocks due to the Russian war in Ukraine.** One of the most important financial sources for Central Asian states are remittances of labour migrants working primarily in Russia. While the international sanctions on Russia increased fears of a potential drop in remittances, and thus further risk of instability, these have not materialised. Contrary to predictions, the levels of migration and remittances have remained relatively stable, providing a much-needed source of income at a time of global uncertainty caused by the Russian war in Ukraine. According to the World Bank, remittance flows to Europe and Central Asia are estimated to have increased by 10.3 percent to \$72 billion in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The strengthening of the Russian ruble against local currencies, and the rising demand for migrant workers in Russia after the pandemic contributed to the strength of remittance flows. The graph below tracks the trade volume increased between Uzbekistan and Russia within a short period of time. In the same vein, about 3.12 million migrants came to Russia to work in the second quarter of [2022], which is a third more than last year and is a record quarterly value for at least the last six years.<sup>2</sup>



ent Brief.37: Remittances Brave Global Headwinds. Special Washington, D.C. p.6.



Graph 1. Effect of the Ukraine invasion on exports and imports from the Russian Federation. Source: Uzbekistan’s State Committee for Statistics.

Despite the positive economic outlook, the region suffers from structural economic problems. Poverty, inflation, increasing food prices, growing economic inequalities, and unemployment are threatening the region’s social stability. All these factors lead to social tensions, as we saw in Kazakhstan in January 2022 when a fuel price hike prompted the country’s worst social unrest in its 30 years of independence.

## Border security

- 2. Border disputes, ethnic tensions and radicalisation threaten the region’s security and stability.** The escalation of conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022 was a significant change in the scale and breadth of conflict. Unlike the previous skirmishes that involved border communities, this was an interstate conflict, resulting in over 100 deaths on both sides of the border. A particularly worrying development is the arms race between the two states, and resurgent nationalism, particularly among the border communities who are not interested in engaging with the other side. These developments present significant challenges to the efforts to increase regional cooperation, increasing the region’s vulnerability to external interventions.
- 3. The Taliban’s dramatic takeover of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 increased the risk of transnational extremist networks linked to Afghanistan.** The region thus far has experienced limited terrorism, with the last significant attack happening in 2018 in Tajikistan. Compared with the conflict in Syria, which attracted between 5,000 and 8,000 citizens of Central Asia, the mobilisation to Afghanistan, despite its proximity to the region, has remained minimal.<sup>2</sup> While the risk of mobilisation to armed Islamist groups is now low, the Taliban’s rule has activated pockets of support in the violent extremist eco-system, in which increasingly vocal groups of young people spread propaganda about the Taliban’s provision of public goods and call for the imposition of a similar system of Sharia in Central Asia. Growing dissatisfaction with democracy and democratic states, as well as increasing openness to non-democratic alternatives like the one embodied by Taliban, poses a much more significant challenge to the UK than the threat presented by terrorism from Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Border Security and Violent Extremism in Central Asia, *Global Partners Governance Foundation*. March 2022. London.

## Geopolitics and big power rivalry

4. **The war in Ukraine has accelerated the growing influence of China in the economic, political and security spheres.** This has opened new opportunities for China's objectives in Central Asia in the following areas:

**4.1. Security:** China's security role has been expanding in the region and looks set to grow further as Russia's role declines. While Russia's dominance in the region is gradually decreasing, it will be difficult to entirely replace it. Russia enjoys certain benefits in terms of its existing facilities, long-term relationships, linguistic affinities and technological dependencies.

Name	Country	Type	Location	Strength
201st Military Base	Russia	Military base	Dushanbe and Bohtar, Tajikistan	7,000 troops
Kant Airbase	CSTO	Airbase	Kant, Kyrgyzstan	500 personnel
Baikonur	Russia	Cosmodrome	Baikonur, Kazakhstan	Undisclosed
954th Anti-submarine Weapons Test Base	Russia	Torpedo test site	Koy-Sary, Lake Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan	Undisclosed
Sary-Shagan Test Site	Russia	Anti-ballistic missile testing centre	Sary-Shagan, Kazakhstan	Undisclosed
Okno	Russia	Radar station	Nurek, Tajikistan	Undisclosed
Balkhash Radar Station	Russia	Radar station	Gulshat, Kazakhstan	Undisclosed
Autonomous Seismic Centre No.1	Russia	Seismic Center	Ichkesuu, Kyrgyzstan	Undisclosed
Autonomous Seismic Centre No.17	Russia	Seismic Center	Miley-Suu, Kyrgyzstan	Undisclosed
929 State Flight Test Centre	Russia	Aviation research institution	Taysoygan, Kazakhstan	Undisclosed

338th Naval Communication Centre	Russia	Communication Center	Chaldybar, Kyrgyzstan	Undisclosed
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Graph 2. Russian Military Facilities in Central Asia. Source: GPG's research on "Chinese – Russian Engagement in Central Asia Amidst the Ukraine Conflict", February, 2023. London.

In the long-term, China's role in the region's security and economic domains will increase<sup>3</sup>. Tajikistan is illustrative in this sense. It hosts China's first military bases in the region and has pushed for deeper cooperation with Beijing. It has increased arms exports, accounting for 15.2% of the market between 2016 and 2021, up from 1.3% in the preceding six years. China has sold Wing Loong-1 drones (a copy of the U.S. Predators) and the Russian-modelled Y-8 transport aircraft (based on the An-12) to Kazakhstan, Hongqi-9 (Russian S-300 copy) missile systems to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. China has increasingly opted to cooperate bilaterally rather than via the SCO, cutting Russia out of discussions. In recent years, China has made steady advances to secure dominance of the telecommunications space in the region. To illustrate, Huawei owns 90 percent of Tajikistan's telecommunications infrastructure, connects eight in every 10 Kyrgyz residents to the outside world, and invested over \$500 million in network development in Uzbekistan in 2022. Huawei has close connections to Kazakhstan's top telecommunications companies.

**4.2. Multi-lateral and bi-lateral influence.** China tries to assert its influence in the region through diplomatic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, launched Astana in 2013. Another initiative was the creation of the C+C5 multilateral forum, the first institutionalised mechanism led by China in Central Asia that does not include Russia, as well as being the only forum to involve Turkmenistan. It has developed a Think Tank Forum, a Data Security Cooperation Initiative, and several joint position statements, including one on the "Afghan Issue". Bi-laterally, every Central Asian republic has signed a strategic agreement with China, and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have each signed a higher level Comprehensive Strategic Agreement.<sup>4</sup>

**4.3. Anti-Chinese sentiments.** There is a growing anti-China sentiment amongst the elites and wider public opinion. Our primary research<sup>5</sup> has detected relatively high levels of anti-China sentiment amongst decision makers in several spheres. This sentiment is rooted in the widely-held idea that China is slowly colonising the region by taking control of its resources. With the exception of Tajikistan, survey data shows increasing levels of negative sentiment towards China amongst the general population. Between 2017 and 2021, those with an unfavourable view of China increased from 16% to 45% in Kazakhstan, 6% to 33% in Uzbekistan and 32% to 42% in Kyrgyzstan. Dozens of anti-China protests have taken place in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan between 2018 and 2021.

**4.4. Potential geo-political risk for the UK.** China and Russia's cooperation pose a significant challenge for UK foreign policy in Central Asia. The growing involvement of these two big neighbours in regional politics and security could turn the region into a major site of anti-Western sentiment.

<sup>3</sup> GPGF, "Chinese – Russian Engagement in Central Asia Amidst the Ukraine Conflict", February, 2023, Unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Social Islamisation and women's rights

5. **Central Asians societies are rapidly Islamising.** In the absence of meaningful political channels of participating in politics, growing numbers of the region's youth are turning to Islam as their primary political and social identity. Social Islamisation is a widespread phenomenon across the region, with Islamist charity actors filling in for the state's inability to provide goods and services, especially in the most marginalised areas. In our research on Islamisation in the region, we identified four different Islamist strands in the region: **i) Piety movements** (seeking to achieve individual, familial and local community change through Islamic values, supporting religious and economic freedoms, providing active role for women), **ii) Loyalist authoritarians** (promoting Islamic identity fused with ethno-nationalist ideology to justify authoritarian leaders, boosting the message that national Islam is incompatible with Western democratic values), **iii) Isolationist Islamists** (primarily Salafis in theological orientation with no interest in participating in politics), **iv) Rural/peripheral disfranchised youth** who increasingly adopt Islamic identity.<sup>6</sup> These groups occasionally interact or compete with one another, yet the main contestation happens between the Piety movement and loyalist authoritarians.
  
6. **As the first post-Soviet generation transitions into power, the region's political trajectory is likely to be shaped either by the Piety movement or Loyalists authoritarians.** While both are Islamists, they largely oppose one another and seek different political ends. The Piety movement is an important part of the Islamic revival. Adherents of this tendency no longer have revolutionary political projects that would radically transform their states and societies. Rather, they pursue a reformist version of Islam that represents an alternative modernity, one that is not Western, yet still is cosmopolitan and forward-looking. In contrast to the national Islam espoused by loyalists, pietist movements are universalists, seeking to integrate with the Umma by following styles of dress and practice that resemble more closely the Islam in other parts of the world. This means that, as we observed in focus groups with Islamist activists across the region, young people in particular, have reversed the order of identities taught by Soviet generation parents: they are Muslim first, and Uzbek or Uzbekistani (or Kazakh/Kazakhstani, etc) second. In this sense, it is part of a reaction against the tradition of elders as well as state-enforced secularism.
  
7. **Concerned by the emergence of Islamists outside of the state's realm, Central Asian states directly or indirectly support a loyalist "illiberal Islamisation," which is couched in anti-Western rhetoric.** Similar to the approach that Putin developed in Russia, using the Orthodox Church as a tool for demonstrating his protection of "traditional values," and opposing "the LGBT ideology of the West," or the use of "Christian values" by Victor Orban in Hungary, the elites of the region use their Islamic platforms to justify undemocratic policies and warn citizens of the alleged harm that could come to them from liberal values, including the freedom of conscience or fair elections. These narratives imply that Central Asian societies each have a unique "national Islam" that is "under attack" by Western democracies and other external actors that want to "destroy their national values and traditions." They also portray social pluralism or democratic reforms, including an independent civil society or free elections, as an existential threat and part of an "anti-Islamic" agenda. In response to these "dangers," they promote strong, illiberal leaders who defend "traditional values." They are deeply regressive on gender roles, and in most states offer no space for women to participate in Islamic institutions they control, including

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<sup>6</sup> Plural Pietism and Illiberal Loyalists: Islamist Politics in Central Asia on the Threshold of Generational Change, *Global Partners Governance Foundation*, March 2023. London.

mosques. These discourses present significant challenges for those in the international community who seek to support women's and LGBTQ+ rights.

## Gender equality

- 8. Central Asia is falling behind on international standards on gender equality. Women are disadvantaged in every part of the economy and society.** GPGF's Research on "Women, Peace, Security in Uzbekistan," as well as our work on the Islamisation of youth, revealed that conservative norms promoted in the name of traditions, religion and national values have led to increasing domestic violence against women, as well as suicides among young married women. In the first six months of 2021, 353 women committed suicide only in Uzbekistan.<sup>7</sup> We have also identified disinformation campaigns promoted by sympathisers of the Taliban regime, promoting their ultra-conservative messages about the place of women in society.<sup>8</sup> The conservative shift in the region has also resulted in polygamous marriages. While these marriages are criminalised in national legislations, the practice is common, and is increasingly normalised in Central Asian societies.<sup>9</sup> In case of divorce or separation, women who were married in unregistered Islamic ceremonies cannot claim any property rights for themselves or for their children. While there are also many active women in the Piety movement who gained new forms of agency, built up self-confidence, and challenged patriarchal interpretations of Islam, they are still in the early stages of developing their agenda on gender equality from an Islamic perspective.

## Opportunities and recommendation for UK foreign policy engagement with Central Asia

- **The UK could encourage regional security and economic cooperation.** Increasing regional ownership over economic and security issues could bolster independence and reduce reliance on external powers.
- **The UK could work with the post-Soviet generation.** Central Asian societies are becoming more diverse, and memories of the Soviet era are in decline. At present, unless they speak English or a European language, the younger generation of Central Asians are exposed to a constant barrage of anti-Western and illiberal messaging from both Russian disinformation, and illiberal Islamic activist voices that frequently push anti-Western conspiracy theories. These predominantly target LGBT issues and gender stereotypes. With independent journalism in all forms in local languages under pressure, accurate information and sources that support democratic values – especially including gender equality – are scarce and difficult to access without the knowledge of other languages. Hence, the promotion of the BBC language services could be boosted along with the teaching of the English language, and an expansion of the Chevening scholarships programme.

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<sup>7</sup> The Analysis of Prevailing Human Rights Issues in Uzbekistan: Domestic Violence, Border Conflict (in the Ferghana Region), High-Level Corruption and Serious Organised Crime. *Global Partners Governance Foundation*. February 2022. London.

<sup>8</sup> Afghanistan, Border Security and Violent Extremism in Central Asia, *Global Partners Governance Foundation*. March 2022. London.

<sup>9</sup> Plural Pietism and Illiberal Loyalists: Islamist Politics in Central Asia on the Threshold of Generational Change, *Global Partners Governance Foundation*, March 2023. London.

- **The UK could work to create relationships with actors within the Piety movement in each country.** The “Piety movement” are socially conservative but highly value religious and economic freedoms, and many cite Western liberal democracies including the UK, Canada and the US as the best place to live or raise a family because of their multicultural approach.<sup>10</sup> Bearing in mind that Islamisation of the Central Asia is an inevitable process, there is a chance for the UK government to position itself in the region as a first Western country that does not hesitate to engage with moderate Muslims. More specifically, UK could foster cooperation between secular and Islamic civil society organisations by encouraging joint initiatives such as dialogues, workshops and project coalitions. These mechanisms would also be vehicles for social peace, women's rights and tolerance for pluralism within broader society in Central Asia.

#### **Annex:**

##### **List of research pieces and research methods carried out by GPGF in the Central Asian region:**

- Women, Peace and Security in Uzbekistan: Political Will Without a Comprehensive Strategy- August 2021
- The Analysis of Prevailing Human Rights Issues in Uzbekistan: Domestic Violence, Border Conflict (in the Ferghana Region), High-Level Corruption and Serious Organised Crime – February 2022
- Afghanistan, Border Security and Violent Extremism in Central Asia – March 2022
- Chinese – Russian Engagement in Central Asia Amidst the Ukraine Conflict – January 2023
- Plural Pietism and Illiberal Loyalists: Islamist Politics in Central Asia on the Threshold of Generational Change – March 2023

#### **March 2023**

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<sup>10</sup> Plural Pietism and Illiberal Loyalists: Islamist Politics in Central Asia on the Threshold of Generational Change, *Global Partners Governance Foundation*, March, 2023. London.