



## Silk Roads Present and Future Conference

King's College, Cambridge

2 July 2026

For millennia, the Silk Roads have served as conduits for the exchange of goods, ideas, technologies and beliefs across Eurasia and beyond.

In the twenty-first century, however, the importance of these connected regions is becoming ever more apparent: from the rise of Asia and the growing significance of Central Eurasia to the pressures created by climate change, demographic transformation and technological disruption, understanding the networks that link societies together has never been more important.

The future of global development, security and prosperity will depend in large measure on how these relationships evolve and on the ability of states, institutions and communities to respond to shared opportunities and common challenges.

This gathering brings together leading scholars, policymakers and practitioners to examine some of the most pressing issues shaping the world today. Discussions will focus on climate change and the environment, social development and human rights, critical minerals and resources, transport and digital connectivity, and the emergence of new patterns of geopolitical and economic power with an aim to exploring how to have an impact on national international and regional policy and on future collaborations.

At a time when assumptions about the international order are being tested and reconfigured, the conference aims to provide fresh perspectives on the changing dynamics of the regions that have historically formed the heart of the Silk Roads and that are once again assuming growing global significance.

## **AGENDA**

### **2pm            Landscapes, Water and Environmental Futures Across the Silk Roads**

From earthquakes and mountain systems to rivers, ecosystems and heritage sites, the geography of the Silk Roads has always shaped patterns of exchange and human settlement. Today, climate change, water scarcity and environmental pressures are creating new challenges and opportunities across Eurasia. This panel explores how landscapes, natural resources and human responses to environmental change are influencing the future of connectivity, sustainability and development along the Silk Roads.

Speakers: Professor Richard Walker, Dr Abubakr Muhammad, Sophie Ibbotson

Moderator: Dr Katie Campbell

### **2.45pm            People, Borders and Identities Across the Silk Roads**

The Silk Roads have long been shaped not only by the movement of goods, but also by the movement of people, ideas and cultures. From migration and mobility to diplomacy, memory and nation-building, the societies of Eurasia are being transformed by new forms of connection and exchange. This panel explores how communities negotiate borders, identity and belonging, and considers the ways in which culture, politics and international engagement are shaping the human geography of the Silk Roads in the twenty-first century.

Speakers: Dr Farhana Afrin Rahman, Kate Mallinson, Dr Diana Kudaibergenova (remote)

Moderator: Dr Angus Russell

### **3.30            Break**

### **3.45            Presentation: The Silk Roads Virtual Museum**

The Silk Roads Virtual Museum is an innovative digital initiative that brings together objects, ideas and stories from across the interconnected worlds of Eurasia. By using digital technologies to transcend geographical boundaries, the project seeks to illuminate the rich cultural exchanges that have shaped societies from East Asia to the Mediterranean and beyond. Drawing on the collections and expertise of museums, libraries and scholars around the world, the Virtual Museum enables users to explore the movement of peoples, goods, technologies and beliefs across time and space. It offers new ways of understanding the Silk Roads not simply as routes of trade, but as dynamic networks of interaction whose legacies continue to influence the contemporary world.

Presenter: Professor Richard Griffiths

#### **4pm                      Competition and Cooperation Across Eurasia**

The Silk Roads are once again emerging as a focal point of international politics, where economic interdependence coexists with strategic rivalry and geopolitical uncertainty. From the Middle East and the Black Sea to Russia, Iran and Central Asia, new patterns of competition and cooperation are reshaping the Eurasian landscape. This panel explores how conflict, sanctions, energy and shifting alliances are influencing the future of connectivity and examines the implications of a changing regional and global order.

Speakers: Sir Laurie Bristow, Dr Nicole Grajewski, Maximillian Hess

Moderator: Professor Peter Frankopan

#### **4.45                      The Future of Connectivity: Ideas, Networks and the New Silk Roads**

The resurgence of the Silk Roads is being driven not only by trade and infrastructure, but also by the movement of ideas, technologies and knowledge. From China's growing engagement across Eurasia to the role of Central Asia as a meeting point of cultures and the emergence of new forms of economic and technological interdependence, this panel explores the changing nature of connectivity in the twenty-first century. It considers how resources and networks – physical, intellectual and digital – are shaping the future of Eurasia and the wider global order.

Speakers: Dr Yu Jie, Dr Montu Saxena, Dr Gillian Tett

Moderator: Professor Carrie Humphrey

#### **5.30                      Concluding remarks followed by Drinks**

## Biographies of participants

**Dr Farhana Afrin Rahman** is an anthropologist affiliated with the University of Cambridge whose research focuses on mobility, borders, identity and everyday life in South Asia and the Indian Ocean world. Her work explores the social and cultural dimensions of connectivity, migration and transnational networks, with particular attention to Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal region. Through ethnographic approaches, she examines how communities experience and shape the changing landscapes of exchange that have historically linked South and Southeast Asia.

**Sir Laurie Bristow KCMG** is a distinguished British diplomat and former Ambassador to Russia and Afghanistan. He served as the United Kingdom's Ambassador to Azerbaijan (2004-7) and then as FCO Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (2010-12), before HMG Ambassador to Russia (2016-20) and then Afghanistan (2019-21). Now President of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, Sir Laurie is an authority on Eurasia and international affairs, and author of *Kabul: Final Call: The True Story of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan*.

**Dr Nicole Grajewski** is a Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and one of the leading specialists on Russian and Iranian foreign policy. Her research focuses on Russia-Iran relations, nuclear diplomacy and the geopolitics of the Middle East and Eurasia. She is the author of *Russia and Iran: Partners in Defiance from Syria to Ukraine* (2023), which analyses the evolution of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran and its implications for regional and global order.

**Professor Richard Griffiths** is Emeritus Professor of Economic and Social History at Leiden University and a distinguished scholar of European and international economic history. His research has focused on globalisation, international trade, European integration and the economic dimensions of political change, with particular interest in the ways in which networks and exchanges have shaped societies across continents. He has held visiting appointments at universities around the world and has published widely on modern economic history and international relations. In recent years, his work has increasingly explored the wider historical and contemporary connections linking Europe and Asia, making him a prominent voice in discussions about the changing dynamics of the Silk Roads and the emerging global order.

**Maximilian Hess** is Founder of the political risk consultancy Enmetena Advisory and a Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He specialises in Eurasian political economy, sanctions, energy and international trade. He is the author of *Economic War: Ukraine and the Global Conflict between Russia and the West* (2023), which examines the economic dimensions of contemporary geopolitical competition. Max's second book, *Tbilisi: Crossroads in the Caucasus*, will be published later this year. His work explores the strategic importance of Eurasia and the shifting patterns of connectivity and commerce across the region.

**Sophie Ibbotson** is a British consultant, writer, and researcher who has advised governments in Central Asia since 2008. As Uzbekistan's Ambassador for Ecology and a former Visiting Fellow at Oxford's Changing Character of War Centre, much of her work focuses on water security and conflict, climate change, and economic development in the Aral Sea basin. Sophie is the author of numerous guidebooks and articles on Central Asia and is a regular commentator on the history, cultures and contemporary development of the Silk Roads. Her forthcoming book, *Oxus*, a biography and travelogue about the Amu Darya, will be published by Icon Books in 2027.

**Professor Diana T. Kudaibergenova** is Associate Professor in Political Sociology at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, and one of the leading scholars of contemporary Central Asia. Born in Kazakhstan and educated at the University of Cambridge, her research focuses on nationalism, identity, cultural politics, gender and the transformation of post-Soviet societies. She is the author of *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives* (2017) and *Toward Nationalizing Regimes: Conceptualizing Power and Identity in the Post-Soviet Realm* (2020) and has edited and contributed to numerous volumes on Central Asia and Eurasia. Her work explores how questions of culture, memory and belonging are shaping the political and social landscapes of the Silk Roads in the twenty-first century.

**Kate Mallinson** is a leading political risk expert on Central Asia, and she has worked continuously in the region since 1987, with nearly three decades of experience in the risk management sector. A decade ago, Kate founded PRISM, a leading corporate intelligence provider on the wider Eurasian region. Recognised as an authority in the region, Kate travels frequently to Central Asia and enjoys regular dialogue with the region's most influential policy makers, business representatives, journalists and analysts. Kate is an advisor to the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and an Associate Fellow for the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. Kate and PRISM are both recognised by the industry rankings agency Chambers & Partners as leading political risk and corporate intelligence providers.

**Dr Abubakr Muhammad** is Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and founding director of the Centre for Water Informatics and Technology (WIT). His work combines artificial intelligence, robotics and systems engineering with applications to agriculture, water management and environmental sustainability. He has published extensively on hydroinformatics, socio-ecological systems and water allocation, and leads research aimed at addressing some of the most pressing resource challenges facing Pakistan and the wider region

**Professor Siddharth (Montu) Saxena** is Research Professor in the Cavendish Laboratory at the University of Cambridge, Bye-Fellow of Jesus College, and Director of the Cambridge Central Asia Forum. Trained as a physicist, historian and anthropologist, he has spent more than three decades fostering research and dialogue on Central Asia and the wider Silk Roads region. His work explores questions of identity, religion, knowledge systems and social development across Eurasia, alongside a distinguished scientific career in superconductivity and magnetism. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and Iran, and has published widely on both physics and Central Asian studies. Through the Cambridge Central Asia Forum, he has played a leading role in promoting intellectual and cultural engagement across the region.

**Professor Richard Walker** is Professor of Tectonics in the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Oxford. His research examines earthquakes, active tectonics and landscape evolution across Central Asia, Iran and other regions of Eurasia, combining fieldwork with satellite imagery and remote sensing. He has led major projects on seismic hazards and the geological processes that have shaped the landscapes through which the Silk Roads passed, and has published widely on the tectonic history and environmental dynamics of the region.

**Dr Yu Jie** is a Senior Research Fellow for China, Asia-Pacific Programme at Chatham House, where she focuses on the interplay between China's domestic political economy and foreign policy. She is a seasoned commentator in major international media outlets, including BBC News, the Financial Times and Foreign Policy, and regularly briefs senior policymakers from G20 governments and leading intergovernmental organizations. In July 2025, Project Syndicate

recognised her as ‘one of the most notable female voices’ in global affairs. She has provided expert testimony on China’s foreign affairs to several UK Parliament committees. Dr. Yu currently leads a Horizon Europe research project, funded by the European Commission and UK Research and Innovation, focused on advancing China studies and policy research.

## **King’s Team**

**Dr Katie Campbell** is an archaeologist and historian whose research focuses on the cities and landscapes of Central Asia and the wider Silk Roads. A research fellow at King’s, she works on the archaeology of Otrar and urban networks across Eurasia. Katie’s work explores the interaction between environment, material culture and long-distance exchange, shedding new light on the development of societies along the Silk Roads from antiquity to the medieval period.

**Professor Peter Frankopan** is Professor of Global History at the University of Oxford and Professor of Silk Road Studies at King’s College, Cambridge. He is the author of numerous bestselling books, including *The Silk Roads*, *The New Silk Roads* and *The Earth Transformed*, which explore the forces that have shaped the interconnected history of humanity. His work focuses on the past, present and future of the relationships linking Europe, Asia and the wider world.

**Professor Dame Caroline Humphrey** is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and one of the world’s leading authorities on Inner Asia and the former Soviet world. Her research has focused on Mongolia, Siberia and Central Asia, examining questions of mobility, religion and social change. A Fellow of the British Academy, Professor Humphrey’s books include *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*, *The End of Nomadism? Society, State, and the Environment in Inner Asia*, and most recently (with Franck Bilić), *On the Edge: Life along the Russia-China Border*.

**Dr. Angus Russell** is a Research Fellow in the Silk Roads Programme at King’s College, Cambridge, where he focuses on the history and legacies of the Mongol Empire. His research examines the transmission of institutions, ideas and practices across Eurasia, with particular interests in the Golden Horde, Muscovy and the wider interconnected world created by Mongol rule.

**Dr. Gillian Tett** is Provost of King’s College, Cambridge, and a columnist and member of the editorial board of the *Financial Times*. An anthropologist by training, whose PhD focused on identity in Soviet Tajikistan she is the author of several bestselling books, including *Fool’s Gold*, *The Silo Effect* and *Anthro-Vision*. Her work explores the hidden connections that shape economics, politics and society in an increasingly interconnected world.

## **The Silk Roads Programme at King’s College, Cambridge**

The Silk Roads Programme at King’s College, Cambridge was established in 2021 to promote the study of the societies, cultures and connections that have linked Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa across time and space.

Since it was established, the Programme has awarded seven research fellowships and one doctoral scholarship, and has organised termly seminars featuring scholars from King’s, from across Cambridge and from around the world.

It has also convened workshops and conferences on topics as diverse as the history and memory of the Kazakh famine, the environmental dimensions of global history, patterns of globalisation and deglobalisation, the movement of peoples and ideas across Eurasia, the role of climate and disease in shaping societies, and the changing geopolitical and economic landscape of Asia and the wider world.

Bringing together historians, social scientists, policymakers and practitioners, the Programme seeks not only to advance academic research but also to encourage new conversations about the challenges and opportunities facing an increasingly interconnected world.