

Views from Central Asia on the UK's Foreign Policy in the Region

The UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee is currently undertaking [an inquiry](#) into the UK's engagement in Central Asia. The aim of this inquiry is to “*scrutinise the UK's diplomatic activity and soft power influence in Central Asia*” and to “*examine priorities and challenges for the Government as it seeks to deepen its engagement on security, energy, trade, environment and investment to pursue mutually beneficial objectives.*”

In June 2023, the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) and the John Smith Trust (JST) co-organised an online roundtable with experts from the region with the aim of providing an opportunity for a timely discussion on these themes, the outcomes and recommendations of which from are summarised below. To note, in March 2023, FPC also submitted written evidence to the inquiry, which is available [here](#).

Summary:

While Central Asia has often been viewed from abroad through various lenses, it is important to recognise the value of the region in its own right. Global trends and geopolitical developments in recent years, including digitalisation, the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan and, most recently, Russia's war in Ukraine, have created a new impetus for the Central Asia region to *focus on its own resources and strengths*.

Each of the five Central Asian countries differs greatly from each other and regional cooperation has been challenging historically. However, the current situation presents a new opportunity, and **supporting greater cooperation between different sectors in and across Central Asian countries** would enable the UK to **contribute to better governance as well as sustainable economic development** – and therefore make Central Asian countries **more reliable and resilient partners in the long term**.

Key policy considerations:

- Threats to Civil Society:
 - Civil society and media in Central Asia (and globally) are threatened by growing populism and nationalism. NGOs, individuals, journalists and activists who are vocal in challenging their governments' policies in Central Asian countries are facing increasing restrictions and oppression. NGOs receive little support from the public, which views them with suspicion. This is driven by disinformation and propaganda portraying them as treacherous foreign agents disseminating Western values.
 - Civil society faces a legitimacy crisis, the root cause of which lies in its strong orientation towards donor priorities. Donors' short funding cycles are a huge challenge for civil society organisations (CSOs) and can undermine their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as they are forced to respond to donor priorities, not local needs. At the same time, there are few funding opportunities internally, creating a vicious circle for the CSO sector.
- Tackling legitimacy issues in civil society:
 - The most important underlying task is to build legitimacy of the civil society sector – for that, it is necessary to identify shared interests, develop common aims and build trust. Learning how to communicate across different sectors is key to achieving this aim.
 - Pre-colonial, Islamic social norms may provide a solution to the legitimacy issue CSOs face in Central Asia; a system of endowments exists in the region's Islamic traditions and could become a

source of support and cooperation with faith-based organisations. Again, this would require cross-sector communication and understanding of intersection of interests.

- Cooperation between CSOs and the business sector through social business/enterprise and corporate social responsibility is another potential area for increasing the legitimacy of civil society. Crowdfunding platforms would offer an opportunity for greater financial independence and stability of civil society organisations, but these platforms are currently under-developed in the region.
 - Government funding for civil society organisations (e.g. in Kazakhstan) is in some ways a positive step away from international donor dependence, but also distorts priorities and the independence of CSOs and is very limited.
 - Regional networks (of civil society organisations and beyond) are an important source of motivation and support to each other. Platforms for discussion, sharing and learning across sectors are needed to build bridges and cooperation. Civil society has to learn to speak to business community and for that they may need 'interpreters' able to inhabit both sectors.
- Role of the Private Sector:
 - Cooperation efforts between Central Asian countries cannot be left just to governments, as these are dependent on the political leaderships' continued interest in cooperation and can therefore be unpredictable. People-to-people contact and relationships are needed across all sectors for regional cooperation to be effective.
 - There is an understanding in the business community that cooperation across the region is beneficial, but there is a vast gap between the attitudes and behaviour of the private and public sectors in this area. There is also a lack of understanding that all three sectors – public, private and civil society – could be more effective if they worked together in pursuit of sustainable economic development and they tend to work separately in their own ways.
 - The private sector shares the public's suspicion of the civil society sector and does not see that their interests overlap with civil society. The private sector has its own mechanism for philanthropic/charitable giving and policy engagement, but does not generally cooperate with CSOs, particularly activists and human rights defenders.
- Opportunities for economic development:
 - Opportunities for economic development across the region exist where there is an intersection of interests, including in areas such as energy, trade, digital economy/e-commerce and culture/creative economy.
 - Central Asian businesses learn from each other, adapting successful policies and practices. Therefore, economic interests will be *the* driver of regional cooperation and (if done with consideration of sustainability, inclusion, and other good practices) can also become an effective driver for social change, peace and security.
- Climate Change:
 - Governments in Central Asia often lack the political will to act on climate and environmental issues, and such efforts are often part of government public relations strategies. Although all Central Asian governments have implemented laws and policies to protect the environment and combat climate change and are part of international treaties, they have been less successful in integrating these policies into economic policies. Empowering civil society and business to play a greater role here can be an effective strategy in this sphere.

Recommendations:

1. Funding and support for grassroots initiatives:

- There **needs to be a greater focus on 'grassroots'** i.e. basic civil education, grassroots movement funding, linking ordinary people to formal institutions and formal NGOs – allowing them to mobilise the public and develop legitimacy in public perception.
- This requires **broader and more flexible funding streams** – to allow informal actors coming from the grass roots to come up with new initiatives particularly at the community level. With Embassies in each Central Asian country, the UK could lead cooperation efforts among the international donor community.

2. Vocal and demonstrable support for civil society:

- There is a need for greater support from the international community (Embassies in particular) to **speak up against the new policies and laws that oppress and stifle civil society**. There should be conditionality, e.g. to threaten to or actually remove partnerships, aid or trade. This will have greater political and economic weight than official statements.
- The international community should **leverage investment and trade in order to increase standards and commitment to international conventions** that all Central Asian states have signed up to. This will require better coordination among the international community.
- Embassies should be **open about their support of civil society** and include them in their high level meetings or consult them before high level meetings with national governments take place.

3. Partnership and open collaboration:

- There appears to be a generational divide amongst the populations in Central Asian countries in terms of support and suspicion of Western influence and interest in their region – probably linked to media consumption patterns. There is a section of society generally supportive of the UK and its increased interest in their countries. However, in order to maintain and increase this support among the population, the **UK needs to demonstrate that it is interested in more than self-serving economic and trade partnerships** and stands for and invests in the wellbeing of Central Asian societies.
- The UK should use every opportunity to **encourage openness and cross-sector, cross-regional cooperation beyond governments – i.e. among business and civil society as well as the public sector**, as such efforts can have a significant impact on tackling governance and development challenges and encouraging good practice.

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