

Written evidence submitted by the FCDO (ECA0023)

FAC INQUIRY – TERMS OF REFERENCE

BEGINS

The Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan sit on the fault lines of great power competition between two of the UK's foremost competitors: China and Russia. Some of these states are in a time of considerable transition in their political and economic development and are re-evaluating their relationship with the rest of the world. All confront major challenges in competition for water and energy resources. In recent years the UK Government has cooperated with these states on issues including withdrawal from Afghanistan and energy security.

This inquiry seeks to scrutinise the UK's diplomatic activity and soft power influence in Central Asia and to identify priorities for the Government as it seeks to deepen its engagement on security, energy, trade, environment and investment to pursue mutually beneficial objectives.

The Committee welcomes written evidence on the following:

- 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?*
- What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?*
- 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?*
- What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?*
- 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?*

ENDS

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Written evidence

This memorandum comprises the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's evidence submission for the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) inquiry into Central Asia (CA). It focuses on UK policy towards each of the Central Asian states - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - as well as towards Central Asia as a region. It is structured around the questions posed by the FAC in its terms of reference for the inquiry.

The memorandum provides an overview of HM Government's (HMG) analysis of regional issues, including the challenges facing the region, opportunities and risks for the UK, the role of other key regional actors, and UK interaction with Central Asian states in multilateral organisations. The memorandum addresses key issues including conflict, energy security, governance and human rights, as well as the possible implications of changing dynamics between the Central Asian states and their neighbours. It summarises the UK's policy approach including: our strategic focus on improving security, governance and prosperity across all five Central Asian states; the UK's approach to the region in multilateral fora; UK development and programming activity; and information about the cross-Government British Embassy platforms through which the UK pursues our goals.

Part 1: Key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade

1. Overview

The Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (CA5) established their independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. They are located in a geopolitically important zone between Russia, China, Afghanistan and Iran, and sustain economic, cultural and other ties stretching to Türkiye, South Asia and beyond.

While each of the five states has its own distinct national identity, they share a recent history as part of the Soviet Union, including legacy approaches to governance, infrastructure, civil society and education. They also have different degrees of interdependency with their neighbours, notably Russia and China. Prior to Russian Tsarist and then Soviet control, the people of today's CA states retained predominantly Islamic identities - repressed by the Soviets and to varying degrees reasserted since independence. While similarities among the states are instructive, and regional approaches have growing relevance, it is important also to consider the UK's relations with each of these sovereign states on an individual basis.

More than thirty years after independence, and at a pivotal time for the region, the Central Asian states are consolidating their independence and building capabilities to navigate an uncertain decade ahead. There are significant opportunities for the region, and its peoples, as well as for external partners. At the same time, they face defining challenges including: aging Soviet-era energy, transport and water infrastructure with limited regional integration; quickly growing, young populations; deepening inequalities and gender disparities, and cultural differences between

urban areas and rural communities; fragile institutions and governance, with transitions underway between generations; corruption; and powerful security structures rooted in Soviet systems. The five CA states also face varying levels of debt sustainability. Climate risks (including, though not only, water scarcity) are rising, alongside the challenges caused by damaging Soviet environmental legacies such as the shrinking of the Aral Sea. Lastly, borders with Russia, China, Afghanistan and Iran, create logistical vulnerabilities, geographical and infrastructural issues, significant problems for export and supply chains in key industries, and the risk of sanctions circumvention.

1.1 Regional Stability

Stability in the CA region since 1991 has been punctuated by significant outbreaks of unrest. These include: the devastating Tajikistan civil war in the early 1990s (which lasted 5 years and led to the loss of at least 20,000 lives); the Batken events (armed clashes in 1999 between militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan, with support to the latter being provided by the Uzbekistan Ground Forces); the Andijan protests (in Uzbekistan in 2005, resulting in security forces firing on protestors, with estimates of several hundred deaths); three revolutions (2005, 2010, 2020) in Kyrgyzstan; and mass inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. During 2022, violent protests broke out in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Local security forces have in each case utilised force to quell unrest. In the case of Kazakhstan in January 2022, President Tokayev sought the assistance of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to end what he described as an attempted coup, with evidence that in some cities, notably Almaty, organised violence overtook legitimate peaceful protest.

1.2 Border Conflicts

Border clashes, particularly on the Uzbek/Tajik/Kyrgyz borders, have been a frequent occurrence in CA since 1991. This is primarily a result of complicated and sometimes poorly defined borders. Enclaves and exclaves exist across the region, which are neither fully delimited nor demarcated, sometimes isolating their residents from their titular governments. These complexities have resulted in conflict over access to land, water and other resources. Most recently, in April 2021 and September 2022, clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border escalated into armed military conflict. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan ratified a border agreement in November 2022, ending a 30-year bilateral dispute, with an accompanying agreement on joint management of water resources. Relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have also improved in recent years, including bilateral cooperation on electricity. While these are hopeful signals of growing regional cooperation, there remains a genuine risk that tensions could resurface if underlying concerns are not resolved.

1.3 Energy security, water security, and climate change

The Central Asian states are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Temperatures in CA are expected to rise faster than the global average. Rising temperatures are already affecting regional water patterns and driving water scarcity

and food insecurity in parts of the region. Climate change is expected to increase the risk of accelerated glacial melting, droughts and extreme weather events. If no action is taken, economic damage from droughts and floods in CA is projected to be up to 1.3% of GDP per annum, while crop yields are expected to decrease by 30% by 2050. The Central Asian region could see as many as 2.4 million climate migrants by 2050.

Access to water remains a potential conflict driver. Across the region's southern borders, in the north of Afghanistan, the Taliban are constructing a canal which will take water from the Amu Darya River, from which Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan draw water downstream. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan receive 90% and 80% respectively of their water supply externally. It is estimated that the Central Asian states are collectively losing around \$4.5 billion due to a lack of cooperation in the management of Transboundary Rivers. Increasing competition over water resources poses a significant risk to regional stability.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are fossil fuel-rich and this has defined their economic development over the last 30 years. Mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have abundant water resources, but largely lack the wealth that their neighbours generate through extractive industries. Both states have significant hydro-electric potential, but lack the investment to realise this fully. Russia's war in Ukraine has had significant knock-on effects on the region's energy security and its economy given the significant reliance on, and integration with, Russia. Increased sharing of energy resources, diversified trade options, and better management of water resources, could significantly increase the resilience of the region and help to address these vulnerabilities.

Kazakhstan has pledged to reach a target of net-zero emissions by 2060, Kyrgyzstan by 2050. Most CA states have recently updated their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) with more ambitious climate targets by 2030. However, these plans tend to lack clear, developed roadmaps on how to reach targets or create the necessary environment for investment. The World Bank estimates the investment required in CA regional energy to be \$150bn through to 2030. The majority of Soviet era infrastructure is now beyond its useful life, with shortages and breakdowns becoming more frequent. Meanwhile, regional energy demand is expected to increase by more than 30% by 2030.

CA has abundant renewable energy resources that can support its future energy needs whilst delivering a low carbon transition. However, fossil-fuel dependent economies such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have little incentive to accelerate shifts away from fossil-fuel export growth models while energy prices are high, and they have an abundant supply of cheap coal/gas for their internal markets.

Limited governance reform, subsidies, and the lack of transparent and competitive market rules or regulation also impede the Central Asia energy sector's development. Regional energy trade flows are negotiated on a bilateral, not regional, basis, and related decisions are often politically driven, which constrains effective regional cooperation on both energy and water. Just 2.5% of regional

energy demand is traded across national borders and only 40% of interconnection capacity is utilised.

1.4 Transnational Threats – Serious and Organised Crime/Illicit Finance

The Central Asian region also faces a series of transnational threats, including commodities trafficking, cyber-crime, illicit finance, drug trafficking - in particular via long borders with Afghanistan - and serious and organised crime (SOC). The UK, working across HMG and with our partners, is supporting the CA states in responding to these threats. For example, the UK's National Crime Agency has a focus on the serious and organised crime threat, with other UK agencies gradually increasing engagement with Central Asian counterparts.

1.5 Terrorism

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan has a significant impact on Central Asian states' security. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan share borders with Afghanistan and have long histories of managing cross-border instability. The CA region itself has also been a source of international terrorists and foreign fighters. Several high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe and North America have been committed by Central Asian citizens. Thousands of Central Asians (including labour migrants in Russia) are believed to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside Islamic State. Domestic radical Islamist movements have remained marginal for now but are of growing concern. The risk of extremism has also been used by governments in the region to crack down on minority groups, or groups out of favour.

1.6 Sanctions

Central Asian economies are integrated to a greater or lesser extent with Russia, in areas covering energy infrastructure (e.g. the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) oil pipeline, electricity grid, and gas pipelines), logistics routes (e.g. Russian railways), imports and exports, investment and joint businesses, and labour markets. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), with obligations around removing barriers to trade and movement of goods, people and capital. Given the significant economic integration between Central Asian states and Russia, the sanctions applied to Russia following its invasion of Ukraine have added legal risk to logistics, supply chains and financial flows for trade with and through Russia. The UK has recognised this and, in some cases sanctions licences have been approved given the lack of viable alternatives for Central Asian states (e.g. the CPC oil pipeline which takes around 80% of oil from Kazakhstan's multinational projects to the Russian port of Novorossisk on the Black Sea).

1.7 Implications for UK foreign policy

The UK has a strong interest in the security, stability and prosperity of the Central Asian region. A sovereign, stable and prosperous Central Asia will be better able to handle political, security, social and economic challenges, and manage the competing pressures of its external relationships in a difficult neighbourhood. We are therefore seeking to increase our engagement in the region and with individual

states. Given resources available, a key aspect of our approach is to work closely with likeminded partners, including G7, EU, OSCE and other key stakeholders to maximise opportunities across political, economic and security agendas, and encourage reform. A further underlying goal is to encourage greater regional integration, to foster intra-regional trade, energy and water networks, as well as security cooperation and wider resilience.

Part 2: What are the opportunities for the UK in strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?

HMG recognises the importance of the Central Asian region to UK foreign and development policy, national security and prosperity interests: from supporting reform, democracy and human rights; to managing the strategic challenge posed by Russia; to responding to the growing influence of other states in the region, including China; to the rules based international system; to global security; to supporting UK prosperity and energy security; and containing threats from Afghanistan.

We are re-energising our efforts to develop long-lasting partnerships in areas of mutual benefit, as envisaged in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. The Foreign Secretary's visit to Kazakhstan in March 2023, the first by a British Foreign Secretary for 20 years, had particular significance in repositioning the UK in the region, generating an impact on which we seek to build.

We have an established track record in the region, and are one of only three European countries with active Embassies in all five CA countries. Current opportunities for the UK vary by country. Our development programmes, established in the early years of independence, continue to evolve, including in areas of economic governance, private sector development and essential humanitarian aid; most recently following the Kyrgyzstan -Tajikistan border clashes. The UK is a top 10 investor in Kazakhstan, with UK businesses holding key stakes in two out of three flagship multinational oil projects. We also support significant higher education collaborations, and defence and security cooperation in several CA countries. For example, HMG's Developing Countries Trading Scheme provides opportunities for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to improve their access to the UK market as part of supporting a more sustainable growth trajectory. Several private UK operators have signed agreements with the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan under the UK's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme. In addition to its primary purpose, this expanding scheme offers the opportunity for CA workers to experience the UK, deepen their knowledge of the agricultural sector and contribute to the economic development of CA on their return

2.1 Ministerial engagement

There is a steadily increasing series of UK Ministerial and senior official visits to Central Asian states. We are also supporting regular visits to the UK by CA interlocutors, hosted by the FCDO and other Government departments. At varying levels, Central Asian governments have confirmed their ambition to build meaningful relationships with the UK. Our aim is to maintain this momentum in both directions.

Our relationship with each CA country is distinct, with different elements emphasised according to UK interests and the needs, appetite and capacity of the host governments. Our Embassies maintain valuable networks inside and outside governments. In addition to the Foreign Secretary's successful visit to Kazakhstan in March 2023, five Ministerial delegations travelled to Uzbekistan in the past 18 months and a Minister visited Tajikistan in 2021. In the past year, we have hosted inward visits by the Kazakh Foreign Minister, two Kyrgyz Deputy Prime Ministers, junior Ministers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and senior officials from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In Kazakhstan, engagement is increasingly frequent across our strategic priorities. We are able to raise concerns (such as over judicial independence and electoral processes) in exchanges with our Kazakh counterparts and Kazakhstan continues to be the UK's most prominent economic partner in the region. While energy continues to underpin Kazakhstan's economy, we also support efforts to diversify, cooperate on security and foreign policy issues, and push for the implementation of their domestic reform programmes.

We are in a period of growth in UK-Uzbek relations. Demand for UK support has seen us increase programme funding in recent years to support political and economic reform efforts and increase the number of staff in our Embassy in Tashkent. We have an annual Senior Official consultation covering all aspects of our relationship, upgraded this year to a Strategic Dialogue.

We hold annual Ministerial-level strategic dialogues with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In March 2023, we held an inaugural political dialogue with Tajikistan. These meetings provide a forum for cross-government discussions covering the full range of cooperation on reform, foreign, security and development policy and trade. While we do not currently have a formal ministerial mechanism with Kyrgyzstan, we aim to have a substantial ministerial interaction at least once a year and are considering options for further engagement.

2.2 Working alongside Likemindeds

A key aspect of our Central Asia strategy is engagement with partners also active in the region. Our most frequent interlocutors are the US, Canada, EU and specific European partners (notably France and Germany), Türkiye, South Korea and Japan. A recent example of this close coordination is the joint statement released in Astana earlier this year with the US, Canada and the EU to mark the one-year anniversary of the January 2022 clashes. We also cooperate closely across the region with the UN agencies, major international NGOs and International Financial Institutions.

2.3 Trade

UK trade with the CA region has good potential for growth. Kazakhstan is the UK's largest regional trade partner, with an economy a third larger than the rest of Central Asia combined. Shell's long-term investment in Kazakhstan's Kashagan and Karachaganak oil and gas fields represents the biggest UK economic interest in the region (c. \$16bn invested since 2005). With the change in policy towards support to fossil fuel projects, we are actively exploring opportunities for UK trade and

investment in critical minerals, education, infrastructure, agriculture, financial and professional services and the transition to green energy. The latter will be particularly important for the region given economies and domestic energy systems are tied to fossil fuel production.

In Kazakhstan, in March 2023, the Foreign Secretary signed Memoranda of Understanding on critical minerals and green hydrogen, areas where the UK has particular interests and expertise. Kazakhstan has globally significant reserves of critical minerals which feature on the UK's priority list. UK companies already have a strong presence in this market. For example, a UK company is about to open the world's largest vanadium mine. Other Central Asian countries also have significant mineral reserves. We believe this is a particularly promising area for deeper collaboration, given UK companies' skills, experience and cutting edge technology.

A further important area for focus is the 'Middle Corridor' Transcaspien Transport project. Given the challenge that sanctions present to transiting Russia, this initiative aims to increase resilience by improving connectivity from the Kazakh/Chinese border through to Türkiye and beyond. There is an opportunity for HMG and other partners to both facilitate investment in infrastructure, and also support political agreement to create a predictable economic logistics pathway for Central Asia.

In addition to specific sectors, all of our Embassies in Central Asia work closely with DBT to increase UK trade and investment by encouraging the region's governments to undertake the steps necessary to improve the business environment, including by improving governance and the rule of law. In this regard, the opening of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), established with UK support in Kazakhstan in 2018, is an important development, operating on the basis of English Common Law with a successful court and arbitration centre run by English judges. Similar projects in Uzbekistan are in their planning stages, and could provide comparable improvements for the business environment.

UK support to Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organisation provides the opportunity to encourage rules-based international trade and improve the business environment for UK exporters. The UK is also well placed to assist Uzbekistan's drive for privatisation. Support for the largest State Owned Enterprises' (SOEs) Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) on the London Stock Exchange will underpin changes in governance, transparency, and environmental business practises as well as bring value for the City of London. Fifteen of the largest SOEs have already been prioritised by the Uzbek government for IPOs domestically and internationally in the coming months and years.

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also taking advantage of the 'Developing Countries Trading Scheme' (DCTS) which offers lower tariffs and simpler rules of origin requirements for countries exporting to the UK. Tajikistan is immediately eligible for the enhanced preferences under the General Framework, while both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan fall under the Enhanced Framework. Access to the DCTS is contingent on a country's human rights record; HMG retains the power to suspend a country's preferences for serious and systematic violations of human

rights and labour rights based on international conventions. This also includes climate change and environment conventions.

We have a number of official bilateral structures in place to improve trade and investment links between the UK and the region. For Kazakhstan, since PM Cameron's visit in 2013 we have held an annual Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Investment (IGC), led by Trade Ministers. Most recently held in London on 7 February 2023, the IGC was co-chaired by Lord Dominic Johnson, Minister of State for Investment, and explored business opportunities in mining, education and agriculture, considered ways to address barriers to market entry and promote an open, fair business environment.

The imminent agreement of the transitioned EU agreement with Kazakhstan, the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, will provide a basis for expanded cooperation and an opportunity to refresh the current architecture of annual ministerial engagement.

We held the annual Uzbek-British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC) meeting on 30 November 2022 in Uzbekistan. 126 delegates from 73 British companies and educational establishments attended, which represented the second largest ever trade delegation visit to Uzbekistan. Given ongoing economic reform in Uzbekistan, and with the largest population in Central Asia, we see strong opportunities for growth.

Central Asian ambition to diversify trade options offers the UK an opportunity to both support the business environment in the region, and encourage further investment from UK companies.

- In 2022, total trade in goods and services between the UK and Kazakhstan was £2.5 billion, an increase of 98.1% or £1.3 billion from the four quarters to the end of Q3 2021;
- Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Uzbekistan was £141 million, a decrease of 62.5% or £235 million from the four quarters to the end of Q3 2021;
- Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Turkmenistan was £43 million, an increase of 53.6% or £15 million from the four quarters to the end of Q3 2021;
- Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Tajikistan was £42 million, an increase of 250.0% or £30 million from the four quarters to the end of Q3 2021;
- Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Kyrgyzstan was £28 million, an increase of 86.7% or £13 million from the four quarters to the end of Q3 2021.

2.4 UK Development and Programme funding

The FCDO funds initiatives such as the Economic Governance for Economic Development (EGED) programme directly and also manages the work of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) in the region, a cross-Government fund

that tackles conflict, stability and security challenges which threaten UK national security.

2.41 Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)

The Central Asia Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) programme delivers projects in all five Central Asia countries. Administered from the CSSF Programme Hub in Bishkek and implemented via our Embassies, the programme supports the security and governance pillars of our regional strategy and the cross-cutting 'Russia & China', 'Gender' and 'Values' priorities.

We had a greater focus on Uzbekistan from 2019/20 to 2020/21 because of opportunities to support reform and good governance. From 2021/22, there was a greater focus on Tajikistan in relation to Afghanistan and on Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which are eligible for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and border areas of fragility.

The current CA CSSF Portfolio commenced in financial year 2022/23 and focuses on the most significant security needs through the following thematic priorities:

- **Peacebuilding** – addressing conflict and instability in vulnerable areas including the Ferghana Valley and Afghanistan/CA borders. Improving understanding of correlation between vulnerabilities and violence and more coordinated, collaborative peacebuilding. Increasing capacity for UN military contingent contributions.
- **Countering State Threats** – promoting Central Asian regionalism and integrated responses to threats, independent of malign influences, such as by providing clear regional narratives countering disinformation on Russia's war in Ukraine.
- **Women, Peace and Security** – reducing Gender Based Violence (GBV) and addressing Russian-influenced backlash on gender equality and women's rights.

The Central Asia CSSF Portfolio has valuable partnerships to lever change including:

- **The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)** works across all five Central Asian states in countering Russian narratives on gender equality and delivering multi-sectoral, survivor-centred inclusive Gender Based Violence (GBV) services to women and girls, including the most vulnerable;
- **The UN International Organization for Migration (IOM)** migration project on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) has the potential to be game changing, in terms of diversifying migratory routes for CA5 workers and finding alternative labour markets;
- Partnerships with the **World Bank** and **UN** continue to enhance delivery through coordination and collaboration with donors, partners, NGOs, civil society organisation and governments in areas of instability and risk (Ferghana Valley and Afghanistan/CA border areas).

2.42 Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED)

The UK-funded EGED programme was launched in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2021 and, from 2023, it will expand into Kazakhstan. EGED provides

knowledge and expertise through technical assistance, aiming to promote economic governance reform in CA.

EGED delivers to the governance and prosperity pillars of the regional strategy. Its overarching objective is to support economic growth and transparent, responsive and effective governing institutions in recipient countries, held to account by informed and active populations. Through this support, these countries and governments should become increasingly prosperous and resilient to external threats. EGED integrates gender equality and social inclusion considerations into all projects.

The programme is managed by the CA Development Team, which is integrated within British Embassies in CA, combining programmatic and advisory expertise with diplomatic and political influence to achieve results in target countries.

Recent notable successes include the revision of the social protection benefits policy in Tajikistan to target more poor households with higher benefits, potentially lifting between 100,000 and 200,000 people from poverty in the next three years. In Uzbekistan, EGED supported the revision of the Labour Code – the first revision in 27 years of Uzbekistan’s independence, which streamlined the ‘equal pay for equal job’ principle to reduce gender-based discrimination in labour.

2.43 International Programme

The International Programme (IP) was created in 2017 by amalgamating the then-FCO's core departmental policy programme budgets into a single unified fund. The overall aim is to support the development of stable, open and prosperous countries. The IP seeks to advance our National Security and foreign policy objectives by championing effective governance, democracy, civil society and human rights. For example, in Turkmenistan, the British Embassy chairs partner groups for Climate Change and Gender Issues bringing together Embassies, development agencies and Government. The work of the IP supports the UK Development Strategy in promoting global prosperity and strengthening global peace, security and governance, helping to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Linked to this, the UK directly works to promote a stronger, diversified and more inclusive private sector in the region. Our Enterprise and Innovation Programme has been active in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since 2019 and provides training to entrepreneurs to drive job creation and improve economic resilience. Plans are in place to extend similar support to Uzbekistan and later Kazakhstan.

2.5 Defence and security engagement

The UK works to support the countries of CA in the reform and modernisation of defence and security sectors.

We use our regional defence teams in Astana and Tashkent, drawing on cross-government expertise, and by providing educational links, capacity building, and in-country training to help increase awareness of international norms in the security sphere. We introduce modern defence concepts around leadership, command and control, as well as courses on issues like gender awareness, with a particular focus

in Kazakhstan on developing international peacekeeping capabilities. In Kazakhstan, we have worked closely with KAZCENT, the peacekeeping centre, to develop the capabilities of peacekeeping troops taking part in UN missions, and to develop the capability of KAZCENT itself to become a centre of excellence for UN training. Multilaterally, we work through the OSCE, UN and International Financial Institutions to tackle challenges to stability of all kinds and promote resilience, as well as with international partners also active in the region.

We have consistently supported international efforts to manage and resolve the region's border conflicts, which undermine regional stability, hamper political and economic reform efforts, and threaten UK interests. There are other national security challenges emanating from the region. There is a growing terrorist/extremist threat in CA linked to ISKP and AQ in Afghanistan. Central Asian governments take these threats seriously and are open to cooperation. We have built increasingly strong links with Central Asia on Afghanistan and Counter-Terrorism. This has seen exchanges of official-led visits, engagement between special representatives, and better links between capitals. This is an area where both the UK and Central Asia are increasingly interested in doing more.

A number of Central Asian governments have begun programmes for the reintegration of 'foreign fighters', with a UNICEF representative recently calling it "an example for other countries in the region ... by being one of the first to repatriate its women and children from Syria and Iraq and effectively reintegrate them into society".

The Serious and Organised Crime threat to the UK from the region is covered remotely by the National Crime Agency.

A proportion of our programme funding goes to security-related projects including UK secondees to the international conflict management effort, training on peacekeeping, countering state threats and enhancing resilience and Women, Peace and Security projects and security sector reform/capacity building projects.

2.6 Energy security, climate and environment

Central Asia's energy infrastructure requires investment, to promote energy security and resilience across the region, as well as to kick-start the green transition. The UK is committed to supporting Central Asian countries' transition to cleaner energy sources. We regularly engage, bilaterally and multilaterally, on climate change and the various risks facing the region. We have dedicated climate leads in the region who also engage with partners. Given the significant risks facing the region, including growing populations and varying reliance on fossil fuels, and the immediate imperative for energy investment, this is an area of opportunity for the UK to engage and share expertise, including on how to develop a policy framework to attract international investment.

We are contributing to efforts to increase energy security and regional economic cooperation, including through the Central Asia South Asia power project (CASA-1000) which is a \$1.2B energy transmission infrastructure programme, financed by a consortium of international donors. Since 2015, the UK has provided £31M in grants

to CASA100 for key infrastructure and community support projects. We are also supporting Central Asian countries' transition to cleaner energy sources through partners, such as the World Bank, incentivising transformative change in the energy sector.

We are actively seeking opportunities to maximise the potential of non-governmental collaborations, including the recent designation of the Kazakh 'Altyn Dala' initiative as a top ten UN flagship biodiversity restoration project for its work saving the unique saiga antelope. The UK's RSPB played a critical role in supporting this project. Lobbying by Lord Goldsmith in March resulted in Kazakhstan also agreeing to sign up to the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, and the Leaders' Pledge for Nature, key goals for the UK at COP15 in Montreal.

Part 3: What are the risks involved in the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?

After 31 years of independence, the CA countries are each at different stages of political transition and reform. We have significant concerns over human rights, fundamental freedoms, gender equality and corruption across the region, which we raise regularly in bilateral contacts. These issues constitute a significant stability and reputational risk for the future.

There is also a risk around the UK's ability to influence Central Asia, given the longstanding historical links to other states in the region, and the neighbourhood it is situated in. We actively monitor and seek to mitigate these risks to our partnerships. We need to be able to effectively prioritise, and increase our level of senior engagement through regular dialogues and long-term commitments.

3.1 Political Capital

In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the systemic challenge which China poses to the UK, we and like-minded partners are stepping up engagement in Central Asia. Ministerial visits and interactions have increased, UK Trade Envoys support that engagement and senior officials hold regular detailed dialogues with their Central Asian opposite numbers.

3.2 Reform, Prosperity, and Human Rights

A key consideration in UK engagement remains the varying observance of human rights in the region. Authoritarian models of governance have predominated in CA since 1991. Freedom House does not rate any of the CA countries as 'free'. Centralisation of power, weak judicial systems and Soviet legacy law-enforcement structures remain prevalent. Two of the CA5 – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – are on the UK's list of Human Rights priority countries. Despite areas of progress, such as the eradication of forced and child labour in Uzbekistan, and recent political reform in Kazakhstan, the overall trend for human rights in the region has stalled and, in some cases, deteriorated further. We have worked to increase our engagement on human rights across Central Asia and include these issues as a core part of our engagement at both ministerial and official level. They also form part of

the agenda for our dialogues with CA partners, including in the discussions with Turkmenistan initiated in 2022.

Our aim is to help governments deliver for their citizens by encouraging higher standards of human rights and the rule of law. We are helping the growth of civil society and reform of government delivery to build more robust and stable countries in the region. Improved governance will enable these countries to strengthen their own resilience and reduce their vulnerability to external and internal pressures.

Human rights advocacy and defending our values are key parts of our approach to CA. Our Embassies, where feasible, maintain close links with local and international human rights NGOs and civil society actors, promoting good governance through our policy and programme work. We regularly raise human rights concerns with the governments of the region and are working to develop stronger inter-parliamentary exchanges as we seek to strengthen the role of parliaments around the region and share UK best practice. In addition to our bilateral approach, we work through multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe, which aims to embed human rights in legislation, institutions and practice, and coordinate our lobbying efforts with likeminded partners such as the EU, US, Germany and France.

Encouraging progress on reform is a key message in our diplomatic engagement. We regularly raise cases of corruption, the vulnerability of electoral processes, independence of the judiciary, freedom of assembly and other restrictions on civil society, and freedom of expression, including media freedom.

Our work on reform extends beyond governmental engagement. The UK supports civil society and independent media in each country. We work closely with international partners and other international actors to encourage reform and address violations when they arise. The OSCE also plays a role in encouraging these countries to adopt higher standards of human rights.

We have extensive cooperation on economic reforms with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via the Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED) programme which will be extended to Kazakhstan in 2023/24.

The UK has notable interests in extractive industries in CA, but our prosperity interests in this region increasingly extend beyond fossil fuels. In Kazakhstan, for example, we are focusing on key sectors including critical minerals and education. Inclusive economic development, with a focus on broad based private sector growth in a business-friendly regulatory environment, is a vital ingredient for the long-term resilience of these countries. Likewise, economic diversification and access to international markets, will increase regional prosperity and resilience.

The Central Asian states' records on governance and meeting international democratic standards have also shown slow progress, as election monitoring reports from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have illustrated. Finally, corruption remains a substantial risk across the region, with the countries of Central Asia occupying a range of positions on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2022, from 101st out of 180 countries (Kazakhstan) through to 167th/180 (Turkmenistan).

3.3 Gender and inequalities

Horizontal inequalities (the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between population groups) are of particular concern in the region. While the Global Gender Gap report shows the region has broadly stagnated in progress on gender equality, there have also been notable declines and reversals in some areas.

The region faces a rollback of women's and LGBT+ rights. Kyrgyzstan was among those countries that saw the greatest reversals on bias against gender between 2010-2014 and 2017-2022 (Human Development Report based on data from the World Values Survey). Gender based violence (including intimate partner violence and bride-napping) are common despite legal prohibitions. There is a growing gender gap in the labour-force participation rate across all Central Asian economies, and women's political participation remains limited.

Disinformation in the region is one tool used to drive a wedge between 'Western' values versus regional "traditional" values. There is a complex interplay of transnational drivers (including disinformation) and national drivers ('traditionalisation' trends, nationalist and populist ideologies) that weaponise gender ideology as a domestic and diplomatic tool for power. FCDO's new Women and Girls strategy places a priority on tackling the global rollback of women's rights providing a key opportunity for the UK's work in the region. In CA, we have a particular focus on supporting positive gender based norms and improving response to Gender Based Violence through CSSF-funded projects. Work on economic empowerment of women and marginalised groups, and political participation of women, is mainstreamed under our bilateral, governance, security and prosperity goals.

Part 4: Relationships between Central Asian states and neighbouring countries: risks and opportunities

Central Asian states have gradually built their sovereignty since independence, and – to a greater or lesser degree - have kept open economic choices. They have achieved this either through deliberate 'multi-vector' foreign policy approaches (which seek to balance ties with a range of different actors) or determined neutrality. Traditionally, this is a region over which there has been a significant competition among neighbours for influence. Russia has been dominant both economically and in the security sphere, but Chinese investment and security interests, including in Belt and Road projects, have grown considerably. Türkiye, India, the Gulf and South Korea are also exerting increasing influence through high level engagement, investment, and people to people links. A growing, CA-led discourse on decolonisation is revitalising domestic debate about national identity within the Central Asian states themselves.

4.1 Russia

As a legacy of its imperial and Soviet rule of the region, Russia retains significant influence across all spheres, including cultural, language, education, infrastructure, security, trade and investment. Many elites have close ties, and around 10% of CA students study in Russia each year. In Kazakhstan, 19% of the

population is ethnic Russian. Reliance on Russia can serve to reduce the choices available to CA states and to limit their room for manoeuvre, for example in multilateral fora and in security choices.

The continued depth of penetration of Russian-origin media in CA helps to promote Russian narratives; and the development of regional multilateral organisations (CSTO, Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building (CICA)) provides frequent opportunity for senior contacts.

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both bilaterally and through regional bodies, Russia has prioritised high-level engagement with the CA states, including regular meetings between their respective leaders and Putin. The Russian President's first overseas visit following the invasion of Ukraine was to Tajikistan. These links are supported by deep networks of contacts at Ministerial and working levels, often dating back many years. At varying levels, the CA5 retain links to the Russian defence industry and, through educational and training links, Russian approaches to military doctrine. Similarly, strong links exist between Russian security services and their Central Asian counterparts.

Remittances to CA from migrant labour in Russia are hugely important for the economies of some CA states; 40% of Tajik households have at least one member working as a migrant, overwhelmingly in Russia. Russia also provides extensive support to education in Tajikistan, through Russian language schools and vocational education to qualify people to work in Russia. Over one million Kyrgyz citizens are working in Russia, accounting for around 90% of total remittances which contribute approximately 40% to GDP. Russia's leverage is enhanced by its readiness to offer citizenship to many of those involved – several hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens hold Russian passports, as well as their own.

There is also an increasing number of Russian nationals migrating to CA as a result of the war in Ukraine. While this has led to an economic boost in the region, it has also led to significant increases in food and accommodation prices in cities, with shortages in the latter, which has generated tensions between local communities and Russian migrants.

4.2 China

Beijing is a powerful player, with growing influence in the region and like Russia, China consistently lobbies for CA support in multilateral fora. China has significant influence in Central Asia, in large part due to its willingness to finance development on a scale unmatched by others, including through its Belt and Road Initiative. China is Kyrgyzstan's largest creditor and China is also the major purchaser of Turkmenistan's economic mainstay – gas.

China's broadening interests predate Russia's war in Ukraine, and, after a COVID-induced hiatus, it has once again engaged. President Xi's first visit abroad in two and a half years was to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in September 2022, where he emphasised economic cooperation, investment in the 'Middle Corridor', and opportunities for increased cooperation on security, defence and energy.

However, historical ties between Central Asia and China are fewer compared with Russia despite geographic proximity. The exception is the approximately one million ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. The treatment of CA minorities there has led to public protests, most notably in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, though these have been tightly controlled and attracted limited media coverage. In the October 2022 UN Human Rights Council vote on holding a debate on widespread human rights violations in Xinjiang, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan voted against.

China's role in Central Asia will be a defining issue in the decade ahead. It creates issues for the CA states, for example, levels of indebtedness. At the same time, the CA states seek to leverage this and other external relationships within their "multivector" policies, limiting dependence on any one power.

4.3 Afghanistan

The CA5 see Afghanistan principally as a source of threats, though each have taken different approaches to the country since NATO's withdrawal in 2021. Large-scale energy export projects and trade routes through Afghanistan could provide CA with enhanced energy security and export opportunities. To date, however, progress in this direction has been limited: projects such as the 'TAPI' pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) are ambitious long term proposals, which may be challenging to deliver

Afghanistan is also dependent on Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, for electricity. The UK has supported the CASA 1000 electricity connection project which envisages the supply of hydroelectricity from Tajikistan south to Pakistan. Uzbekistan has, to date, been the most forward leaning Central Asian state in its Taliban engagement. This reflects, in particular, its objective to secure trade routes to the Indian Ocean given its double-landlocked status. The Uzbek government has convened international conferences on Afghanistan in 2021 and 2022. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have also undertaken a returns and reintegration programme for foreign fighters and their families, with foreign fighters serving prison terms and women and children supported. Borders in the Ferghana Valley also mean Kyrgyzstan, despite not sharing a border with Afghanistan, is vulnerable to terrorism and extremism risks emanating from Afghanistan.

4.4 Iran

In Central Asia, the Islamic Republic is active, with Embassies in all 5 states (and further consulates in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan). Having previously supported Islamist factions in the Tajik civil war, Tehran has tried to build linkages based on common ethnic and linguistic heritage, as well as offering access to essential seaports and participating in security issues related to Afghanistan. However, it does not exert the same influence in the economic, political and military fields as Russia or China.

4.5 Türkiye

Türkiye has longstanding historical, cultural, educational and linguistic ties to CA, and has become increasingly active in recent years, with a steady flow of senior level meetings in the region and in Ankara. Türkiye has sought greater engagement with CA through the Organisation of Turkic States, and a number of trade and defence agreements as well as arms sales and frequent exchange of high-level visits. In March 2022, President Erdogan visited Uzbekistan to strengthen the Türkiye-Uzbek partnership. Similarly, in May 2022, Kazakhstan's President Tokayev visited Türkiye to sign 15 bilateral deals, and President Erdogan visited Kazakhstan in October 2022 and Turkmenistan in December 2022.

4.6 Challenges and Opportunities for UK foreign policy from these wider relationships

Close political links with neighbouring countries mean that Central Asian countries often abstain in UN votes where e.g. Russian or Chinese interests are involved. Geographical proximity and close economic links with Russia also potentially open up opportunities for sanctions evasion. The lack of transparency in business dealings with these neighbours can also raise questions about the sustainability and fairness of processes for incurring debts or awarding contracts.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that the Central Asian countries wish to redouble their "multivector" policies, and are keen to encourage engagement as well as trade and investment with a wider group of partners from the UK, US, Europe, Türkiye, the Gulf, South Korea and Japan. For our part, we aim to help keep the options of Central Asia open and cooperate with likeminded partners to support closer regional integration in the sovereign interests of the CA states. We also need to work to make sure that sanctions regimes targeted at neighbours do not inadvertently further isolate Central Asia. The UK and partners are focused on helping Central Asian states to increase their resilience and address vulnerabilities.

Part 5: Maximising UK soft power influence in Central Asian states

5.1 UK Strategy

The cross-HMG Central Asia regional strategy sets the overall direction of UK policy towards the region. Central Asia also features prominently in other key geographic strategies, such as on Russia, Afghanistan and China. The FCDO acts as secretariat for the Central Asia strategy, managing it from the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Directorate (EECAD). EECAD also houses the Russia Unit, a cross-HMG Unit which develops coherent advice and coordination on Russia and the region, and the Programmes, Assessments and Results Group (PARG) which oversees programme spend in CA. The EECAD Regional Programme Board is accountable for this programming.

Over 2022/23, interest in Central Asia across government has increased. The FCDO meets regularly with a range of colleagues from line ministries, including DBT, MOD and Home Office. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan form part of Baroness Nicholson's portfolio as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy.

5.2 UK footprint in the region

The UK has Embassies in the capitals of all five Central Asian states. On our platform there are over 120 staff from several government departments, including both UK Based and Country Based Staff. We have UK Trade Directors and British Council Directors based in Astana and Tashkent. We also have regional Defence Attachés in Astana and Tashkent, covering all five countries, and a Trade Commissioner (covering Eastern Europe and Central Asia) based in Istanbul. Reflecting the pivot from oil/gas, the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) have this year relocated their Kazakh trade office from Atyrau (the oil capital) to Almaty (Kazakhstan's old capital and business centre).

Since 2020, UK Based staffing at our Embassy in Tashkent has been increasing and by April 2023 it will have doubled. Further increases are taking place in our Embassies in Dushanbe and Astana. We will use this additional resource to step up further our promotion of UK interests in the region, including in the 'soft power' spheres of education, culture, and communications. There are also advanced plans to relocate the embassy in Ashgabat to a new upgraded facility.

5.3 Regional Strategy

The long term goal for HMG engagement in the region is to promote a more secure, sovereign, inclusive, resilient and prosperous region which is stable for the long-term and resilient to a range of internal and external threats. This means championing accountable, effective democratic institutions; open, inclusive economies; and demonstrable application of the rule of law and human rights.

This also involves regular engagement with civil society, promoting UK values, having an active communications strategy highlighting the range of people to people contacts, and seeking to widen English teaching and educational opportunities to demonstrate UK soft power in the region. Our Embassies use major landmarks to promote the UK, for example, through events, comms and social media initiatives celebrating the 30th anniversary of bilateral relations last year with Central Asian governments and the Platinum Jubilee of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We will build on these links through Central Asian attendance at the Coronation this year.

5.4 Education Collaboration

Education and the English language are major tools for projecting soft power in the region.

Over 30 years, the Kazakh state scholarship scheme 'Bolashak' has sent its best and brightest students to the top 200 universities across the world for Masters programmes. The UK now typically receives over 300 scholarship students a year, in addition to Chevening scholars and other students. An impressive cohort of UK graduates are now in increasingly influential positions in Kazakhstan, across law, business, civil society and government, including the current Minister of Infrastructure and Industry, the Governor of the Astana International Financial Centre, the head of the Agency for Structural Planning and Reform and the Head of the Agency for Statistics.

The widespread and rapid education reforms of the past seven years in Uzbekistan, and the focus on human capital development to drive economic reforms have presented an excellent opportunity for the UK, and the British Council in particular. Increased internationalisation and massive expansion in Higher Education (from enrolment rates of 9% in 2017 to over 30% by 2022 with a goal of 50% by 2030 and a doubling of the number of universities) and growing university autonomy has created a need for UK expertise in many areas, including quality assurance, university governance and English-medium education.

The establishment of Westminster International University Tashkent (WIUT) in 2002, offering degrees from the University of Westminster, has had an enormous influence and helped establish the UK as the partner of choice for education. WIUT graduates are increasingly seen in top jobs across Uzbekistan, in government, academia and elsewhere.

Beyond WIUT, there are now established degree programmes from Bangor, London Southbank, Sunderland, Teesside, Royal Agricultural University, Queen Margaret University and the University of London/London School of Economics in Tashkent. Sunderland and De Montfort University will be awarding degrees at the newly established Pharmaceutical Technical University and the new Digital University will be partnered with Wolverhampton.

In addition to the above examples, there are many other MOUs between Uzbek and UK education institutions, supporting collaboration.

In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the last 30 years have seen an impressive number of education collaborations between higher education institutions. In November 2021 the first UK campus – for DeMontfort University – opened in Almaty, but prior to this universities like the Kazakh British Technical University had been running dual degrees with the LSE for many years. Kazakhstan's flagship new research University, Nazarbayev University, was initially set up in 2012/2013 with the support of UCL, University of Cambridge and other partners, providing advice on organisation, curricula, faculty and student selection and support. This further widens the opportunity for Kazakh and Central Asian students to receive a first class education in Kazakhstan, in English.

The latest initiative of the Ministry of Education in Kazakhstan aims to further expand these partnerships, with Heriot-Watt University planning a collaboration with Aktobe University in oil/gas engineering. The ultimate ambition is for Kazakhstan to become a transnational hub for study in English for both Central Asia and the wider South Asia region, offering a huge opportunity for UK universities to be involved in shaping this approach.

At the school level in Uzbekistan, the prestigious Agency for Presidential Education chose the British, Cambridge curriculum for their Presidential Schools (these are public, specialised schools for gifted children), with students studying A levels.

While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are our most developed education partnerships, we are also seeking to build links, to varying degrees, with the other Central Asian states.

5.5 British Council

The British Council has a 30-year history in the region with permanent offices in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It has an extensive and successful track record of supporting governments on education and cultural reform and providing individuals with the skills they need for more prosperous, stable and certain futures. Through their excellent relationships with governments and civil society and their positive public profile, the British Council complements HMG's support for governance and prosperity and burnishes the UK brand in the region.

The British Council's programmes in the region are multi-country and reflect common challenges and ambitions shared by each country. In 2021-2022, their programmes reached 2.8m people in Kazakhstan and 5.6m in Uzbekistan through social media and online engagement. Face-to-face, the programmes reached 2,500 teachers in Kazakhstan and 4,000 in Uzbekistan.

Since changes to the British Council's global settlement, the British Council has refocused its priorities to focus on partnerships with Ministries of Education to help with systemic change to education systems so that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, in particular of English language, is improved. The British Council also supports the development of Transnational Education links between UK and Central Asian universities to internationalise tertiary education.

In arts and culture, the focus is on working with stakeholders to demonstrate the power and potential of the Creative Industries in the region, with creative economy mapping work undertaken in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The British Council has a network of young, creative entrepreneurs from its work on Creative Central Asia and on Creative Producers and plans to work with the Uzbekistan government in its preparations to host the World Conference on the Creative Economy in 2024.

5.6 Chevening

Chevening is the UK Government's international scholarships and fellowships programme. The programme offers individuals who show potential to inspire, inform, and influence positive change, the opportunity to study at a UK university and gain a UK educational qualification. Chevening Scholarships are open to residents from all five Central Asian states and play an important role in our bilateral relationships, offering significant opportunities for cultural and educational exchanges. The Chevening programme is regularly praised in bilateral meetings and events with the CA5. In 2022/23, the UK welcomed 23 scholars from across CA.

5.7 The John Smith Trust (JST)

The JST runs fellowship programmes that give exceptional young professionals the chance to gain detailed insights into the values, ways of working and challenges faced by people and institutions in the UK. JST also creates opportunities for Fellows (alumni) in our network across Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, connecting them with UK counterparts in order to learn from each other's work in the public, private and civil society sectors.

In 2023, the JST has concentrated on nurturing and supporting the network of existing Fellows through online and in-person activities.

Many alumni from these schemes from the Central Asian region have gone on to make a positive difference in their communities, for example contributing to legal, social, and parliamentary reforms, supporting rural entrepreneurs and assisting socially vulnerable groups.

5.8 Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

Nationals from Central Asian states are also participating in increasing numbers in the UK Seasonal Agricultural Workers scheme. This has significantly increased the number of Central Asian nationals coming to the UK on a seasonal basis. In 2023, it is estimated that around 10,000 nationals from the region will come.

Part 6: Opportunities for cooperation in multilateral institutions and in support of the rules-based international order

All five Central Asian states are participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE's ODIHR is also regularly invited to undertake election monitoring in the region.

All five countries are members of the UN. The United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) was established in December 2007 in Ashgabat to assist and support the five countries of CA in building their conflict prevention capacities. The Centre was established at the request of the five countries and is headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General. CA states are active across the UN agenda. Most recently, Tajikistan, with the Netherlands, hosted a successful UN Water Conference in New York in March 2023.

Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) also have a strong presence in the countries of CA and provide significant financial resources and technical expertise.

6.1 Regional Groupings

Historically, the region has suffered from poor intraregional links but recent years have seen progress in advancing regional cooperation. Previously, regional engagement has been enabled by Russia- or China-led groupings, but there is a gradual shift towards more CA-led engagement, without the presence of other parties.

The **Shanghai Co-operation Organisation** (SCO) is a regional inter-governmental organisation of which eight states are members (covering 40% of the world's population). These are China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – with Iran in the process of acceding. Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia are observer states with six other dialogue partners. The SCO serves different purposes for its different members but unites them all in a desire to combat common security challenges. The last time the CA5 met at Head of State level was at the SCO meeting in Samarkand on 15-16 September 2022. This meeting focused on trade, the Russia-China relationship, and defence and security cooperation. All also signed the (non-binding) Samarkand Declaration, which

confirmed that the SCO is not directed against other states and international organisations. President Xi and President Putin also attended.

The **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)** is an intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia consisting of six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. It purports to act in a similar manner to NATO, ensuring that aggression against one signatory is perceived as an aggression against all. However, it has not intervened during cases of conflict between its own members. The CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan in 2022 marked the first time in the bloc's history that it exercised its collective defence mechanism. The reality is that the majority of the security challenges members face are internal, or exist between themselves, such as the border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The **Organization of Turkic States (OTS)** is an intergovernmental organization whose member states are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan. Hungary, Turkmenistan and the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" have observer status. Its overarching aim is to promote cooperation among Turkic-speaking states as well as contributing to peace and stability in the region. First proposed by Kazakh President Nazarbayev in 2006, this remains the primary format through which Türkiye engages the CA states collectively.

The **Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU)** is an economic union of several post-Soviet states. The Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union was signed on 29 May 2014 by the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and came into force on 1 January 2015. Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia are current members. Cuba, Moldova and Uzbekistan are observers. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have not joined. The Eurasian Economic Union encourages the free movement of goods and services, and provides for common policies on transport, industry and agriculture, energy, foreign trade and investment, customs, technical regulation, competition, and antitrust regulation.

6.2 UK Multilateral Engagement

We engage through a range of multilateral fora to support our interests in the region. The UK is seen as a credible partner, both by CA governments and the multilateral organisations. The OSCE offers opportunities to engage with the CA5 bilaterally and multilaterally. The UK also supports the OSCE-ODIHR Election Observation Missions, which regularly observe elections conducted in CA.

We have increased our collaboration with the CA5 in the UN, including through peacebuilding. Most notably, we worked together on a Peacebuilding Commission meeting last year. The UK is exploring opportunities to increase our active engagement with the CA5 at the UN, and our engagement with likemindeds on CA.

The UK is a major contributor to the work of the MDBs in the region through its shareholdings. The UK plays a particularly active role in multilateral assistance to CA through the World Bank Group, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Asian Development Bank.

6.3 Opportunities for the UK

Through our permanent missions to a number of multilateral organisations, we regularly engage Central Asian partners on votes, programmes and opportunities. These are opportunities to support the independence and territorial integrity of these states, and to support them in countering key threats (climate, terrorism and others) facing the region.

The UK also has an opportunity to increase wider awareness and engagement on Central Asia by working with, and lobbying, partners. For example, CA is now an increasingly prominent agenda item in the G7, with G7 Foreign Ministers in November last year committing to work together to strengthen our cooperation with the countries of CA.

At the same time, as noted earlier, there are also challenges associated with engagement in multilateral organisations, including the influence that Russia, China and others seek to exert on key issues and votes.

May 2023