

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Matteo Fumagalli and Dr Filippo Costa Buranelli,
School of International Relations, University of St Andrews (ECA0021)**

Introduction

1. This submission addresses the Foreign Affairs Committee's request for information related to the UK's engagement in Central Asia. Our submission focuses on the key challenges facing the region and its people, the opportunities and the implications these have for the UK.
2. This evidence is submitted by Dr Matteo Fumagalli and Dr Filippo Costa Buranelli. Dr Fumagalli is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of St Andrews specialising in conflict and conflict transformation, ethnic minority politics and resource nationalism in Central Asia. Dr Costa Buranelli is a Senior Lecturer in International relations at the University of St Andrews specialising in comparative regionalism, regional order in Central Asia, Eurasian politics and global governance.

Executive summary

1. The waning of western presence and influence in Central Asia predates both Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. Yet, both events significantly compound pre-existing challenges, limiting the scope and impact of UK action in the region.
2. Talk of a duopoly of influence by China and Russia in Central Asia oversimplifies the complex and evolving role of those countries, the relationships between them and with the Central Asian republics themselves. Furthermore, not everything in Central Asia is about Russia or China and a single prism centred around great power competition risks hindering cooperation with China in even the narrow spaces currently available, such as taking action on climate change.
3. The UK should identify a select number of ambitious but achievable aims, coordinate with allies to avoid duplication and ensure coordination when applicable, and should primarily focus on areas where it can offer added value while enhancing its visibility and impact across the region.
4. Stepping up engagement with Central Asia requires addressing fundamental questions of trust among the Central Asian elites as much as the wider population about the UK's long-term commitment to the region, and its sustainability. The UK needs to find ways to persuade its Central Asian partners that it is stepping up engagement because they matter in their own right and that they share a common vision.
5. The 5+1 format has exhausted its purpose and is increasingly resented by the Central Asian countries who feel they are being bundled into an undistinguished collection of broadly similar states. Rather, the UK should take its actions and projects well beyond the capital cities and the national elites. The focus should be on regions, not 'the Region'.

Evidence

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?

6. The transition to a multipolar and contested world is nowhere more apparent than in Central Asia, where the emergence of five distinct regional players has been accompanied by the involvement of a growing number of powers, proximate and distant, great and less so, including Russia, China, the United States, South Korea, Japan, India, Iran, Turkey, among others. This is a crowded field for the UK to operate in.
7. It is also a complex one, where different configurations of powers and alliances have led to some form of heterarchy, with different powers leading in some sectors, but not all. China is the main economic player. Russia remains the main security actor. This does not result in disorder. Rather, Central Asian order rests upon pillars that differ from, for example, the one in Europe, which has now disintegrated.
8. The most evident challenge, first and foremost to the Central Asian societies themselves, is the cultivation, enhancement, and entrenchment of authoritarian rule. While some domestic reforms have been introduced Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in recent years, the political landscape in the region is notably authoritarian, with Russia and China reinforcing already existing region-level normative preferences for strong rule and autocratic management – what can be called the institutionalisation of (soft) authoritarianism.¹
9. For this reason, activities in support for democracy are likely to face headwinds throughout the region, not least because western conditionality has very limited if no traction and because other democratic partners of the UK such as Japan and South Korea, also very active in the region, do not make democratic progress part of their economically-driven and focused policies for the region.²
10. Kyrgyzstan, for long widely regarded as home to the most competitive and pluralistic political system and a vibrant civil society has gradually but steadily receded in terms of its democratic credentials and behaviour, with widespread crackdowns on independent media and political activists.³ While engagement and sustained support to political reforms in the country are important, the persistent description of Kyrgyzstan as a ‘beacon of democracy’ has fostered complacency within the local elite circles, and project a somehow over-optimistic picture of the country within multilateral and international organisations while glossing over the increasing instances of erosion of the country’s legal and political institutions.
11. The linkages between Russia and China on the one hand the Central Asian states are extensive and dense, ranging from economic ties to military cooperation, political cooperation and, with Russia at least, some degree of shared authoritarian mentalities inherited from Soviet times and perpetuated in the three decades that followed. Yet, such extensive linkages referred have not always translated into leverage, as shown in

¹ F. Costa Buranelli, “Authoritarianism as an institution? The case of Central Asia” *International Studies Quarterly*, 64(4) (2020), pp.1005–1016.

² M. Fumagalli, ‘Growing inter-Asian connections: links, rivalries, and challenges in South Korean-Central Asian relations’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7, 1, 2016, pp. 39-48.

³ <https://transatlanticpuzzle.com/2021/05/10/voices-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-the-case-of-kyrgyzstan/>

the 2010 Osh conflict in Kyrgyzstan or the 2022 border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both blatantly ignored by Russia and China. ⁴

12. Although the war has accelerated certain trends, the Central Asian republics had already, to varying degrees, embarked on the diversification of their foreign political and economic ties.
13. The response of the Central Asian states to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, though broadly formulated around the notion of neutrality, revolves around four no's, objecting to the recognition of the annexed territories, the change of the borders inherited by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to the resort to war to resolve and to the independence of the Russia-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Abstentions or no-shows in international fora may have characterised the Central Asian states position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in some contexts such as the United Nations General Assembly, but not others, as reservations have been aired publicly in more regional settings.⁵
14. The Consequences of the war on the region have thus far not been as clear-cut as envisaged, confounding simplistic expectations and predictions. Although the Central Asian economies have proven more resilient to the fallout of the war than expected, some sectors have suffered. The war has hurt Uzbekistan's trade, investment and financial flows. Inflationary pressures have been felt everywhere due to the disruption of supply chains.
15. For more than twenty years, since the start of the Afghanistan war in 2001, UK's engagement in Central Asia has been predominantly shaped by a security-first focus centred around Afghanistan. The 2021 abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan reinforced the beliefs among many Central Asia that the UK's interest in the region is short-lived.
16. Central Asia does not feature in HMG's Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) 2023,⁶ save for a single mention, reflecting the low priority the region holds for the UK. At the same time all the challenges identified in the IRR 2023 are present in Central Asia. Far from merely being 'the neighbourhood's neighbourhood' Central Asia matters in its own right, and the UK, with a correct focus matched by suitable resources, can contribute to the development and resilience of the Central Asian states and societies.
17. Although HMG maintains a variegated presence in the five countries through diplomatic representation, the British Council and the Trade and Investment Council, the trade relationship is imbalanced and overall, fairly minuscule in both absolute and comparative terms.

⁴ Matteo Fumagalli, 'Stateness, contested nationhood and imperilled sovereignty: the effect of (non-western) linkages and leverage on conflicts in Kyrgyzstan', *East European Politics*, 32, 3, 2016, pp. 355-377.

⁵ <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/kazakhstan-and-russia-after-ukraine-does-pragmatism-pay-36064>

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1145586/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf

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

18. The UK's educational, creative industries and service exports are popular. There is potential for trade volume and investment to grow, but this is – with perhaps the only exception of Kazakhstan – is from a very low base, so the impact is unlikely to be felt in the immediate.
19. UK trade in goods and services with the five Central Asian countries amounted to less than £3bn as of March 2023. The lion's share of UK trade is with Kazakhstan (£2.5bn)⁷. A distant second commercial partner is Uzbekistan (total trade £141m),⁸ followed by Turkmenistan (£43m)⁹, Tajikistan (£42m)¹⁰ and Kyrgyzstan (£28m)¹¹. With the exception of Kazakhstan (the UK's 62nd largest trade partner), all others rank low (Uzbekistan ranks the highest at 139th). Except for Kazakhstan, where the UK exports exceed £774m against £1.8bn of imports (including oils, non-ferrous metals and machinery), the trade relationship is imbalanced, with UK imports a minuscule share of the overall bilateral trade. UK exports tend to include machinery, power generators, pharmaceuticals and chemicals. Imports include minerals. Increasing UK in education and high-end sectors (such as legal) should be a priority, particularly with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.
20. The most promising areas lie in the renewable energy sector (especially wind and solar), water management, fintech. There are also areas in which the UK should strive to make a difference as other countries will not, such as media and internet freedom, freedom of speech, support for civil society.
21. 'Boosting the prosperity, security and resilience to Russian interference', as pledged in the IRR 2023, requires an integrated and systemic approach to the region. Tackling the water, food and energy security of the countries and societies of Central Asia can contribute to diversifying the local economies, create good jobs, enhance prosperity and thus decrease the dependency on Russian and Chinese economic support.
22. An area in which UK foreign policy can find fertile ground and potential incentives for collaboration is in the promotion of sustainable development, renewable energy, and energy diversification¹², with considerable margins for improvement both in terms of decarbonising the economies and diversifying the fuels mix.
23. Climate change and environmental degradation are serious and severe challenges for all the Central Asian republics, and despite the fact that some of them still have to rely considerably on oil and gas for their economic development – specifically Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – the greening of the regional economy is progressively being institutionalised and promoted.¹³

⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142158/kazakhstan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-03-17.pdf

⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142432/uzbekistan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-03-17.pdf

⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142422/turkmenistan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-03-17.pdf

¹⁰https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142414/tajikistan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-03-17.pdf

¹¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142164/kyrgyzstan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-03-17.pdf

¹² https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/CADGAT_data_article_28.pdf

¹³ F. Costa Buranelli, "The Institution of Environmentalism in Central Asia", in Climate

24. There is considerable space for growth exactly in the areas where the the UK is at its strongest, such as education and high-end services, particularly in relation to Uzbekistan and in areas that are central to both UK policies and UN Sustainable Development Goals. This includes assisting Tajikistan in delivering the Roghun dam project in a way that progressively leads to a zero-carbon economy, while mitigating impacts on downstream countries, and assist the Kyrgyzstani authorities in their efforts to protect rapidly-melting glaciers. The development of a regional development market is another area in which the UK can offer support to support decarbonisation and boost domestic and regional green economies, creating good, productive jobs.
25. UK civil society organisations have extensive experience in conflict transformation, prevention, peace-building and community engagement, which could be effectively deployed along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border where violent clashes have increased in frequency and intensity in recent years.
26. Collaboration with local universities can be made conditional on protecting freedom of speech and academic freedom.
27. By taking leadership in introducing reforms at home and ensuring that kleptocratic elites do not move their wealth to the UK or UK territories,¹⁴ the UK can then lead by example in anti-money laundering legislation without being accused of double standards.

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?

28. Russia and China have a strong and multifaceted presence in the region, where both have strong stakes. In the first half of 2022 China trade with Kazakhstan had tripled compared to the 2016 volume. Beijing’s trade with Uzbekistan had grown by a third from 2021 to 2022. Russia is Kyrgyzstan’s main source of imports and the 2nd for Tajikistan.
29. The war has damaged Russian power, hard and soft, and raised doubts concerning the Collective Security Treaty Organisation which declined the request for help by Kyrgyzstan on the occasion of the armed conflict with Tajikistan in September 2022 (Armenia’s request over the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan was similarly turned down).
30. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has confronted the Central Asian countries with considerable challenges, from the need to navigate a complex and evolving regional and global geopolitical environment, to the economic fallout on the region of the western sanctions against Russia. With some degree of equilibrium, ambivalence and ambiguities the Central Asian states have been able to navigate the period following February 2022 by maintaining working relations with Russia while diversifying their economic and diplomatic ties, accelerating efforts that were well under way even before the start of the Ukraine war.

31. The reliance of households in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on remittances, primarily from Russia, which account for about 30-40% of each country's GDP exposes them to pressure and gives Russia leverage.

What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?

32. The Central Asian states are well known for their institutional flexibility, adaptability, and membership of regional and international organisations.¹⁵ While there are (macro)regional institutions in which no single Western power is member, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and each of them is somehow linked to an attempt of neighbouring great powers to project power, the Central Asian republics are also eager members of institutions that include Western states, such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and, of course, the UN. In fact, it is within the UN framework that recent research has shown that the Central Asian republics uphold and promote the basic normative structures of international order, such as sovereignty, non-interference, international law, anti-nuclearism, environmentalism, and sustainable development.¹⁶
33. Extra-regional powers have typically adopted a 5+1 format when engaging with the region. This is of limited utility, especially in light of the diversity of the regional countries. HMG should engage with the Central Asian republics on a multilateral basis when it comes to present visions and common approaches, but on a bilateral basis when it comes to discussing targeted projects and possibilities for cooperation.
34. The UN and the OSCE form adequate platforms for working more closely with the regional countries over themes pertaining to sustainable development, economic modernisation and diversification, and cooperation in the field of energy and human security, science and academia. The recently-signed memorandum of understanding whereby Kazakhstan joined the Effective Governance for Economic Development program in Central Asia is a case in point.¹⁷
35. The UK is one of the very few Western countries to benefit from a diplomatic, political, commercial, and scientific presence in all five Central Asian states, and could leverage on such presence by hosting periodic events – both at the regional level and at the level of each single country – inclusive of civil society actors, including academics and members of local think tanks, to better target the policy areas that are of interest and relevant to local societies, economies and specific sectors.
36. Central Asia is a region marked by sustained population growth, with a median age of 27.6 years.¹⁸ Engaging the youth is essential to have more impact in the region, especially in the fields of rights and energy transition.

¹⁵ F. Costa Buranelli, "Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections", *Central Asian Affairs*, 8(1), pp. 1-26.

¹⁶ F. Costa Buranelli, "May we have a say? Central Asian states in the UN General Assembly", *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5(2) (2014), pp. 131-144.

¹⁷ <https://astanatimes.com/2023/03/uk-foreign-secretary-visits-kazakhstan-meets-president-tokayev/>

37. An additional area of possible convergence between Central Asia and the UK in matters pertaining to foreign policy is Afghanistan. While the Central Asian republics coordinate their engagement efforts with neighbouring countries through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the informal organisation ‘Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan’ and the ‘Moscow Talks’, they have all recently advocated a more inclusive approach to domestic governance, exhorting the Taliban to pay attention to the political and social representation of all ethnic groups and to abandon their odious policies against girls and women, especially in the field of education. Working in partnership with Central Asian governments on Afghan matters in fora like the UN and the OSCE would constitute a pragmatic area of cooperation, especially as the Central Asian states are key stakeholders in the regional process of securitisation, and holders as well as providers of invaluable information and political capital in the area.¹⁹

Prospects and recommendations

The following recommendations are for consideration by the Foreign Affairs Committee:

- a. Overcome the ‘5+1 framework’ which has passed its purpose and effectiveness. Shared transnational challenges are real, but such a blanket approach risks perpetuating the image of a region which is indistinct.
- b. *Regions*, not ‘Region’: The UK should increase the frequency of dialogues, but also diversify the venues and local stakeholder involvement beyond the capitals and national elites to engage with the breadth and depth of the Central Asian societies. Global politics and socio-economic priorities look and feel different in Osh, Atyrau, Nukus, Mary and Khorog. In this respect, the UK could capitalise on the recent policy shift made by several Central Asian chanceries to prioritise border regions as actors of regionalisation in themselves.
- c. Consider more flexible, cross-sectoral approaches to dealing with the challenges of the region (some of which are in fact global and shared by the UK) by including a ‘nexus’ framework linking food, water and energy security, as the UK has relevant expertise in each of these areas.
- d. Cognisant of its limited capabilities and resources, the UK should focus on areas where it can make a significant difference, such as media freedom and freedom of speech, education and community-level conflict transformation, renewable energy, health, and poverty reduction.
- e. While building up a distinct UK profile in the region, HMG should work closely with allies in key areas would avoid duplication, coordinate efforts and therefore engender multiplier effects.
- f. Leverage the strengths of the UK’s four countries to offer the Central Asian countries a portfolio of partners and share a variety of experiences by highlighting the contribution of its individual components to the needs of specific areas, such as Scotland in the area of renewable energy (wind).

¹⁸ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/>

¹⁹ F. Costa Buranelli, “Your problem, my opportunity – Comparing Western and Eurasian discourses and practices over Afghanistan” in *Afghanistan and the Rule of Law after 2021: Legal and Social Developments* prepared at the Max Planck Institute (Heidelberg, Germany) edited by Ilaria Vianello and Stephan Ollick.

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