



A POST-TILT APPROACH:

WHY CENTRAL ASIA SHOULD BE FIXED IN THE UK'S SIGHTS

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DESPITE rarely playing a central role in global politics, Central Asia has featured as the confluence, and subsequent instigator, of some of history's greatest rivalries. Today, however, Central Asia plays only a minor part in British geopolitical strategy and appears to be of limited interest to the UK's diplomatic or military communities. One of the clearest indicators of British commitment to the region is its distribution of diplomatic personnel. In a region comprising of five countries, 78 million people and a total of 3,926,790km², Central Asia is represented by only two defence attaches

splitting responsibilities for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, between them.¹

Diplomatic investment in the region is similarly modest. Ministerial responsibility for Central Asia falls within the jurisdiction of the Minister for Europe, Leo Docherty. Although Mr Docherty has conducted a trip to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as recently as June 2023, he was the most senior British representative to visit these countries in more than a decade.² However, this absence is understandable when we consider that Mr Docherty's responsibilities also include Europe, the remainder of Central Asia, UK-EU relations

in accordance with the Northern Ireland Protocol and national security.³ Clearly "far too broad a mandate to devote the requisite attention to this crucial region".⁴

¹Worldometer, 'Population of Central Asia (2023 and Historical)', worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/, (accessed 14/07/23).

²Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Europe Minister to Forge Closer Relations in Central Asia', gov.uk/government/news/Europe/Europe-minister-to-forge-closer-relations-in-central-asia, 04/06/23, (accessed 11/07/23).

³Gov.uk, 'Parliamentary Undersecretary of State (Europe) Leo Docherty MP Biography', gov.uk/government/people/leo-docherty, 22/11/22, (accessed 11/07/23).

⁴Ottaway, Sir R., 'Central Asia Can Play an Integral Part in Reversing the Decline of Global Britain', *The House*, politicshome.com/thehouse/article/, 22/11/22, (accessed 14/07/23).

By contrast, the US maintains a conspicuous presence in Central Asian affairs through their C5+1 platform. Representing “the US government’s whole of government approach to Central Asia, jointly engaging all five Central Asian governments”, the C5+1 was formed in 2015 and has met four times in Secretary Anthony Blinken’s two-year tenure.⁵

However, Central Asia’s failure to be prioritised by the British military and government is perhaps unsurprising when we consider recent British strategic ambitions. In July 2021, Her Majesty’s Government’s *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* sought to assure Britain’s international presence post-Brexit by capitalising on the ‘Asian Century’.⁶ In doing so, Britain declared its ambition to be “the European power with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific”, and, to an extent, this refocus did work.⁷ Between 2021 and 2023, Britain achieved dialogue partner status with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations,

“THE UNITED KINGDOM’S INDO-PACIFIC FOCUS WAS DEEMED SO SUCCESSFUL THAT IT IS ALREADY A THING OF THE PAST.”

became the 12th member of the Comprehensive Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, launched ‘Britain’s International Investment Singapore Hub’, deployed a UK Carrier Strike Group and two offshore patrol vessels to the region, and strengthened security links through two major defence and security partnerships in the form of AUKUS with the US and Australia; and the Global Combat Air Programme with Italy and Japan.⁸ In fact, the UK’s Indo-Pacific focus was deemed so successful that it is already a thing of the past. Whilst proclaiming “that the UK has delivered the ambition we set for the Indo-Pacific tilt”, the 2023 *Integrated Review* ‘Refresh’ also asserted that “the security and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic will remain our core priority”.⁹ Despite this dramatic re-prioritisation, questions around the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region do still remain.

Whilst this article does not

intend to argue that a British military presence in Central Asia will independently answer these questions, it does assert that some form of Central Asian focus to British strategic thought can provide “a link between [British] commitments to promoting security in Europe and expanding economic and political influence in Asia”.¹⁰ Furthermore, pursuing such a Central Asian approach need not be exclusive of any other maintained by His Majesty’s Government. As Veerle Nouwens and Dr Lynn Kuok of RUSI stated to the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, “it is not quite clear just yet how the UK interprets and envisions the Indo-Pacific region,” but that “Indo-Pacific terminology is principally about recognising and responding to China’s widening strategic horizons”.¹¹ Again, implying that the Central Asian states neatly fit within the Indo-Pacific or Euro-Atlantic strategies is tenuous, but the region could provide planners

with an indirect and relatively low risk approach to countering Chinese and Russian influence across both operational theatres. If British strategy is based in the disruption of this influence, then Central Asia must be considered as a ‘target-rich environment’.

In contrast to the UK, “China and Russia have keen interests in the resource-rich Central

⁵US Department of State, ‘C5+1 Diplomatic Platform Press Release’, state.gov/c51-diplomatic-platform/, 27/02/23, (accessed 11/07/23).

⁶Wolf M., ‘The Myth of the Asian Century’, *Financial Times*, [ft.com/content/4a779440-acd5-42dc-912c-6ff304d4ddb0](https://www.ft.com/content/4a779440-acd5-42dc-912c-6ff304d4ddb0), 06/06/23, (accessed 24/07/23).

⁷Cabinet Office Policy Paper, ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, defence, Development and Foreign Policy’, 02/07/21. PM’s foreword

⁸HM Government, ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World’, 01/03/23. Pg 2

⁹*Ibid.* Pg 3

¹⁰Ottaway, Sir R., ‘Central Asia Can Play an Integral Part in Reversing the Decline of Global Britain’, (accessed 14/07/23).

¹¹Kuok, Dr. L., Nouwens, V., ‘Collected Oral Evidence: The UK’s Security and Trade Relationship With China’, House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, 14/04/21.

Pictured: HMS *Defender* (front) and HMS *Kent* (rear) flank an Asahi-class destroyer of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force whilst exercising in the Philippine Sea as part of the Carrier Strike Group deployed in the Indo-Pacific region in 2021 Picture: UK MOD © Crown copyright



Asian States”.¹² Central Asia’s “geographic location makes it a centralised global hub... as a result, Russia and China look to the Central Asian states as key partners in trade, energy and investment”, and have made significant financial and military investments.¹³ As of 2022, total Chinese investment in the Central Asian states was estimated at \$40 billion, setting the foundation for China’s Belt and Road Initiative with ongoing projects in Almaty, Bishkek Samarkand and Dushanbe. Although Russia’s \$20 billion investment since 1991 pales in comparison, its influence in Central Asia is primarily exercised through military means

¹²Grossen. C., Risewick. A., Cawthon. Z., Enterline. M., Finden. B., Forde. J., Preske. A. I., Sanders. D., Smith. J., Roberto. P., Mirghahari. M., ‘How Operational SOF Units Can Address Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia’, Seton Hall University, March 2023. Pg 19

¹³Ibid. Pg 4

¹⁴Libman. A., Davidzon., Saggat. R., ‘How to Intervene Symbolically: The CSTO in Kazakhstan’, Chatham House, [chathamhouse.org/2023/06/how-intervene-symbolically-csto-kazakhstan](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/06/how-intervene-symbolically-csto-kazakhstan), 27/06/23, (accessed 25/07/23).

¹⁵Grossen. C., Risewick. A., Cawthon. Z., Enterline. M., Finden. B., Forde. J., Preske. A. I., Sanders. D., Smith. J., Roberto. P., Mirghahari. M., ‘How Operational SOF Units Can Address Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia’, March 2023. Pg 4.

¹⁶Parliament UK Editors, ‘UK Foreign Policy in a Shifting World Order’, [publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/250](https://www.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/250), 2018, (accessed 25/07/23).

¹⁷HM Government, ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World’, 01/03/23. Pg 3.

¹⁸Gohel. Dr. S.M., Andreopoulos. M., Jones. V., ‘Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Great Game 2.0’, Written Evidence to House of Commons Central Asia Committee, [committees.parliament.uk](https://committees.parliament.uk/committees/central-asia/), March 2023, (accessed 11/07/23). Pg 6.

¹⁹Pannier. B., ‘Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, [fpri.org/article/2022/05/northern-afghanistan-and-the-new-threat-to-central-asia/](https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/northern-afghanistan-and-the-new-threat-to-central-asia/), 13/05/23, (accessed 26/07/23). Pg 3.

²⁰Ibid. Pg 3.



“THE ETHNICALLY PASHTUN TALIBAN ARE STRUGGLING TO BRING NORTHERN MINORITIES OF TAJIKS, UZBEKS, TURKMENS AND EVEN KIRGIZ ‘TO HEEL’, AND TERRORIST INCIDENTS LINKED TO FAILING AFGHAN SECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE ARE INCREASING.”

in the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and its ability to provide hard power. This Russian hard power was most notably demonstrated in January 2022, when Kazakhstan’s President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, requested Collective Security treaty Organisation assistance to suppress what Tokayev claimed were externally incited riots. Whilst the Russian-majority Collective Security Treaty Organisation component didn’t directly engage rioters on the streets, the intervention demonstrated Moscow’s reach and determination to be involved in the region.¹⁴ In fact, despite seemingly competing roles in the region, neither Russia nor China has overstepped into the other’s interests. “Russia has maintained a larger cultural, political, and security presence in Central Asia, while China is generally the main economic developer.”¹⁵ This symbolic exploitation of the region is reflective of the two powers’ ‘no limits friendship’ and should be of significant concern to the UK which anchors its foreign policy on the “construction and maintenance of a rules-based international order”.¹⁶ Instead, Russia, be it militarily or through the Eurasian Economic Union, and China, through the Shanghai Cooperation Institution, pressure their hegemonic influence over the Central Asian nations.

The Central Asian states should, therefore, bear greater significance to the UK, not only in direct opposition to the significant Russian and Chinese investment in the region, but also because the empowerment of disenfranchised nation states is a stated goal of ‘Global Britain’. As 2023’s *Integrated Review* asserts, it “responds to the intensification of systematic competition, which is now the dominant geopolitical trend and the main driver of the deteriorating security environ”, but also, crucially, “where there are attempts by the Chinese Communist Party to coerce or create dependencies, we will work closely to push back against them”.¹⁷ As the UK seeks to reorientate defensive focus from Asia to Europe, there is real risk we will achieve neither. Instead, Central Asia provides a literal middle ground for both theatres. It is “at the centre of geo-economic priorities but also international security challenges”, and is a region where significant economic and cultural investment will resonate disproportionately to the scale of British investment.¹⁸

Aside from providing ample opportunity to maintain British strategic ambitions and meaningfully compete against adversarial influence, Central Asia provides the UK with an opportunity to contribute to regional and international

counter-terrorism efforts. Since the closure of US airbases in Uzbekistan in 2005, Kyrgyzstan in 2014, and the complete coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Central Asia has lacked any significant Western military presence. The cessation of Western activity in the region and the rise of the Taliban administration has subsequently created a vacuum of authority along the Northern Afghan border, which is increasingly hospitable to Islamist terrorist groups. “Since regaining power,” explains Bruce Pannier, “the Taliban have repeatedly assured the governments in Central Asia that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used for attacks against Afghanistan’s neighbours.”¹⁹ However, the reality has been very different. In truth, the ethnically Pashtun Taliban are struggling to bring Northern minorities of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens and even Kirgiz ‘to heel’, and terrorist incidents linked to failing Afghan security infrastructure are increasing. In April 2022, the Islamic State of Khorasan carried out bombings of Shia mosques in Mazar-i-Sharif, approximately 60 kilometres from the Uzbek border, and Kunduz, approximately 50 kilometres from the Tajik border. Eighty people were killed.²⁰ Aside from enabling the propagation of Islamist ideology, the failure of the Taliban

to secure their northern regions has serious implications for the wider regional stability. Continued incursions and attacks from Afghan territory will collapse the Taliban's informal truce with their northern neighbours and could prompt significant retaliatory action. Tajikistan, for example, has a long history of animosity towards the Islamic regime. The Tajik President, Emomali Rahom, is the only neighbouring leader that was in power for the Taliban's 1990's administration.²¹ As a staunch supporter of the ethnically Tajik and Northern Alliance founder, Ahmad Shah Massoud, President Rahom maintains an uneasy peace with the Taliban and would likely seek opportunities to subdue the organisation in a similar manner to other Islamic groups within his borders.²²

By far the most notable group affecting regional security is the Islamic State of Khorasan. Established in 2014 by veteran Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan members, the group expanded with additions from the Tajik group, Jamaat Ansarullah and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan before receiving support from Islamic State's core leadership in 2015.²³ The group has since grown, and, 're-energised by the Western withdrawal' from Afghanistan, were responsible for almost twice as many claimed attacks as the 'core group' in Iraq and Syria in 2022.²⁴ Despite directed security efforts to counter Islamic State of Khorasan in Afghanistan, the group's reach and recruitment is spreading to the Central Asian states. "By addressing ethnic groups in formerly Soviet Central Asia, Islamic State militants know they are sowing potentially fertile ground", and their recent efforts have been comprehensive. Since February 2022, *Al Azaim*, 'Islamic State of Khorasan's dominant media organ' has begun publishing in Central Asian languages and subsequently produced two books and 15 audio recordings in Uzbek.²⁵ Similarly, in



“TAJIKISTAN'S TERRITORY CONCESSIONS SHOULD CONCERN WESTERN ADMINISTRATIONS... THEY BEAR SIGNIFICANT PARALLELS THAT CENTRAL ASIA LAND-GRABBING HAS TO CHINESE POLICY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA.”

March 2022, *Al Azaim* released a book in the Tajik Cyrillic entitled *Why Jihad is Obligatory*.²⁶ Aside from obvious proof of efforts to reach Central Asian recruits, there is also evidence of its efficacy. "Just before it fell in August [2021], the Afghan Republic Government confirmed it was holding several dozen Islamic State of Khorasan-affiliated militants from Central Asia. On May 3, 2021, then intelligence chief Ahmad Zia Seraj confirmed that of 408 such prisoners... 15 per cent hailed from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan."²⁷

The development of Islamic State of Khorasan and its subsequent proliferation should cause some consternation amongst British security services. In much the same way that it strives to construct and maintain the rules-based international order, the UK also seeks to interdict domestic and international terrorist organisations in line with its Contest, counter-terror strategy. As Contest states, "we will seek to influence the international counter-terror response by working with like-minded partners around the world to identify areas for engagement, build alliances and to detect, disrupt, and tackle, the threats... through this wider focus on assisting allies to counter violent extremist organisations, the UK helps to counter the regional security vacuums in which terrorism lives".²⁸ This approach

to responding to international terrorist threats was most notably demonstrated by the UK's response to the Islamic State of Khorasan's parent organisation, Islamic State or Daesh. Daesh took advantage of a similarly vacuous political situation in Iraq and Syria and seized an area of land roughly the size of the UK. To ensure longer term domestic security, the UK militarily intervened to topple Daesh and liberate its seized territory. Although Islamic State of Khorasan is yet to make territorial gains anywhere as significant as Daesh, the parallels between the two groups, and the UK's justification for intervening, are apparent.

Aside from interdicting violent extremist organisations, counter-terror efforts in Central Asia have an additional benefit to the UK's interests. Security in Central Asia is a major concern to Russia and China and is readily monopolised by the two powers. For Russia, Central Asia remains a "front-line" defence from "transnational threats emanating from the South, which includes narcotics trafficking and violent extremist organisation".²⁹ Similarly, Chinese officials, academics, and media repeatedly stress the security concerns China has in the region, from "insulating their Western province of Xinjiang from 'separatism' to protecting valuable economic infrastructure and even personnel located in Central Asia".³⁰ These security

concerns have justified an exploitative Russian and Chinese military presence in Central Asia which has reinforced the cultural and financial dependence the Central Asian states already endure. The inability of these countries to independently ensure their collective security however, "demonstrates the limit of the Central Asian states' security strategies and highlights that they have few options in dealing with a new threat on their border".³¹ As such, Central Asian states have accepted the relinquishment of their security responsibility and begun to make significant concessions. In 2021, Tajikistan granted land to the Chinese military to construct a military base overlooking the

²¹ *Ibid.* Pg 4

²² *Ibid.* Pg 4

²³ Sharb, C., Newlee, D., 'Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan>, 2018, (accessed 11/07/23).

²⁴ HM Government, 'CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023', assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment_data/file/1171084/CONTEST_2023.pdf, July 2023, (accessed 26/07/23). pg 20.

²⁵ Webber, L., Valle, R., 'Perspectives: Islamic State in Afghanistan Seeks to Recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz', *Eurasianet*, eurasianet.org/perspectives-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-seeks-to-recruit-uzbeks-tajiks-kyrgyz, 17/03/22, (accessed 14/02/23).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Webber, L., Valle, R., 'Perspectives: Islamic State in Afghanistan Seeks to Recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz', *Eurasianet*, eurasianet.org/perspectives-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-seeks-to-recruit-uzbeks-tajiks-kyrgyz, 17/03/22, (accessed 14/02/23).

²⁸ HM Government, 'CONTEST', (accessed 26/07/23), Pg 48, Para 145 and Pg 25 Para 72.

²⁹ Kansas, R., 'Understanding Russia and China in Central Asia', *American Foreign Policy Council*, afpc.org/publications/articles/understanding-russia-and-china-in-central-asia (accessed 26/07/23).

³⁰ *Ibid.* (accessed 26/07/23).

³¹ Pannier, B., 'Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia', (accessed 26/07/23). Abstract.

Tajik-Afghan border and protect the Wakhan Corridor, a vital passage for the impending Belt and Road Initiative. This base was in addition to another turned-over to China at zero cost in return for Chinese military aid.³² Tajikistan's territory concessions should concern Western administrations. In part, they represent the extent to which Central Asia states find themselves ransomed for security guarantees, but also, the concessions bear significant parallels that Central Asia land-grabbing has to Chinese policy in the South China Sea. Indeed, "the more Chinese bases that are built in Tajikistan, the more territory and de-facto sovereignty is yielded to the Chinese Communist Party".³³

British investment in Central Asia and involvement in regional and international counter-terror efforts could therefore aid prospective allies and offer the Central Asian states a viable alternative security partner in the region. The disruption of

³²Standish, R., 'Tajikistan Approves Construction of New Chinese-Funded Base As Beijing's Presence in Central Asia Grows', *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html, 28/10/21, (accessed 26/07/23).

³³Gohel, Dr. S.M., Andreopoulos, M., Jones, V., 'Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Great Game 2.0', (accessed 11/07/23). Pg 4/5 Para 17.

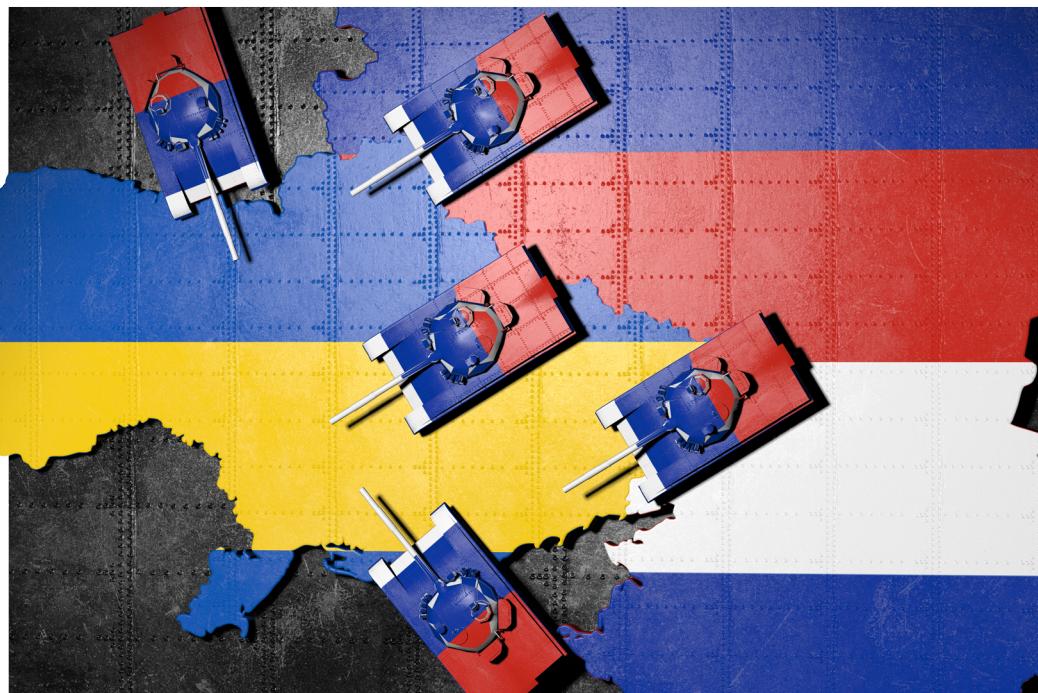
³⁴Ibid, Pg 4 Para 13.

³⁵UN News Editors, 'Ukraine: General Assembly Passes Resolution Demanding Aid Access By Large Majority', *UN News*, news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632, 24/03/22, (accessed 21/07/23).

³⁶Umarov, T., 'Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer of Drifting Apart?', *Carnegie Politika*, carnegieendowment.org/politika/88698, 23/12/22, (accessed 18/07/23).

³⁷Saida, N., 'In Uzbekistan, Another Z-Artist's Concert Canceled', *The Diplomat*, thediplomat.com/2023/07/in-uzbekistan-another-z-artists-concert-canceled/, 11/07/23, (accessed 18/07/23).

³⁸Ibid. (accessed 18/07/23).



"NONE OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES VOTED TO SUPPORT RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF PARTS OF UKRAINE OR RECOGNISED THE SELF-PROCLAIMED DONETSK AND LUHANSK PEOPLE'S REPUBLICS."

Islamist terror groups emanating from a Taliban administered Afghanistan would not only lay the foundation for concerted counter-terror efforts in the region but also the threat of violent extremist organisation incursions, which could ignite formal regional conflict. In doing so, the UK could endear itself to an increasingly exploited Central Asia and establish itself as worthy and viable competition for Russian and Chinese defence partners. In short, "whilst Central Asia appears to be under the influence of Russia and an ascendant China, there remains an opportunity for the UK to improve relations and establish partnerships grounded in the security needs of both parties".³⁴

However, having assessed the reach of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia, it is apparent that Sino-Russian investment is ubiquitous. We have discussed the colossal financial investments both powers have made in the region, including in long-term infrastructure projects. Similarly,

we've examined the security framework Russia and China have constructed to guarantee their own security objectives whilst also monopolising the defence of the Central Asian states. Despite these successes, Russian and Chinese dominance in Central Asia has been taken for granted, and since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine there have been indications that both powers may not be as omnipotent as believed.

On 2 March 2022, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution with 141 nations condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Significantly, none of the Central Asian states voted to support Russia's annexation of parts of Ukraine or recognised the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.³⁵ Similarly, "all Central Asian states are adhering to Western sanctions on Russia" and even the region's banks are not accepting Russian Mir payment cards.³⁶ More recently, however, frictions between Central Asia and Russia have become increasingly popularised. In July 2023, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

of Uzbekistan announced that the concert of Grigory Leps, a Russian singer who is openly supportive of Russia's invasion, was cancelled two months ahead of time due to 'some technical issues'.³⁷ The boycott of so called 'Z-artists', that is Russian performers supportive of the invasion, is also widespread in Kazakhstan and has forced the cancellation of several shows. Z-artist Polina Gagarina was also scheduled to perform in Astana in February 2023, but was cancelled in November 2022. Similarly the Zhara music festival, scheduled for March in Kazakhstan, was forced to relocate to Uzbekistan.³⁸

These modest yet contemporary acts of defiance against Russia could be symptomatic of an emboldened Central Asia. Whilst the Collective Security Treaty Organisation intervention in Kazakhstan in early 2022 was the perfect demonstration of Russia's resolve to intervene in Central Asian affairs, Russian progress in Ukraine has done much to undermine their credibility. "Russian military defeats in Ukraine have exploded the myth

of the mighty Russian Army,” writes Tamar Umarov, “which has alarmed countries that depended on the Russian security umbrella.”³⁹ This apparent decline in Russian control of Central Asia also comes at a time of attempted regeneration by the Central Asian states who have historically been prevented from pushing beyond the Sino-Russian envelope. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan was forced to close the US airbase in Manas due to Russian concerns about Western influence. Similarly, India’s attempts to invest \$70 million to renovate Aini Airbase in Tajikistan between 2001 and 2010 were blocked on Russian insistence.⁴⁰ More recently, efforts have been made to halt the annual Steppe Eagle exercise which regularly involved US, UK, NATO and regional allies. Having paused since 2020, initially due to Covid, the Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan made it clear in February 2022 that the exercise “would no longer fly in Kazakhstan.”⁴¹ It is perhaps this lingering threat of control

and intervention that is most egregious to Central Asians, and most likely to encourage dissonance between neighbours. Predicated on historic ethnic divisions and nationalist tendencies resurgent in Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, they represent misplaced arrogance. As Chatham House’s James Nixey describes, “there is a strong mindset in most of Russia’s citizens that, because they used to rule these other countries, it either still has privileged rights over them or they are not real countries at all... getting Russians to look upon their neighbours as equals requires wide-scale self-reassessment in a post Putin Russia.”⁴²

By contrast, China’s regional popularity appears relatively unchecked. As recently as May 2023, Xi Jinping personally hosted the first China – Central Asia summit in Northwest China and unveiled further significant investment in the states. Further to China’s \$70 billion trade

relationship with its neighbours in 2022, the Chinese premier has pledged an additional 26 billion Yuan (approximately \$3.8 billion) to Central Asia.⁴³ Despite enjoying a prosperous relationship with its neighbours, “there has not really been any abrupt change in China’s policy towards this region.”⁴⁴ In fact, regardless of the decline of Russian influence and steady progress of Chinese projects, “China is not aiming to be the dominant player in Central Asia or fill a power vacuum.”⁴⁵

It must, of course, be understood that “the complete eradication of Chinese and Russian influence in the Central Asian states is an unrealistic strategic goal.”⁴⁶ Regardless of pop culture cancellations or limited Chinese intentions, Central Asia will always possess a lingering relevance to both powers just by virtue of its geography. The diaspora of Central Asians seeking work beyond their borders will continue to dictate favourable opinions of Russia and China

amongst migrant workers and ensure the importance of Central Asia to Moscow and Beijing. However, Central Asia is ambitious, and it does at least appear that the current political situation could be receptive to an alternative partner in the region. Preoccupied with an ailing campaign in Ukraine, the potency of Russia’s hard power threat has waned and, as the only viable contender, China has openly declared its interests as economic. A gap has therefore opened between a napping legacy oppressor and an economically oriented investor. Within this space, the UK can effect its wider strategic ambitions and local security concerns and entice an emergent region to the rules-based international order. A significant opportunity to meaningfully compete with adversarial partners and achieve long term strategic aims is there for the taking, it should now be seized.

³⁹Umarov, T., ‘Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer of Drifting Apart?’, (accessed 18/07/23).

⁴⁰Jardine, B., Lemon, E., ‘Avoiding Dependence? Central Asian Security in a Multipolar World’, *oxussociety.org/avoiding-dependence-central-asian-security-in-a-multipolar-world/*, 28/09/20, (accessed 24/07/23).

⁴¹Putz, C., ‘Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan Says US-NATO Steppe Eagle Exercise Will No Longer Fly’, *The Diplomat*, *thediplomat.com/2022/02/russian-ambassador-to-kazakhstan-says-us-nato-steppe-eagle-exercise-will-no-longer-fly/*, 11/02/22, (accessed 18/07/23).

⁴²Nixey, J., ‘Russian Imperial Mindset Must Change For Real Victory’, *Chatham House*, *chathamhouse.org/2022/12/Russian-imperial-mindset-must-change-real-victory*, 28/12/22, (accessed 18/07/23).

⁴³Guo, X., ‘Explaining China’s Central Asian Pivot’, *Lowy Institute*, *lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/explaining-china-s-central-asian-pivot*, 26/05.23, (accessed 27/07/23).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Grossen, C., Risewick, A., Cavethon, Z., Enterline, M., Finden, B., Forde, J., Preske, A. I., Sanders, D., Smith, J., Roberto, P., Mirghahari, M., ‘How Operational SOF Units Can Address Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia’, March 2023. Pg 1.



Soldiers from the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan rehearse urban operations during Exercise Steppe Eagle in 2021
Picture: U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jerry Boffen, 108th Public Affairs Detachment