

**Written evidence from Dr Sajjan M. Gohel, Marcus Andreopoulos, and Victoria Jones  
(ECA0018)**

## **Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Great Game 2.0**

*The reasons for submitting written evidence centre around Central Asia's geostrategic importance and especially regarding Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. For centuries, Central Asia played a key role, linking the Far East to Europe along the Silk Road. Once again, Central Asia is at the centre of geo-economic priorities but also international security challenges. Russia's war against Ukraine and its fallout, the growing instability in Afghanistan, and China's increasing presence in the region, are three principal factors that necessitate this report on Central Asia. Furthermore, the ramifications of instability that emanate from Central Asia, as well as the roles of Russia and China, directly impact on the geo-strategic and security concerns of the United Kingdom.*

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### **Introduction**

1. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Central Asia was the subject of the Great Game, with Great Britain and Tsarist Russia competing for influence over the region and Afghanistan. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the region is once more at the centre of great power competition, with the added interest of China.
2. When considering how best to pursue partnerships with Central Asian nations, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the United Kingdom must assess each country's most relevant and pressing foreign policy challenges. For these two states, the key relationships to evaluate are those with Afghanistan, Russia, and China.
3. The crucial contexts in which these dynamics are determined have changed drastically since the middle of 2021, after which the world saw the disastrous Western

withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover, Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and China's increasing power and continuing expansion on a global scale.

4. Central Asia provides the U.K. with both an opportunity and challenge to safeguard its security interests from future terrorist attacks. In Afghanistan, both al-Qaeda and the regional ISIS affiliate IS-KP have demonstrated signs of growth, as has the narcotics trade.<sup>1</sup> Through closer collaboration with Afghanistan's neighbours, like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the U.K. can mitigate against this development and better prevent the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into and out of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
5. Furthermore, Central Asia is a crucial route for China to access European markets through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup> As Russia's attention is concentrated on its protracted war in Ukraine, Moscow's influence over the former Soviet republics may wane, leaving China the uncontested opportunity to expand its involvement in Central Asia. Such expansion is not solely economic, but also includes greater military cooperation with the likes of Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> China's increased presence in Central Asia may be unfavourable to the United Kingdom's economic and security interests; thus, greater diplomatic engagement and improved soft power initiatives in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are imperative.

### **The Key Challenges Facing Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**

6. Central Asia features within the nascent 'no-limits' partnership between Russia and China.<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin has historically stood as the region's security guarantor through the Soviet Union. However, this has not deterred China from attempting to build greater economic, security, and cultural ties with the five nations of Central Asia. Since the commencement of President Xi Jinping's BRI, China's presence in Central Asia has deepened with greater economic involvement.<sup>5</sup> This has manifested in the form of loans for infrastructure projects and other means of improving the connectivity between China, Central Asia, and beyond.
7. China's presence in Central Asia is contingent upon the achievement of four essential goals, all of which are based on resource and wealth extraction for Beijing's benefit. In this way, China's objectives in the region are not dissimilar from those exhibited in other parts of the world where Chinese state firms operate, such as Africa and Latin America.<sup>6</sup> In Central Asia, the CCP aims to boost trade and acquire access to local markets; increase investment in infrastructure projects; gain access to transit lanes connecting to Europe; and secure access to the region's raw materials.<sup>7</sup> These ambitions demonstrate the region's centrality to the western sector of the BRI and suggest that China will continue to deepen its ties to the governments of each of the five Central Asian states. Despite Moscow's historic connections to these countries, China is surpassing Russia's economic footprint, as well as the West's, with trade increasing from \$500,000 in 1991 to \$3 billion in 2016 and the development over 100 infrastructure projects.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan maintain strong economic links to China tied to the energy sector.<sup>9</sup> Uzbekistan has also received Chinese grants worth \$285 million for healthcare, education, agricultural needs, water resources, and labour.<sup>10</sup>

8. Despite the large sums of money involved, very little cash actually leaves the Chinese system or enters the domestic economies of the Central Asian states. Instead, the model sees credit from Chinese lenders reinvested by the Central Asian government into a Chinese company, which subsequently sources the equipment and labour necessary to complete the project from China.<sup>11</sup> As a result, China operates an unequal model that entails securing resources and trade routes to extend the growth of its economy at the expense of the interests of Central Asian governments and their economies.<sup>12</sup>
9. Such financial leverage can be used to undermine the geopolitical interests of the recipient country, forcing it to yield to China's demands. For example, Tajikistan and China both claim ownership of a region in the Eastern Pamirs.<sup>13</sup> This issue has been simmering despite the first bilateral agreement that was signed in 1999. In other regions, China has demonstrated its reluctance to observe agreements on disputed territories, like those along its shared border with India.<sup>14</sup> Tajikistan ceded 1,000 square kilometres to China as part of the 1999 agreement, in return receiving a partial debt write-off from China who has far more interest in the disputed land, which is rich in gold and other precious metals and minerals.<sup>15</sup> This outcome reveals how China is able to use its financial muscle to induce Central Asian states to act in accordance to its agendas, making acquiescence on such issues a precondition of the financial support packages it offers. This is particularly impactful in the case of Tajikistan.<sup>16</sup>
10. The overdependence of Central Asian states on Russia, and increasingly more so on China, is a symptom of another problem facing the region: its lack of integration. This has meant that Central Asian countries are unable to form a unified regional bloc to safeguard their own interests, whilst Russia and China utilise multilateral bodies to exert influence over each of the five countries individually.<sup>17</sup> Russia uses the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to preserve its hegemonic influence over the Central Asian nations whereas China ensures that its voice dominates through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).<sup>18</sup> Without a unified institution comprising just the five Central Asian countries, the individual governments of the region are left to engage with the larger powers of Russia and China from far weaker positions.
11. As a case in point, at an SCO meeting in 2022, Uzbekistan unveiled a policy entitled "Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026" in Mandarin, whose stated goal was to further economic cooperation with China.<sup>19</sup> One of the key ongoing projects the two countries are involved in is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project that would link Xinjiang's Kashgar to Andijan, Uzbekistan. The route would then connect to the Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Turkmenistan supplies gas to China's Xinjiang via the Central Asia-China Pipeline, which travels through Uzbekistan.<sup>21</sup>
12. All of these trade routes align with China's strategic aim of connecting several countries in Central Asia as well as linking them beyond the region across Iran, the Middle East, and ultimately Europe. Furthermore, going through countries like Uzbekistan presents Beijing with alternative BRI routes that can bypass Kazakhstan and Russia.<sup>22</sup> The prospect is also appealing on the Uzbek side as it helps to diversify and develop its economy. However, with this comes the risk of becoming too reliant

on China, with concessional loans for infrastructure which mandate that at least half of the materials, equipment, technology, and services must come from China.<sup>23</sup>

### **Implications and Opportunities for U.K. Foreign Policy**

13. Whilst Central Asia appears to be under the influence of Russia and an ascendent China, there remains an opportunity for the U.K. to improve relations and establish partnerships grounded in the security needs of both parties.<sup>24</sup>
14. However, British foreign policy will have to overcome years of soft power cultivation on the parts of Russia and China that has the region predisposed to look towards them rather than the West. Uzbekistan's deep connection with Russia transcends the cultural aspect into the economic, with tens of thousands of Uzbeks migrating to find work in Russia over the past two decades.<sup>25</sup> China, in addition to eclipsing Russia's economic ties to the region, has also attempted to improve cultural ties with Central Asia. There are two Confucius Institutes in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which promote Chinese language and culture with the aim of creating a closer affinity between the populations of these countries.<sup>26</sup> As China continues to become more involved within Central Asian affairs, its institutes will become game-changers in the soft power arena.<sup>27</sup>
15. The lack of integration between Central Asian states can also pose as an opportunity for the U.K. to become more active in the region. However, the U.K. faces an uphill battle in building trust with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Existing studies on public opinion show an overwhelmingly positive view towards Russia and China, with the West lagging far behind.<sup>28</sup> This displays a clear tilt in Central Asian public opinion in favour of Russia, with China as a close second. Thus, significant diplomacy, soft power initiatives, and financial incentives would be required to shift the public's view on the West, including the U.K.

### **The Afghanistan Dynamic and the IS-KP Threat**

16. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has increased the importance of establishing a security dialogue with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who both border the country to the north. Tajikistan has already demonstrated its desire to support opposition movements to the Taliban, offering refuge to members of the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, son of the famed resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud.<sup>29</sup> In addition, land has been ceded to the Chinese to build a military base overlooking the Tajik-Afghan border. This military base, located in Gorno-Badakhshan province, near both the borders with Afghanistan and China, is critical to China for the protection of the Wakhan Corridor, which itself is vital for the BRI.<sup>30</sup>
17. This development demonstrates China's anxieties regarding the security situation inside Afghanistan and how it may affect their own economic interests, whilst also revealing a clear consensus between the Tajik government and the CCP on the necessity for security cooperation vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The more Chinese bases that are built in Tajikistan, the more territory and de-facto sovereignty is yielded to the

CCP, a development that bears similarities to Chinese actions in the South China Sea.<sup>31</sup> However, if the West, including the U.K., do not make clear their desire to assist in security matters relating to Afghanistan, then the Tajik government may view China as the only option, with Russia preoccupied by its war in Ukraine.

18. Furthermore, whilst the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan remains a concern for the future, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are already experiencing direct consequences from the instability brought by the Taliban's return. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the regional ISIS affiliate, has recruited ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks with the intention of having them carry out attacks within Afghanistan and against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>32</sup>
19. IS-KP poses a real threat to the governments and people of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and has launched attacks against both countries in addition to those carried out in Afghanistan. In 2022, IS-KP fired rockets into both Central Asian countries and stepped up its online propaganda campaign aimed at ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, using local dialects.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, IS-KP's dissemination of material in Central Asian languages has been on the rise, with the group creating digital books, audio statements, translations, and social media content in the Uzbek and Tajik languages, including with its media wing, al-Azaim; through its Uzbek Telegram channel Tawhid News, IS-KP has also declared a "great jihad [on] Central Asia," similar language to that used to describe Europe at the height of ISIS' so-called caliphate in the mid-2010s.<sup>34</sup>
20. IS-KP Tajik language content has also been spotted on TikTok and Telegram, including videos with Tajik subtitles that use the Cyrillic alphabet, which suggests a targeting of Tajiks outside of Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, IS-KP has made a point to prop up local media outlets within the Central Asian states. Al-Azaim has been broadcast on official media channels in Uzbekistan.<sup>36</sup> The Ferghana Valley region, which includes Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, may be especially vulnerable to IS-KP recruitment due to the conflict and unrest the area experienced after the dissolution of the USSR, thanks to border tensions and ethnic divisions.<sup>37</sup>
21. These instances have already demonstrated the Taliban's culpability or inability to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist groups to carry out attacks against foreign countries, increasing the possibility of plots against Western interests or on Western soil in the near future. Compounding the problem further has been the illegal narcotics trade in Afghanistan, which constitutes a key source of revenue for the Taliban and its most powerful faction, the Haqqani Network. International organised crime with links to terrorism is being funded through the smuggling of heroin and methamphetamines from Afghanistan, a serious impediment to security and democratic governance in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region.<sup>38</sup>
22. Uzbekistan's and Tajikistan's borders with Afghanistan remain vulnerable, and the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is not able to devote resources and energy to assist with securing them, especially as Russia is distracted with the war in Ukraine. This leaves the perfect chance for China to step in and step up to fill this vacuum.
23. For these reasons, the U.K. has an opportunity to approach both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and develop security partnerships to monitor and respond to developments

in Afghanistan. That the CCP already has a military base in Tajikistan only serves to demonstrate the latter's desire for any security assistance it can get. Greater security along the border between Afghanistan and both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will also cut off a vital pathway for foreign terrorist fighters to leave Afghanistan and make their way to Europe, as well as stop those in Europe from making the journey into the Taliban-controlled country.

## **Conclusion**

24. Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will become more dependent on China in the near future due to the current state of their economy, geographical location, and Russia's absence from the arena as President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine rages on. Moscow's distraction with Ukraine war has also meant an increase in China's role because Uzbekistan and Tajikistan may be worried about secondary sanctions, so turning to China is an appealing alternative.
25. Beijing's attention and investment will be impossible for the U.K. to match in terms of scale and geographical power. Yet, if the U.K. wants to prevent Central Asian nations from totally depending on China, then it needs to engage to some extent. Of course, when it comes to these states, there are also valid concerns surrounding crackdowns on civil liberties, media transparency, and corruption. However, if the U.K. has adopted an Indo-Pacific pivot, and Central Asia features as a part of that, then Britain must increase collaboration in the domains of security and counter-terrorism to ensure regional stability. The U.K. must have alternative options in terms of counter-terrorism cooperation, especially as Pakistan has proved to be an inconsistent partner in this regard, and the country is currently facing enormous internal economic, social, and security challenges.
26. If the U.K. also wanted to put pressure on the Taliban regime and counter the IS-KP threat, there is even the possibility of working with the NRF itself, which is carrying out its resistance movement from within Tajik territory. Of course, proper diplomatic channels would have to be adhered to, and London should consult with other Western capitals and Dushanbe before pursuing any such action.

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