

Central Asia between China and Russia: Exercising Agency in a Changing Regional Order

EDITED BY GIULIA SCIORATI



Analysing Chinese strategy, foreign policy and influence from the inside out.

China Foresight focuses on the internal drivers and global implications of Chinese foreign policy and strategy. On the one hand, this includes understanding the domestic policy making processes and ongoing debates among Chinese academics and senior policy makers. On the other, the programme analyses the global implications of China's rise across different regions and sectors. By making use of its affiliation to a world-leading research university, China Foresight aims to deliver policy relevant and actionable advice to strategic circles in the UK and beyond to further a better understanding of Chinese foreign policy and help formulate constructive policy responses by connecting academic knowledge of diplomacy and strategy with the people who use it.

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Introduction

This report draws on a series of three expert round tables convened by LSE IDEAS over the course of 2025. The meetings brought together scholars and practitioners with expertise in international security, migration and development, and international order – with the aim of reassessing prevailing assumptions in the study of Central Asia. Across the series, participants examined how relations between China and Russia are evolving in the region, how Central Asian states themselves are responding to these changes, how external actors engage with a region shaped by multi-actor cooperation and growing stances of autonomy. The report summarises the main takeaways from these discussions, highlighting points of convergence and divergence. The contributions included here are revised versions of interventions delivered during the meetings, alongside follow-up reflections from experts worldwide.

At the core, the report addresses a central question: Why has increased Chinese engagement with Central Asia not resulted in direct rivalry with Russia? Much of the earlier literature assumed that Central Asia would become a site of competition as China's presence expanded and Russia's relative influence declined. Developments over the past decade, however, suggest a different pattern. Across the discussions underpinning this report, a consistent view was that Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia are better characterised by 'managed coexistence', as both China and Russia benefit from limiting external intervention and preventing domestic political change that could threaten their own regime security. These shared aims have reduced incentives for rivalry, even as power asymmetries between the two have grown. At the same time, Central Asia is not treated here simply as a passive arena for great-power competition. The report places emphasis on the agency of Central Asian states, which pursue multi-vectorism to diversify partnerships and protect their sovereignty.

The report is organised around a set of thematic expert contributions focused on relations between China and Russia, China's approach to order-building, and its economic and social forms of engagement. The report also includes a set of policy recommendations directed at the United Kingdom, focused on how existing UK priorities can be applied more effectively in Central Asia.

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Why Cooperation, Not Rivalry, Defines Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia

MICHAEL COX, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

It was at one time assumed that one of the many areas of potential dispute between Russia and China was likely to be in Central Asia as Russian influence declined and China's increased. But more recently the debate has shifted. Thus, today there is a greater recognition of how much influence – strategic as well as economic – Russia still exerts over the region. There is also a more nuanced appreciation of how China and Russia have come to recognise that by working together in Central Asia they can better protect their respective interests, not only against unwanted political change from within – the so-called 'colour revolutions' problem – but also in ensuring that the US footprint in the region is kept to a minimum. Yet if a power transition is underway in which Beijing starts to play a greater role – over the past few years China has surged ahead of Russia in terms of trade – and this in turn leads to greater political influence, there is a possibility that tensions between Moscow and Beijing could increase. For the moment, however, the partnership between China and Russia looks set to continue, indeed possibly become closer. Meanwhile, the elites within the region itself are starting to recognize that they too have 'voice', and significantly have begun to forge new partnerships with other players like Japan, South Korea, the Gulf countries, and Türkiye – even the European Union, which now accounts for over 20% of all trade with Central Asia (European Commission, 2025) – all designed to give the region greater options and choices going forward.

Gradual Realignment without Direct Sino Russian Competition

PATRICK GILL-TINEY, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

A key theme that emerged across discussions was the relatively limited degree of direct competition between China and Russia. While their interests in the region are not identical, they appear largely aligned for now, with both states tolerating each other's presence and influence. This in part reflects the material asymmetry in the Sino-Russian relationship, as well as Russia's focus on Ukraine, Europe, and NATO. China's growing role, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, is contributing to a gradual erosion of Russia's economic and strategic position in Central Asia. But this trend is uneven: Russian language use remains widespread – in Kazakhstan, 20% are native Russian speakers and Russian is an official language (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025) – and remittances from workers abroad, primarily in Russia, make up a substantial part of GDP – e.g., Tajikistan, 30-50% (Murakami, Yamada and Sioson, 2021). This suggests a divergence between governmental strategies focusing on China and the lived realities of citizens. At the same time, the US, the EU and India were seen as less central to regional developments, except in specific cases, such as in terms of Afghanistan's securitisation. There was also some discussion of India's potential long-term interest in bypassing Pakistan and China to engage more deeply with Central Asia, but questions remain over institutional capacity and intent. Rather than a sharp contest between major powers, the picture that emerged was one of gradual realignment.

Shared Regime Security as the Basis of Sino-Russian Alignment

BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN, FORWARD COLLEGE

China and Russia's deepening alignment has been driven by a combination of factors, but the two that stand out as the primary drivers are: a) shared geopolitical interests in jointly opposing the US-led alliance system and b) shared interests regarding the prevention of 'colour revolutions' – i.e., any domestic political challenges to authoritarian regime security. Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia has also reflected these priorities.

China's rise has posed an unprecedented challenge to Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia, which Moscow continues to regard as a core Russian sphere of influence. China has long displaced Russia as the leading economic actor in the region. Russia initially remained incontestably dominant in the political and security spheres. More recently, however, China has become significantly more proactive in these spheres as well. In contrast to the US, which vacated its last military installation in the Central Asian republics (Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan) in 2014 and withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, Beijing has substantially deepened its military cooperation with the Central Asian states, expanding bilateral military exercises with them, providing large volumes of military aid, and covertly constructing its first regional military base in Tajikistan. In the meantime, Beijing is also becoming increasingly involved in the region's domestic politics.

Nonetheless, Russia has done very little to balance against China's growing dominance in Central Asia. It is instructive to compare Russia's (non-)reaction to China's expansion into Central Asia with its radically dissimilar reaction to perceived Western encroachments in Ukraine, where Moscow has been willing to go to extreme lengths to retain the country exclusively within Russia's orbit. This is in large part because Moscow's calculation is not solely based on geopolitical considerations – where China can appear as both a partner and a potential strategic rival or threat – but equally on considerations of authoritarian regime security, which Moscow shares with Beijing. In this regard, Beijing appears to Moscow not primarily as a strategic threat, but a stabilising force in Central Asia.

This shared set of regime security priorities and aversion to 'colour revolutions' has also facilitated and solidified China's and Russia's cooperation with the governments of the Central Asian republics, all of which are authoritarian as well. At the same time, each of these states is pursuing a multi-vector hedging strategy, trying to avoid overreliance on either a China that risks becoming overbearing or on a Russia that pursues a neo-imperialist agenda. Not least for this reason, Russia will continue to be a key strategic player in Central Asia, even as its relative influence has been shrinking considerably. Following Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most Central Asian governments became increasingly wary of Moscow's actions and intentions regarding its former Soviet client states, but much of that wariness appears to have subsided considering Russia's military being tied down in Ukraine and substantially weakened, particularly relative to China.

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One of the most crucial developments in recent Sino-Russian relations has been its unprecedented imbalance. While bilateral cooperation has only become stronger since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Moscow has moved from being the junior partner in the relationship to essentially becoming a supplicant that is now substantially dependent on Beijing, including in terms of military support (especially dual-use technologies). The war in Ukraine has also showcased that modern warfare no longer plays as much to Russia's traditional military strengths, while the increased focus on drone warfare in particular renders China more influential than before (since it is the world's largest producer of drone technology).

China has further deepened its cooperation with Russia since 2022, including in the military sphere, where it has been liaising closely with Moscow to tap into its experience fighting a modern war against Western technology in Ukraine. But behind closed doors, Beijing – as well as the Central Asian states – have become more dismissive of Russia's military strength since 2022. Due to Moscow's ongoing military tribulations in Ukraine, as well as its inability to uphold effective military support for its allies Armenia and Syria, Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) have lost much of their credibility as a security provider/guarantor in Central Asia. This limits Moscow's ability to respond to regional crises, such as the 2022 Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border clashes (even though Russia has military bases in both countries), whilst further boosting China's profile and relative influence in the region.

Simultaneously, Beijing continues to expand its economic footprint in Central Asia under the aegis of the Belt-and-Road Initiative, whilst appearing to care little about whether this irritates Moscow. A case in point is the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway line designed to connect China with Central Asia and offer an alternative route for Chinese trade with Europe whilst bypassing Russia – a project that had been delayed for decades due to Russian resistance. This ongoing gravitational shift in Central Asia to the detriment of Russia is particularly conspicuous in a new institutional format: the China-Central Asia summit. Inaugurated in 2023, this biennial diplomatic summit meeting brings together the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – the first (semi-)institutional

format of such a stature in Central Asia that excludes Russia. The second China-Central Asia summit meeting took place on 16-18 June 2025 in Kazakhstan.

Russia's influence in Central Asia nonetheless remains considerable and cannot be discounted. Russian trade with Central Asia has recently picked up again and the number of Russian firms active in the region has grown, whilst Moscow has made renewed inroads into the energy sectors of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Notwithstanding a gradual decline of Russian language use and Russian favourability ratings in Central Asia, Russia's soft power in the region remains strong; conversely, support for China among the public – as opposed to the elites – in most Central Asian states remains tepid. Much of this is reflective of the fact that, as mentioned before, the Central Asian states wish to preserve their ties with Moscow – as well as other adjacent actors, especially Türkiye – as a strategic counterweight to China's growing regional dominance.

Why Authoritarian Coexistence Outperforms External Engagement

**UNA ALEKSANDRA BĒRZIŅA-ČERENKOVA, RIGA STRADINS UNIVERSITY AND
LATVIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

Since the 1990s, Russia and China have aligned around a shared set of 'common' rules rooted in their parallel post-Cold War transitions (Iwashita, 2017), allowing for a rapprochement despite differences and lack of trust. This has enabled efforts to co-exist regionally, including in the Central Asian region, for the sake of reaching a wider goal of 'making the world safe for dictatorship' (Dukalskis, 2021). An interpretivist lens reveals overlapping interests between Russia and China (e.g., regime stability and responses to non-traditional security threats) alongside divergences (e.g., long-term strategic dominance, traditional security partnerships and preferential economic partnerships). The EU's growing engagement in Central Asia, driven by a quest for strategic autonomy and a desire to hedge against authoritarian consolidation reflects a strategic push, but will hardly prove efficient in a region saturated with local agencies and a dynamic of neighbouring great power competition/cooperation.

China's Emerging Regional Order in Central Asia: Structured Partnership and Soft Alignment

ZHANG XIAOTONG, KIMEP UNIVERSITY

Central Asia has become a testing ground for China's regional order-building. Rather than reviving a hierarchical model, Beijing is advancing a non-hierarchical, yet structured approach built on rapidly evolving partnership diplomacy. The logic is incremental. Relationships have moved from strategic partnership to comprehensive strategic partnership, then to all-weather (Uzbekistan) and permanent (Kazakhstan) partnerships, and toward bilateral 'community of shared future' formulations – now buttressed by regional-level institution-building. This

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sequencing explains what 'structured' means here: a stepwise upgrade of diplomatic intimacy, moving from bilateral commitments to small-multilateral (such as 'Central Asia+partner') arrangements and, crucially, to region-wide legal and organisational anchors.

Since the first China-Central Asia Summit (Xi'an, 2023) and the second (Astana, 2025), China and the five Central Asian states have established a permanent China-Central Asia Secretariat in Xi'an and signed the Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation – milestones that aim to develop a more coherent regional architecture (Liu, 2025; Xinhua General News Service, 2025). Additional deliverables include cooperation platforms and centres that operationalize this agenda.

This order is best understood as soft alignment: no alliances or binding defence obligations, but institutionalised consultation, economic statecraft, and regularised summitry that raise predictability and lower political costs for all sides. The unprecedented combination of a permanent secretariat and a region-wide treaty within a 'C5 + China' format signals that Beijing is not playing a new 'Great Game' but prototyping a post-alliance regional order that is structured, multi-layered, and anchored in pragmatic partnership rather than coercion.

From Across the Pacific: The United States and Central Asia after Afghanistan

JONNY HALL, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

While not a central concern of this workshop, the US' policies towards Central Asia undoubtedly impact Sino-Russian policies in the region. Although it would be a fool's game to try and predict Donald Trump's next foreign policy moves, there are a few trends to note.

First, following in the footsteps of the Joe Biden era, the Trump administration has made critical minerals a central component of their recent National Security Strategy (White House, 2025). This strategic logic can be seen in an increased professed interest in the Central Asian region, with plans

announced for greater cooperation in November 2025 when Central Asian leaders visited the White House (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Second, as was argued throughout the workshop, Central Asian leaders have agency in how they deal with great powers (Umarov, 2025), such as praising Trump and aligning with his distaste for NGOs and policies combatting climate change. If the old world order 'is not coming back' (Yousif, 2026), then this only increases the potential opportunities for Central Asian states to engage with the United States on a specific and transactional basis.

Third and final, any strategic moves towards Central Asia are likely to be made without much interference outside of the White House. Granted, the chaotic withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021 brought the region into US political headlines, but this was fleeting. The dominant lessons of Afghanistan remain quite unclear in US political discourse and public opinion: was the war doomed from the start, or was the withdrawal the mistake (Brenan, 2022)? In that sense, whilst Central Asian countries' views of the US might have been affected by the Afghanistan War, there seems to be leeway for Trump to lead public opinion on policies towards Central Asia if necessary.

Japan as an Alternative: Deepening Engagement in a Region of Strategic Importance

WRENN YENNIE LINDGREN, NORWEGIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

As the Central Asian region faces a shifting geopolitical landscape featuring increasing alignment between China and Russia, other external actors have reconsidered how to best engage with the region. In East Asia, both Japan and South Korea have opted to deepen their engagement in a bid to diversify their global partnerships, secure critical supply chains and support industrial advancement through infrastructure development, connectivity and human capacity building in a region of strategic importance. While there has always been a great deal of potential in Japan's relations with the five Central Asian states, it is only in recent years that cooperation has become more prioritised. In December 2025, Japan hosted its inaugural 'Summit of Central Asia+Japan Dialogue' which incited an ambitious goal to realise \$19 billion in business deals with the region in the next five years. For Tokyo, such engagement is consequential in that it serves as both an alternative for Central Asian states as well as a strategic imperative to expand Japan's cooperation with the resource-rich region. Known as a first mover in the field of economic security, plans to strengthen supply chains for critical minerals and to enhance energy security under the newly adopted 'Tokyo Declaration' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025) could be agenda-setting items for how others can also deepen strategic engagement in a region that increasingly finds itself in-between.

From Corridors to Production: New Frontiers in China-Central Asia Cooperation

FRANK MARACCHIONE, SOAS UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

China's role in Central Asia has entered a new phase. Over the past decade, thanks to the global exposure of the Belt and Road Initiative, the region became synonymous with large infrastructure projects, and logistics corridors, particularly those connecting China with Europe. Today, the centre of gravity is shifting toward embedded production, particularly in sectors such as automotive, metallurgy, textile, and agriculture. This transition is reshaping the socio-economic landscape far more profoundly than earlier connectivity investments. In Uzbekistan, almost 2,000 Chinese companies were established in the last two years, going from 2,337 in later 2023 to 4,192 in June 2025 – more than one fourth of the total number of new companies. Factories such as the BYD-UzAuto joint venture in Jizzakh, have become emblematic of the move towards sustained industrial presence rather than episodic construction work. This follows the trend of what Chinese economists called 'cooperative globalisation', where Chinese enterprises take the lead in industrial localisation and enhance host countries manufacturing capabilities through collaborative development. This new phase opens spaces for local agency: local institutions, labour brokers, family networks, and state authorities, shape the terms of production, including access to jobs, and expectations around working conditions. In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese companies have learned the hard way that the sustainability of production facilities rest on local forms of cooperation and conflict management. Relatedly, the success of this new wave of Chinese investment hinges not only on state-to-state harmony but also on how companies' activities are adapted and contested locally.

For policymakers, the key implication is clear: socio-economic development in Central Asia now unfolds inside supply chains. Understanding this requires attention to labour regimes, skills ecosystems, and everyday practices within production sites, not just macro-level strategic alignments. As China deepens its everyday footprint, Central Asia's development trajectory will increasingly hinge on how local actors negotiate and reshape the new production landscapes materialising around them.

How Skills-Training Can Transform China's Relationship with Central Asia

ALIYA TSKHAY, UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

China has launched several Luban workshops, a capacity-building educational centres to train Central Asia's workforce in technical skills. The nature of the workshops is also defined by the local needs ranging from the focus on AI, electric vehicles, energy, and urban infrastructure. The roll out of Luban workshops is fast with three launched since 2023 and two more under construction in Kazakhstan only (Lemon and Jardine, 2025). The workshops are also present in all other Central Asian states.

The emphasis on such vocational workshops by both Chinese and Central Asian leaders underlines the high-political attention this initiative has acquired. The Chinese government promotes the workshops for two main reasons. First, to support a more positive image of China across the region where anti-Chinese protests occur on an annual basis. Second, to create a trained workforce that can be engaged in many infrastructural and industrial projects that China leads in Central Asia.

The question remains how an idea of tertiary education becomes an important pillar of the China-Central Asia relationship and how it can be an example for other foreign partners. It is evident that Chinese authorities recognise the fact that more investment in the infrastructure projects in the region (ongoing and future ones), especially those on energy and mining, will require availability of skilled and trained workforce. By training local youth on Chinese machinery and under Chinese certification, Beijing promotes Chinese knowledge and technological advancement. This feeds into the growing role of China as a superpower. China also recognises that fostering a relationship beyond the development of infrastructure projects will build a more sustainable path for bilateral relations. Using a people-to-people approach – influencing local youth to resort to Chinese knowledge and local governments to use Chinese machinery – enlarges China's political influence over Central Asia.

Central Asian Labour Migration at a Crossroads

ELIZABETH HUMPHREY, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Central Asia is home to one of the world's largest migrant labourer populations, which has pursued seasonal labour in Russia *en masse* since the early 2000s. However, anti-migrant sentiment across Russia is on the rise (BBC, 2025), making the door to higher wages and steady employment much harder for migrants to open. Particularly since the deadly March 2024 Crocus City Hall terror attacks (ICCT, 2024), reportedly carried out by Tajik labour migrants on behalf of ISIS-Khorasan, migrants in Russia have faced heightened legal scrutiny and everyday discrimination. Workplace and accommodation raids

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While Russia was once considered a 'brother' amongst post-Soviet countries, the realities of migration are changing this dynamic

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have spiked since the attacks, and huge numbers of migrants have been deported with lengthy re-entry bans (RFE/RL's Tajik Service, 2024; Sultanalieva, 2025).

As such, while Russia was once considered a 'brother' amongst post-Soviet countries, the realities of migration are changing this dynamic. Now migrants are searching for alternative migration corridors with better conditions and more opportunities. Other pathways *do* exist, but do not accept the numbers necessary to meet labour supplies. Moreover, anti-migrant sentiment is by no means exclusive to Russia. For example, the UK's Seasonal Workers Scheme (SWS), which provides much-desired opportunities for migrants to work on farms across the country, has faced heavy political pressure and criticism since its inception in 2019. Though the scheme was extended in 2025 (Horton, 2025), concerns continue around mismanagement of visas in home countries and exploitation on hosting farms (Livingston, 2025), amid a political climate that is less than welcoming to migrant labourers.

As migrants face worrying conditions in host countries, home governments are increasingly under pressure to provide domestic job opportunities. Some countries are excelling on this front, for example Uzbekistan (International Monetary Fund. Middle East and Central Asia Dept., 2024), which, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has accelerated domestic industry growth – though it continues to face governance and informality challenges. Meanwhile, China could play a pivotal role in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Aibashov and Rickleton, 2024) as an investor in domestic projects that could also produce internal jobs – though outcomes for local job creation and long-term benefits are mixed and depend on contract structures and governance improvements. However, as long as the domestic business climate remains suffocated by local corruption and political obstacles (Transparency International, 2025), a China-assisted shift to domestic growth may have limited effects in the short term. Under such conditions, Central Asian governments will need to consider the implications of unemployment and lack of migration opportunities for internal economic and political stability.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations for the United Kingdom

The contributions in this report show that the UK's current set of priorities about Central Asia are generally consistent with how the region is structured and governed.¹ In particular, the UK's emphasis on sovereignty, stability, and pragmatism reflects how governments in the region approach external partnerships. However, what the authors collectively note is that these priorities are more likely to succeed if they remain focused and consistent over time, rather than overextended. The following recommendations, therefore, build directly on what the UK already does and show where this approach can be strengthened.

1 This assessment can be inferred from recent UK policy documents, including the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, the International Development Strategy, and the UK-Central Asia Regional Development Partnership.

a) Prioritise selectivity of engagement

The UK approaches Central Asia as a re-engaging partner, working via targeted bilateral relations – especially with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – and discussing the establishment of loose multilateral formats such as a CA5+UK dialogue, similar to arrangements already in place around the world (Parliament. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023).² At the same time, the UK has also aimed to deepen its relationships with Central Asian countries through more pragmatic forms of cooperation in areas such as education, development assistance, and regulatory support, including programmes like, among others, Chevening Scholarships. However, as the experts participating in this project report note, the UK continues to be a latecomer in the region. This reflects the reality that Central Asia, as a world region, is structured by enduring Russian influence and increasingly institutionalised Chinese engagement. This is particularly visible, for instance, in Russia’s prominent role in labour migration and remittance flows across the region (IOM, 2024), and in China’s institutionalisation of dialogue formats such as the China-Central Asia summit via the establishment of a permanent Secretariat in the city of Xi’an, Shaanxi, in 2024 (The Times of Central Asia, 2024). Taking stock of this reality, the UK should be more explicit in narrowing its engagement focus, concentrating resources on a limited number of areas where the country offers a clear and convincing added value to Central Asian countries – above all, education, workforce skill development, regulatory governance and standards – instead of seeking wide-ranging engagements across multiple, already-saturated sectors.

b) Connect values to technical cooperation

The UK already avoids adopting language reminiscent of political conditionalities or demands for regime change, framing any instance of engagement around issues of governance and resilience. In recent years, this was made particularly evident by the UK-Central Asia regional development partnership, wherein cooperation was linked to clear and achievable goals such as economic resilience or climate and water management (UK-Central Asia Region Development Partnership Summary, 2023). This approach is reinforced by the authors participating in this project report, who stress that Central Asian governments traditionally employ lenses such as political risk and regime security when evaluating novel external partnerships. The UK can thus push this further by linking values to technical cooperation so that principles of good governance are experienced as improvements to existing institutions rather than political demands. This can be achieved by working with Central Asian countries in, for example, advising on how public contracts are more efficiently awarded, regulations are applied to international businesses, or officials are trained to promote rules fairly.

c) Routinise cooperation

In its priorities for engaging Central Asian countries, the UK already makes a case for establishing long-lasting relations with the region. David Cameron’s well-known 2023 op-ed on Uzbek newspaper *Gazeta*, above all, emphasises the need to ‘build[...] an even stronger

2 The CA5+UK format would sit within a broader family of “Central Asia+partner” engagement mechanisms used by multiple actors, such as the C5+1 platform with the US, as well as similar summit-level dialogues involving China, the EU, India, Japan, and South Korea.

partnership' and 'take [...] relations to a new level'(Cameron, 2024), thus signalling the UK's intention to develop an inter-generational engagement with Central Asian countries.³ The expert views collected in this report show that this approach aligns closely with expectations from regional actors, especially at the governmental level, where ambitious and short-lived initiatives do not resonate. The UK should strengthen this position by reducing reliance on pilot projects and favouring long-term programmes, signalling commitment through the routinisation of cooperation. Moreover, although the UK already relies on regional dialogues and bilateral partnerships, these frameworks are often disconnected from one another. Yet, as the report shows when discussing the Chinese case, routinisation stems from repetition and continuity. Even though the UK cannot match China's reach, the country can strengthen its engagement with Central Asia by establishing regular dialogue forums.

d) Support hedging mechanisms

UK policy currently makes a case for respecting the sovereignty and free choice of Central Asian countries. This approach is strongly supported by the views presented in this report. Indeed, multi-vectorism remains the strategy of choice across the region (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020), as it allows Central Asian states to preserve autonomy and avoid aligning with a single regional power. The UK can build on this by showing that engagement with Central Asian states need not be competitive but additive, offering a way to strengthen existing multi-vector approaches without requiring distance from Russia or China.

e) Treat everyday economic engagements as strategic

The UK already invests in development aid across Central Asia, often framed in terms of common prosperity (United Kingdom. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023). Contributions across this report show that engagement increasingly operates through industrial and training centres, labour markets, and migration. Building on existing frameworks, the UK could give greater strategic weight to workforce skill training and labour standards, recognising their long-term social effects and avoid treating them as second-tier activities. For example, UK-accredited degrees delivered in the region shape local labour markets long after projects end. Over time, this kind of engagement shapes how the UK is experienced as a partner in everyday economic life.

3 The op-ed and associated state visits are widely understood as marking the UK's formal re-engagement with Central Asia.

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