States in Central Asia, and the state of myself. My Relations, Development and Diplomacy.

When I explained in my interview why I applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship, or have told friends, family, and potential employers about it, I've always focused on one aspect. It's the opportunity to research more about the world, but then to apply that new knowledge and approach to society, to "real life". A knowledge-based approach is vital to informing and inspiring change, and over the past two years I've learnt that this is what I want to do in the future. I wasn't expecting, though, that through learning more about the world, the scholarship would also change how I looked at myself. In this essay, I want to explore some of the parallels between what I researched in the first summer, and what I have now realised about myself, looking back to where I was this time two years ago. Whether "we" are states or people, from Scotland or the 'stans, it's our differences that make us who we are, and often what sets us apart means we can be brought closer together.

This was the thesis I developed during the research component. My work was part of a trend investigating why some states "behave differently" to those that usually receive attention in international politics. This requires thinking in new ways, attentive to the specifics of the people and cultures that you seek to better understand. My model was "inside-out"- looking at Central Asian states before trying to understand what they do. I set myself the condition of talking *with* people, rather than talking *about* them and *to* them from my desk in St Andrews. After two weeks of fieldwork in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, my understanding was widened, and my work took on a more meaningful depth. One can never fully "explain" anything in IR, and I was by no means an expert; but at least I had finally been to Central Asia and could write about some people's identities and politics, having looked them in the eye.

I now knew far more about how politics in the region "worked". It was this learning that I expected to take into my LiA summer, assisting and undertaking projects with an advisor on international relations, connecting Uzbekistan's Ministry of Ecology to international partners (such as embassies, UN bodies, and development banks). The aim was to establish and coordinate programmes on environmental stewardship, especially education. This was global politics 101, working on regional projects and international programmes, exactly the "layers" of politics that I had researched in 2022. I was putting into action what I had learnt last year- precisely what I set out to do, and so valuable.

Looking back over the past two years, however, I can now see that all this politics, diplomacy and "Central Asianism" was teaching me a far more personal lesson. I wrote about states facing difficulties in cooperation, overcoming differences, and struggling to move forward together. I didn't stop, though, to think about how I'd been struggling to do the same. And about how it, too, was holding me back.

Learning to cooperate is a fundamental part of "growing up", so we all face ups and downs. In some ways, I didn't see this as a weakness. Before university, I didn't really struggle with confidence; I was a student leader, I did public speaking, and I was sociable. I got to St. Andrews and spent a year studying through a laptop, alone.

Around the time that I applied for Laidlaw, however, I was going through a difficult patch, finding that a lot of things in my life had… slipped. Laidlaw has been an important part of the journey out of this, from the friends I've made to the opportunities I've had. These showed me how uncomfortable I'd become with "difference". Not in a xenophobic way, but rather that I had started to avoid situations

where people didn't all look at something or think about it in the same way. If this did happen, I would try to find ways to ignore it. Looking back at my research fieldwork, for instance, I wonder if I engaged with the different worldviews and opinions of my participants, because I was scared that it might seem that I was challenging them, or that they might challenge me.

This was shown "on paper" by the DISC profile that we were given during our leadership course. It recommended that I both "be firm and stand your ground" and "ask for input" as part of a team in decision-making. At the time, these seemed contradictory. How could I need to be both more self-assured and less convinced about my work? Now, however, after the LiA, working somewhere I often describe as "another world", this makes a lot more sense.

"Difference" was present even before I got to Tashkent. I had to work to the St. Andrews/ Laidlaw timescale for organising the summer programme, months in advance. My supervisor, though, was very clear that on "Central Asian time" things simply aren't organised that far in advance. I did as much as I could, but the details were "confirmed" the morning I started work. It became clear that I would have to find a way of working through, around, and with those differences to achieve anything over the LiA. All of us have faced this, and do every day, even if we don't always realise it- because difference is unavoidable.

This is the central argument of Richard Sennett's book "Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation". Inspired to think more about these, I began rereading it in Tashkent. Ironically, I started one weekend in Café Pesto, true Italian style, not a traditional chaikhonas (teahouses) like I would usually frequent. I was craving a proper flat white. This is usually read as a sign of globalisation, that our tastes are getting ever closer. Sennett, though, argues that whilst such homogeneity can occur naturally, any desire to "neutralise" difference when working together actually makes cooperation harder. If we try to ignore it or stamp it out, we become more defensive and suspicious of each other. If there's common ground to be found, great, but this isn't the only way to cooperate.

Forcing one person to be like the other weakens cooperation further, because we haven't sought to understand one another, and one or the other's perspective is being silenced. The fear of silencing is what led to my avoidance when I started my Laidlaw journey. Whereas I thought of contradiction like a clash, Sennett's book, my Laidlaw journey, and being locked in baking train carriages forced to share opinions very different to my own, have shown me that there is a better way to be different.

The first step is to notice the differences, through the "differentiating encounter". These may simply be different approaches, like workplace cultures. It manifests in trying to organise a placement in Uzbekistan six months in advance, rather than six days, or doing **everything** through the messaging app Telegram (like WhatsApp- but have you ever WhatsApp-ed the United Nations?). It can also be outright contradiction. It happens even between similar people – like heated debates between Laidlaw scholars at the London conference. Difficult conversations were a constant feature of my travel. The close confines of Central Asian transport gave me the best taste of this, testing my Russian vocab to its limits. Russian tourists on trains tell you about "unjustified violence" because they can't buy their favourite brands under Western sanctions and must holiday in Tashkent instead of Toulouse. Taxi drivers, who you've known for minutes, start asking where your wife is, what your salary is, and what you think of their president. Political questions were constant. I should emphasise that I was not working for the government of Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, I was working with them, as every international organisation does. That government is led by a president who was "re-elected", whilst I was there, with 87.71% of the vote, in an election which the OSCE found was completely undemocratic. Many people I spoke to said this was a strength, but I was disturbed by it.

When we talk these things over, however, Sennett advocates for a different kind of conversation- dialogic, rather than dialectic, and empathetic, rather than sympathetic. He advocates that we "look outward, rather than thinking everyone is or should be a reflection of ourselves" (p278), to use the conversation to reflect on our differences and identities, rather than focusing on the gap between the two.

That way, we become better leaders of others and of ourselves. Living with difference is a skill- a muscle to train, a habit to keep. This is also the definition of diplomacy- managing, not necessarily decreasing, difference. If that was the goal of diplomacy, diplomats would be getting rid of states (and doing themselves out of a job). Diplomacy has two levels, both of which I worked on in my LiA. The first, grand ritual with big statements (Uzbekistan is hosting COP this year), is about saying that the parties acknowledge and respect one another. The second, subtle notes, winks, and ambiguous phrasing, is about leaving things unsaid or saying them differently, actually respecting both parties' differences.

One of my conclusions last summer was something that sounds obvious but is very rarely practised. It was that Central Asian cooperation should be on their terms, in ways that make sense to there. It should develop naturally, and they should be allowed to be "different" together. In this way, they receive what they need, making it mutually beneficial and so more sustainable.

The leadership aspect of Laidlaw has shown me that humans need to do the same. During my LiA, an official told me how glad he was to have my outside perspective working on a particular project- it needed slowing down, and a reality check. For my part, the pace of work was sometimes uncomfortable, but also invigorating. I will *never* choose to run a project to the timescales that we ran in Tashkent, but I will remember that a bit of momentum can be healthy. On my first day, I was asked to write a high-level diplomatic communication- something usually done years into a diplomatic career. It was so exciting and so important to me. This time, though, I asked for feedback. I'm glad I did, because it wasn't great, and it meant that I got to write even more.

During my fieldwork in Bishkek, I met fascinating people and heard many perspectives. I would listen, nod attentively, and laugh politely. I would leave, and write up my thoughts. I learnt a lot, but now partly through what I now think I missed out on when I didn't delve deeper. In Tashkent, I started to question and challenge, but not confrontationally. Not to change the other person's mind, but so that I could learn more from them, about them and myself. This felt like leadership- cooperation, rather than avoidance. When I challenged, asked questions, and talked more, people didn't get angry. Instead, they talked more, and showed me a different worldview, and sometimes a different world, inviting me into their homes and lives.

I'm sure I missed out on things in Tashkent too- taking easy options, smiling, and putting my earphones in, or opening my book, instead of responding "why?". Still, though, without the chance and support given to me by the Laidlaw Foundation, my fellow scholars, and my supervisors, I doubt that pre-Laidlaw me would have put myself in those situations at all. I've experienced such variety, which has changed the way that I look at myself, as well as the rest of our world. Diplomacy is richer because we are all different, and more rewarding when we acknowledge that fact. That's something I concluded we should remember in international politics, but it has become equally important in my everyday life.