

# Russia & Eurasia Studies Centre –

## **A STEPPE CHANGE: SHOULD BRITAIN BE BOLDER IN CENTRAL ASIA?**

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### **Introduction**

This briefing will discuss whether and how the UK should push for more ambitious trade engagement with Central Asia (CA), a region comprising the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab has repeatedly outlined his intention that the UK should be a force for global good.<sup>1</sup> Central Asia is in many ways an excellent case study to consider what this might mean in practice; as such, this report considers both the

economic impetuses and moral impediments that should guide the UK's approach to the region.

There are very good reasons to pursue a more ambitious trade policy in Central Asia. Having now exited the European Union, the UK is ready and able to sign its own trade agreements. There is much to recommend Central Asia as a trade partner, including economic, security, and geopolitical considerations. Moreover, there is an appetite for British goods in countries such as Kazakhstan, and the UK has an established trade and diplomatic

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<sup>1</sup> Raab, D., 'As the U.K. Enters a New Chapter, We Reaffirm Our Commitment to Be a Global Force for Good', *Washington Post*, 26 December 2020, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/26/uk-eu-brexite-deal-trade-dominic-raab/>, last

visited: 13 January 2021; Raab, D., 'Global Britain Is Leading the World as a Force for Good,' *GOV.UK*, 22 September 2019, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-is-leading-the-world-as-a-force-for-good-article-by-dominic-raab>, last visited: 13 January 2021.

presence in each of the five nations. Long seen as an authoritarian part of the world, in recent years there have been incipient signs of democratisation in CA's two largest economies and nations: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

However, while encouraging, these steps towards democratisation must be treated with considerable caution, as this report argues. While the Kazakh and Uzbek governments have evoked democratic values, they have not evidenced them. Moreover, the region's most established democracy, Kyrgyzstan, is at risk of backsliding into the populist authoritarianism it

overturned in 2010. The two remaining countries, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, are decidedly not democracies. Thus, adopting an overly optimistic assessment of the region's democratisation could embarrass the UK, undermine our efforts against authoritarianism in China, Russia and elsewhere, plus demoralise brave citizens in CA who need our support. The UK, especially the Department for International Trade, must therefore be guided by a cautious optimism in its dealings with the region, tempering trade aspirations with moral considerations and a commitment to championing democracy and human rights.

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## Background

Since gaining independence in 1991, democracy has struggled to take hold in Central Asia. There has also been considerable ethnic tension, resulting from Joseph Stalin's policy of drawing borders along close ethnic lines, creating a patchwork of exclaves across Central Asia. This has created instability, as did the gruelling civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this inheritance, for most of their post-Soviet existence, the CA states have experienced varying

forms of autocratic, personalised and patrimonial dictatorships, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan. Human rights abuses have been widespread across the region, although NGOs have singled out Turkmenistan for particular opprobrium.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, many of the Central Asian economies have struggled to achieve their potential, especially Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which rely heavily on remittances.<sup>4</sup> Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have fared somewhat better, seeing the

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<sup>2</sup> Bashiri, I., *The History of the Civil War in Tajikistan* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> 'Turkmenistan', *Amnesty International*, n.d., available at: [https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-](https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/)

[and-central-asia/turkmenistan/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/), last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> According to the World Bank, in 2019, the share of remittances as a percentage of GDP was 28.5% and 28.6% for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively.

near doubling of per capita income in purchasing power parity since independence.<sup>5</sup> Despite the political realities of the region, there has been consistent interest from abroad in trade and investment opportunities because CA countries are rich in natural resources, which constitute around 65 percent of exports in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and more than 90 percent in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan,<sup>6</sup>. This interest has been buoyed in recent years by what some see as increasing democratisation and trade liberalisation in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in particular. The UK is no exception.

## The UK in Central Asia

With the UK now outside the EU and free to strike its own trade deals, there has been a concerted effort by the Department of International Trade to build on the UK's existing standing in CA, first and foremost in Kazakhstan, where UK cultural, service and educational exports are popular. For example, 4,000 Kazakh students are currently studying in the U.K, with

more visas issued to Kazakhstan's students than Australians. UK universities are also the most popular destination for the presidential Bolashak programme, which sends students abroad for fully-funded postgraduate studies. The British Council and creative industry leaders regularly attend talks and fairs, and the UK has established two trade offices in Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup>

As Figures One and Two demonstrate,<sup>8</sup> Kazakhstan's more consistently open approach to free trade, combined with the comparatively large size of its economy, make it the most promising avenue for UK export growth. There is also potential in Uzbekistan, which signed the United Kingdom-Uzbekistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 2019. This agreement enabled the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan to grant each other most-favoured nation (MFN) treatment, which is especially important given that Uzbekistan does not belong to the World Trade Organization.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Burunciuc L., and Ivailo Izvorski, 'Encouraging Transformations in Central Asia', *Brookings*, 13 December 2019, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/12/13/encouraging-transformations-in-central-asia>, last visited: 11 January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Burunciuc and Izvorski, 'Encouraging Transformations in Central Asia'.

<sup>7</sup> Zhussupova, D., 'UK to Support Kazakhstan's Development, Strengthen Relations throughout Country's Political Transition, Says British Envoy', *www.euractiv.com*, 16 May 2019, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central->

[asia/news/uk-to-support-kazakhstans-development-strengthen-relations-throughout-countrys-political-transition-says-british-envoy](https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/uk-to-support-kazakhstans-development-strengthen-relations-throughout-countrys-political-transition-says-british-envoy), last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Table of each country's exports/imports to UK and total export/import based on data for 2018, the most recent year of full data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity.

<sup>9</sup> 'UK and Uzbekistan Sign Partnership and Co-Operation Agreement', *GOV.UK*, 31 October 2019, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/united-kingdom-and-uzbekistan-sign-partnership-and-cooperation-agreement>, last visited: 13 January 2021.

Figure One. CA exports to and imports from the UK (US dollars/percentage)

Country	Exports to UK	Imports from UK
Kazakhstan	\$852 million / 1.33%	\$452 million / 1.2%
Kyrgyzstan	\$1.32 billion / 49.2%	\$2.69 million/0.15%
Tajikistan	\$1.35 million /0.12%	\$3.01 million/0.083%
Turkmenistan	\$4.22 million / 0.04%	\$34.2million /1.44%
Uzbekistan	\$135 million / 1.28%	\$53.6 million /0.3%

Figure Two. GDP in US Dollars for each CA country

Country	GDP
Kazakhstan	\$179 billion
Kyrgyzstan	\$8.09 billion
Tajikistan	\$7.52 billion
Turkmenistan	\$40.8 billion
Uzbekistan	\$50.5 billion

Despite being one of the most authoritarian countries in the world, Turkmenistan-UK trade has flourished under the auspices of the Turkmen-British Trade and Economic Council. The Council was developed so that there was an appropriate forum for the public and private sectors to discuss opportunities to increase bilateral trade and investment. Most of the private sector companies present are involved in the energy sector but there has also been a disconcerting growth in arms deals.<sup>10</sup>

Economic opportunities with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are much less ample due to widespread poverty, their comparatively low GDP (see Figure Two), and the type of exports provided by the UK. Despite this, it is important to pursue economic ties – bolstered by FCDO development – with both nations as part of a comprehensive region-wide approach, which prioritises support for Kyrgyzstan as a democracy and,

<sup>10</sup> 'UK Arms Exports to Turkmenistan', AOAV, 5 November 2018, available at:

<https://aoav.org.uk/2018/uk-arms-exports-to-turkmenistan>, last visited: 13 January 2021.

therefore, a beacon for the region.<sup>11</sup> After all, the UK currently accounts for almost half of all Kyrgyzstan's exports (mainly gold), which provides Britain with some leverage in discussions over the need to maintain Kyrgyzstan's commitment to the rule of law.

### Looking at the Numbers

Many of the countries in the region adopt an open stance towards the UK, which has considerable soft power in terms of its educational and creative arts sectors among the population at large. Moreover, the work completed by DFID (now FCDO) over the last ten years, especially in the energy and water infrastructure spheres, has demonstrated the UK's commitment and investment in the region beyond mercantile concerns.

Despite its close economic integration with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as members of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia has only invested \$20 billion in the region since the fall of the USSR, largely because it shares many

of the same resources as Central Asian countries, such as unrefined minerals and energy reserves. By contrast, UK exports are centred around high-quality goods and services, which would appeal to a rapidly growing middle class in key countries, such as Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> As such, there is scope for the UK to increase its trade turnover with the CA countries. Certainly, if we compare UK exports to Kazakhstan with those of Italy, we see that they are from similar sectors (machinery, electrics, furniture)<sup>13</sup> but Italy exports three times as much as the UK. Germany's exports to Kazakhstan are almost four times as high as ours.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Italy has been fast off the blocks, already establishing a Business Forum with CA countries, expanding its investments in the energy sector, and signing lucrative if morally dubious arms deals with Turkmenistan. Leading policy practitioners in the USA have called on their country to do much the same,<sup>15</sup> and the USA has just launched the Central Asia Investment Partnership.<sup>16</sup> Even the human rights-

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<sup>11</sup> Gleditsch, K. and Michael Ward, 'Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization', *International Organization*, 60.4 (2006), pp. 911–33.

<sup>12</sup> Pittau, G., and Roberto Zelli, *Measuring the Middle Class in Kazakhstan: A Subjective Approach*, The World Bank (2018), available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/9>, last visited: 23 January 2021.

<sup>13</sup> 'Kazakhstan Imports from United Kingdom', *Trading Economics*, n.d., available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/imports/united-kingdom>, last visited: 23 February 2021; 'Kazakhstan Imports from Italy', *Trading Economics*, n.d., available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/imports/italy>, last visited: 23 February 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Data available from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, see link: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/gbr/partner/kaz>

<sup>15</sup> Gilliland, D., 'Central Asia Is Changing: The Biden Administration Should Pay Close Attention', *The Hill*, 23 November 2020, available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/527119-central-asia-is-changing-the-biden-administration-should-pay-close>, last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>16</sup> US Embassy in Kazakhstan, 'Joint Statement on the Announcement of the Central Asia Investment Partnership', *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Kazakhstan*, 7 January 2021, available at: <http://kz.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the->

conscious Scandinavian nations recently held the Kazakhstan Northern European Investment Forum.<sup>17</sup> The rush to congratulate and take advantage of the Central Asian (partial) democratic spring suggests that the UK should hurry to make its presence known but, as we rush east, we must not lose sight of our values.

### **Using Trade to Reinforce Democracy**

The economic liberalisation that we have seen in Uzbekistan has been accompanied by broader political reform. After the death of the brutal dictator, Islam Karimov in 2016, the Uzbek government launched ambitious reforms in 2017, with the intention of transforming the economy, society, and the government. The 2019 closure of the notorious Jaslyk prison - a site of alleged torture and human rights abuses, and Shavkat Mirziyoyev's ascension to power has heralded a new era for Uzbekistan. The United States government even removed Uzbekistan from its 'countries of particular concern' list, which denotes governments that significantly violate religious and other forms of freedom.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that Uzbekistan had made 'concrete progress' in the sphere of human rights.<sup>18</sup>

The Uzbek government has moved particularly quickly to liberalise its economy, including the exchange rate, and trade tariffs. Taxes on businesses and households have also been cut. As a measure to attract foreign investment, all currency controls were lifted in August. This newfound openness to international partners has extended beyond the economic sphere; as detailed in a report for the Foreign Policy Centre: 'there has been a significant opening up to international organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and United Nations (UN) agencies. Independent media outlets have emerged and surprised audiences with vocal criticism of the government, while hundreds of political prisoners have been released.'<sup>19</sup>

It is also noteworthy that these changes, as in Kazakhstan, have occurred without pressure from the West, following the resignation and death of the Kazakh and Uzbek leaders, respectively. Given that analysts have stressed that Western

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announcement-of-the-central-asia-investment-partnership, last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>17</sup> 'The First Kazakhstan-Northern Europe Business Meeting', *Invest Kazakhstan*, n.d., available at: <https://invest.gov.kz/calendar/the-first-kazakhstan-northern-europe-business-meeting->, last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Matyakubowa, D., 'There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why', *The Oxus Society for*

*Central Asian Affairs*, 22 December 2020, available at: <https://oxussociety.org/there-wont-be-political-reform-in-uzbekistan-heres-why>, last visited: 11 January 2021.

<sup>19</sup> 'Rebranding Uzbek Cotton: An Opportunity for Lasting Reform', *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 14 July 2020, available at: <https://fpc.org.uk/rebranding-uzbek-cotton-an-opportunity-for-lasting-reform>, last visited: 13 January 2021.



democracy promotion fatigue has combined with illiberal norms and weak institutions to perpetuate authoritarianism in Central Asia, the UK should take this opportunity to encourage the offshoots we are seeing.<sup>20</sup>

While many regional specialists remain sceptical about the likelihood of real change, there are some domestic analysts who are positive for the future. For example, Farkhad Tolipov, political scientist and director of the Uzbek non-government research institution *Caravan of Knowledge*, argues that “[Mirziyoyev] will speed up political reforms and work toward consolidation of a more open and pluralist political system” if he wins in elections coming later this year.<sup>21</sup> There is also some limited scope for optimism over the regeneration of the ruling Kazakh party Nor-Otan, where quotas and other measures have been introduced to increase the number of women and young people as MPs. However, this does not presage real multi-party election so much as it represents an effort by the ruling party to modernise and reach new voters.

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<sup>20</sup> Vanderhill, R., and Michael Aleprete, *International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence: Lessons from Post-Soviet States* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013); Sharshenova, A., *The European Union's Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: A Study of Political Interests, Influence, and Development in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2007-2013* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Putz, C., ‘Checking in on Uzbekistan's Political Progress in 2020: An Interview With Farkhod Tolipov’, 15 December 2020, available at: <https://thediomat.com/2020/12/checking-in-on-uzbekistans-political-progress-in-2020-an->

In Kazakhstan and elsewhere, the best hope for democratisation may stem from the ongoing and much more tangible economic reforms. There is often a strong correlation between democracy and economic growth,<sup>22</sup> which – while it may not ensure democracy – does make established democratic nations much less likely to collapse into authoritarianism.<sup>23</sup> Empirical studies have also emphasised the important role of free trade in removing protectionism as free trade agreements weaken the government's power and hence the incentives of autocrats to hold office. All this can reinforce democratic tendencies, especially when bolstered by other measures.<sup>24</sup>

This is of direct relevance to Kyrgyzstan, for whom the UK constitutes almost half of its export market. Having been a flawed but promising example of democracy in the region since the Tulip Revolution of 2010, in January the Kyrgyz electorate voted in a landslide for Sadyr Japarov, widely seen as a populist and nationalist, who served in the autocratic government overturned a decade ago. Given the

interview-with-farkhod-tolipov, last visited: 11 January 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Boix, C., and Susan Stokes, ‘Endogenous Democratization’, *World Politics*, 55 (2003), 517–49.

<sup>23</sup> Przeworski, A., et al, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Liu, X., and Emanuel Ornelas, ‘Free Trade Agreements and the Consolidation of Democracy’, *VoxEU.Org*, 11 May 2011, available at: <https://voxeu.org/article/free-trade-agreements-and-consolidation-democracy>, last visited: 11 January 2021.

risk that Japarov may pursue a more authoritarian path, now is the time for the UK to provide more vocal support for Kyrgyzstan and emphasise that our trade, investment and support are connected to Kyrgyzstan's continued democratic style of governance. This is important not only for Kyrgyzstan but for the region as a whole: the presence of a democratic neighbour increases the likelihood of democratisation in undemocratic nation states.<sup>25</sup> As such, there is no time like the present for reaffirming our commitment to a democratic Kyrgyzstan and placing our support for democracy and democratisation at the heart of our trade endeavours.

### **Short-term Strategy versus Normative Strategies**

While free trade and economic openness can bolster democracies and democratisation, there still needs to be an initial openness towards this. For the sake of the populations of Central Asia and its own reputation, the UK cannot prioritise trade at the expense of human rights and commitment to a free and fair society. When assessing the steps towards democratisation discussed so far, then, we need to be clear-eyed. While promising, many observers remain

unconvinced of the sincerity of the Uzbek and Kazakh governments' commitments to liberalise. A leading Uzbek analyst has argued that the "shadows of the past continue to linger. Many of the people who presided over that era of repression remain in government today – the very people who committed atrocities against prisoners in Jaslyk" and who suppressed and continue to suppress various freedoms.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, Kazakh experts are sceptical that any change will come from within the system. Recent elections on 10<sup>th</sup> January left much to be desired. Evgenii Zhovtis, a specialist in the region, described the vote not as an election but rather an 'appointment' of politicians due to the lack of opposition involvement or space for political competition. He also argued that the concept of a 'listening state', much vaunted by the new Kazakh president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, had failed to lessen the gap between the state and its people.<sup>27</sup> Speaking at the same event, another Kazakh political analyst, Torokol Doorov, also drew attention to the lack of independent exit or opinion polls and the police crackdown on protestors in Almaty, where police kettled opposition supporters, holding them

<sup>25</sup> Gleditsch, K. and Michael Ward, 'Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization', pp. 920-33.

<sup>26</sup> Matyakubowa, D., 'There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why', *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, 22 December 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Zhovtis, E., 'Kazakhstan's Parliamentary Elections: What Next?' (presented at the Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington University, Online, 12 January 2021).



for six hours without respite from the cold or toilet breaks.<sup>28</sup>

There is clearly a gap between what is said and what is done with regard to democratisation in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. To avoid undermining our values, the UK needs to encourage Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to add to the steps they have taken towards democratisation so far and to prevent any authoritarian backsliding by linking trade to human rights. To ensure the UK truly is a force for global good, we should implement a human rights checklist of milestones that need to be met in order for further extensions of trade or diminutions of tariffs to happen. When assessing whether the milestones have been met, we must make sure that what the leaders say is happening is backed up by independent NGOs from the region. To use an Uzbek phrase - *Ishoning, lekin tekshiring*, we should 'trust but verify' what our partners in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are saying.<sup>29</sup>

For the remaining countries in Central Asia - Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - the situation is considerably worse. Of particular concern is why the UK has dramatically increased its arms exports to Turkmenistan, which is

widely regarded as one of the most repressive countries of earth and when these weapons could very easily be turned against its long-suffering citizenry.<sup>30</sup> If the UK's pronouncements about championing democracy are to ring true, then arms deals with Turkmenistan would need to be halted, otherwise it will undermine our efforts to combine trade and support for human rights in the region.

## Geopolitical Security

As well as balancing mercantile interest with normative values, the UK needs to factor in the relevance of trade to security in the region. Alongside a values-driven trade policy in the region, it is important to note how economic investment can bolster our security interests. Central Asia is important to the UK's national security interests, with shared interests in tackling ethno-nationalist tensions, gender inequalities, radicalisation, violent extremism, resource management, corruption, and border issues. Moreover, a stable Central Asia is vital to achieving a secure future for Afghanistan, which borders three Central Asian countries. Alongside a

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<sup>28</sup> Doorov, T., 'Kazakhstan's Parliamentary Elections: What Next?' (presented at the Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington University, Online, 12 January 2021).

<sup>29</sup> This phrase is a calque from Russian phrase - *doveryai no proveryai*.

<sup>30</sup> Stronski, P., 'Turkmenistan at Twenty-Five: The High Price of Authoritarianism', *Carnegie*

*Endowment for International Peace*, 30 January 2017, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/01/30/turkmenistan-at-twenty-five-high-price-of-authoritarianism-pub-67839>, last visited: 13 January 2021.

values-driven trade policy in the region, it is important to note how economic investment can bolster our security interests.

With a combined population of 75 million, the average age of a Central Asian citizen is just 27.6. As such, the region needs new opportunities for young people; in Uzbekistan alone, approximately 500,000 young people are entering the workforce each year. Without adequate economic opportunities, a small minority will be more likely to turn towards extremism or become radicalised. By investing in and trading with the region, we can help prevent that.

We can also use our trade influence to establish a positive counter-example to the major geopolitical players in the region. The Central Asian countries are uncomfortably sandwiched between Russia and China. The latter has used the Belt and Road Initiative to showcase the potential and achievements of its governance model. It is important, therefore, that the region encounters successful economies that are founded on democratic values and provide a counter-narrative. This is especially relevant given China's ongoing campaign against the Uyghurs, which has also targeted Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

Kazakhs are the second-largest Turkic-speaking indigenous community in Xinjiang after Uyghurs and the region is also home to ethnic Kyrgyz.<sup>31</sup> The UK's admirably clear and condemnatory stance towards China's abuses in Xinjiang should extend to supporting and encouraging the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments to settle refugees from Xinjiang who manage to flee. Thus by developing better economic relations with the region, we will be able to support the region's traditional multi-vector foreign policy and an alternative to authoritarian governance, but only if our approach is combined with and rooted in commitments to human rights.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 'Two Ethnic Kazakhs From Xinjiang Obtain Rare Temporary Refugee Status In Kazakhstan', *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 19 October 2020, available at: [www.rferl.org/a/two-ethnic-kazakhs-from-xinjiang-obtain-rare-temporary-refugee-status-in-kazakhstan/30900758.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/two-ethnic-kazakhs-from-xinjiang-obtain-rare-temporary-refugee-status-in-kazakhstan/30900758.html), last visited: 13 January 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Vanderhill, R., Sandra Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva, 'Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers', *International Affairs*, 96.4 (2020), pp. 975-93.

## **Conclusion – ‘Trust but Verify’ in Practice**

In conclusion, there is evidence of liberalisation of both the economy and society in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. While promising, proof of the latter is not entirely convincing and, combined with the potential for democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan, the UK should pursue a firm but cautious approach to trade engagement in the region. It is important we do not rush headfirst into trade deals forgetting our commitment to promoting human rights and championing democracy on the way.

That said, just as we use sanctions to punish moves towards authoritarianism, it is right to use trade incentives to encourage and reward steps towards democratisation, namely through the use of a checklist of human rights milestones when considering further trade engagement. This combination is crucial to our security engagements as well, which rest not just on our increased engagement but on us being able to represent a credible alternative model of governance to authoritarianism.

The UK is unusual in having a permanent presence in all five Central Asian republics, something matched by only two EU states. Since trade and development are natural bedfellows, it makes sense to involve the FCDO

(which leads the UK’s Central Asia Programme) in trade discussions, including in a specific format like a business and development forum. Ideally this forum would be based upon President Obama’s C5+1 initiative, which provided a platform for joint efforts and a regional approach to address common challenges faced by the United States and the five Central Asian states.

The proposed UK-Central Asia business and development forum would establish collaboration with the five CA states on business, trade, energy infrastructure, and development issues, building on the UK’s positive reputation. The inclusion of development allows the UK to maintain channels with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan and demonstrates an openness to trade should they move in a more democratic direction. Until such a point, however, the UK should immediately halt all arms sales to Turkmenistan. The forum should also be located in Kyrgyzstan, which is still the most democratic country in the region, as a sign of the UK’s hope that they will stay on this path.

## Policy Recommendations

This report makes the following policy recommendations:

1. For the UK to immediately halt all weapons sales to Turkmenistan, given the inconsistency of arming that nation while espousing our commitment to be a global force for good.
2. That increased economic engagement should be charted against concrete human rights and democratisation milestones. Designed to complement any human rights impact assessments, this would set goals on topics such as free access for election observers, the establishment of NGOs, and funds to support independent media, which the target country would need to meet for the next stage in economic relations to be reached.
3. That a regional approach that combines all levers of the state (in line with Fusion Doctrine) be prioritised in the UK's approach to Central Asia. This should see co-operation between DIT and the FCDO in the form of establishing a business and development forum to oversee economic ties with the region. Similar to President Obama's C5+1 initiative, the Forum should establish collaboration with five CA states on business, trade, infrastructure, and development issues, building on the UK's positive reputation gained from the FCDO's development work in the region.
4. The Forum should have a permanent representative and annual conference located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. As well as Bishkek's central location, close to Tashkent and Almaty, by placing the forum in Kyrgyzstan the UK will symbolically centre its trade engagement around a commitment to democracy. It rewards and prioritises the most democratic country in the region, while simultaneously hopefully encouraging Sadyr Japarov to continue his predecessors' work.