

The Royal Society for Asian Affairs

Advancing Knowledge of Asia

Business Plan 2023-2027

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The Royal Society for Asian Affairs

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Executive summary

- This plan sets the RSAA's direction as it approaches its 125th anniversary in 2026, strengthening the practical delivery of its mission and core charitable objectives in the context of the needs and priorities of the 21st century.
- The RSAA is an open, active, and international network for informed debate about Asia, engaging experts, policy makers, and the wider public with experience, analysis, and scholarship. It is a membership body and a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.
- The RSAA has three regular sources of income: its membership, its investments and its publications. In addition, the Society has been fortunate to benefit from occasional grants from funding bodies for specific purposes, and donations from its members.

About the RSAA

Vision, mission, values

- 1.1 The RSAA is an open, active, and international network for informed debate about Asia, engaging experts, policy makers, and the wider public with experience, analysis, and scholarship.
- 1.2 The RSAA values and upholds free speech and open debate, is independent of governments and political bodies and does not take institutional positions on issues of policy at its meetings or in its publications.

History

- 2.1 The origin of the RSAA lies in the creation in 1901 of the Central Asian Society, which became the Royal Central Asian Society in 1931. Despite its name, the Society considered that any developments in Asia bearing on British interests in Central Asia fell within the Society's remit. So when, in 1975, the society changed its name to the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, it was in effect acknowledging in its name what had been the practical reality since its earliest days. The Society's journal, first published in 1914, had been using the title *Asian Affairs* since 1970.
- 2.2 The Society's membership was initially drawn mainly from among British colonial administrators, soldiers and explorers and its meetings and publications reflected those backgrounds. Social, political and cultural changes in more recent years are reflected in the Society's current membership and wider audience, which includes academics, journalists, policy advisers, diplomats and businesspeople.
- 2.3 A strategic partnership between the RSAA and Haileybury, begun in 2016, led in 2021 to the relocation of the whole RSAA library and archive to Haileybury, where they are professionally cared for and more accessible to the public.
- 2.4 In addition to its long-standing lecture programme the Society has in recent years run conferences in collaboration with, among others, the Woodrow Wilson Center, King's College London and the University of Virginia.

- 2.5 In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Society put its events online and opened them to a wider audience resulting in greater awareness of the Society and bringing an engaged and increasingly international audience to its online events, which now form a core part of the Society's output. Members of the Society based away from London have also welcomed the ability to join the Society's events for the first time.

Where we are now

- 3.1 The RSAA has two staff: the CEO and one Assistant. Both are part-time positions and together their hours are the equivalent of one full-time position. The Editor of the Society's journal, *Asian Affairs*, is self-employed, as is a Fundraising officer. The Society currently has two paid interns.
- 3.2 Annual turnover in 2020–2022 has been around £170,000. Membership has been declining slowly for ten–fifteen years. Circulation of the journal and related revenue has, in contrast, grown significantly, as has the Society's mailing list and participation in events by both members and non-members.
- 3.3 After a period of significant structural change and the disruption of the pandemic, the key challenge for the Society is adapting its role to serve the needs of a contemporary and international audience against a background of steady decline in membership (in common with many similar organisations), expectations among some members of a return to pre-pandemic activities, shrinking budgets among potential sponsors and rising costs. The appointment of the Society's Fundraiser is part of a response to these challenges.

Legal status

4. The RSAA is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, number 1179300, governed by a board of trustees (currently twelve). It was converted from an unincorporated charity in 2018. There are no plans for further changes of legal status.

Our aims

5. The RSAA aspires to be among the leading networks for people with an interest in, experience of, and expertise about Asia and to provide public benefit through its events, publications, its collections, and its awards. The Society's members are passionate about sharing understanding of how the countries of Asia relate to each other and to the rest of the world.

What we do

- 6.1 The RSAA runs public lectures on a diverse range of topics concerning contemporary Asia and its recent history, including politics, economics, cultural themes and international relations. Since 2020 lectures have been primarily online reaching a global audience.
- 6.2 The Society maintains a library and archive both of which are open to the general public for research.

- 6.3 The Society's quarterly journal, *Asian Affairs*, has the same scope. Members receive hard copies and have full, free access to the online edition and back-catalogue.
- 6.4 Members and non-member-subscribers to the Society's mailing list receive an emailed weekly Newsletter, emailed notices about each of the Society's lectures, and notifications about other significant Society developments.

Product and service development

- 7.1 In 2023 we will launch two regular publications exclusively for Society members. They are intended to strengthen the sense of community for and among members; to provide a tangible connection with the Society to supplement its online and email communications; and to be an outlet for material and news that no longer finds a place in the Society's quarterly journal *Asian Affairs*.
- From the first quarter of 2023 members will receive a revived and refreshed, illustrated, forward calendar of events. It is intended to publish these two or three times per year. Life Members and those members that do not use email will receive printed copies. Other members will receive a printable version through a digital publishing platform.
 - From the second quarter of 2023 members will receive a wholly new high-quality, magazine-style publication, *Caravanserai*, including synopses of recent lectures, short articles including retrospective pieces on the Society's past activities, items about the Society's collections, contributions from the Society's members, and news about the Society's plans. As with the calendar of events, printed copies will go to Life Members and those that do not use email. Other members will access it through a digital publishing platform. Subject to initial trials, the magazine will be published two or three times a year.
- 7.2 The ability to include speakers and audiences from around the world in the Society's online lectures has strengthened the credentials of the programme, diversified the backgrounds and perspectives of speakers and audiences and broadened the Society's reach. For the Society's many members outside London, lectures have become routinely accessible for the first time. This has been welcomed by those who had previously been excluded by geography. But the opportunity to meet in person is valued by those members (and non-members) for whom it is possible. Consideration will be given to running social events in London or elsewhere where the organisational capacity is sufficient. To maintain high quality events that are widely accessible while also meeting the desire for meetings in person, from 2023 the lecture programme will:
- Be constructed with the objective of maintaining and growing the Society's audience and support base, including membership;
 - Be either online or hybrid (unless in particular cases there are reasons to hold an event in person only with no hybrid element);
 - Continue to focus on contemporary Asia and its recent history, politics, culture and economics;

- Ensure as far as possible that the whole of the Society's geographical remit is reflected in the balance of the programme over the duration of this plan.

7.3 To help to meet the additional costs of venue hire and hybrid capability, and to encourage non-members to join the Society:

- Charges for non-members will be introduced for online participation. A technical solution for this will be implemented in 2023. (Non-members are already charged for in-person attendance);
- Non-members will be encouraged to join the Society through the opportunity to offset up to three attendance charges against the cost of membership;
- Members will be able to attend online and at some venues at no charge as at present, but charges may be made (at a lower rate than for non-members) where higher-cost venues are used;
- Access to recordings of the Society's lectures will remain free to members, but the option of charging non-members will be explored.

7.4 The annual RSAA/SOAS Schools' Day was reinstated in 2022 but had lost some of its momentum during the two years hiatus caused by the pandemic. A current £4,000 grant from the Swire Foundation will enable us to re-energise the event, re-engaging with schools, planning more effective advance publicity, and providing more ways of engaging students' interest on the day. We will seek to secure grant funding for the Schools' Day for future years. This is a high priority for our fundraising efforts;

7.5 The Society's relationship with Haileybury and the development of the library and archive will be one of our highest priorities throughout the duration of this plan and in particular up to and including the Society's 125th anniversary in 2026. Some damage was done to the Society's collections by disposals in 2015-16. As a major contribution to the future development of the collections, the Society is committing the proceeds of the 2015-16 sales to a designated fund solely and directly for the benefit of the collections, their long-term sustainability, use and development. The formulation, in 2023, of a policy on acquisitions and development of the collections will be a first step in that process;

7.6 RSAA members will be given the opportunity to see the Society's Library and Archive at Haileybury. An event for this purpose in 2023 or 2024 will, in addition, focus on the contributions of the late Hugh Leach to the Society's collections. The event will involve students from Haileybury, its Central Asian campuses and potentially other neighbouring schools as well as the Kipling Society and others. Depending on the interest in and success of the event, consideration may be given to making it an annual event;

7.7 A long-term conservation and repair programme for the Society's collections will start in 2023 and continue in future years, subject to available funding. Some of the early products of this programme will be on display at the members' event at Haileybury. The Adopt-a-Book scheme will contribute to the costs;

- 7.8 Consideration will be given to producing a supplement to Hugh Leach's history of the RSAA, to bring it up to date and in particular to amend sections of the book relating to the Society's collections that are in need of updating following the 2015-16 sales of archive material;
- 7.9 Reinstatement of the Society's Travel Awards is a high priority for 2024 and an important objective for fundraising. The awards will retain their present focus on support to applicants aged 21-28 for practical projects and research that have the potential to contribute to advances in scholarly or other public knowledge including, but not limited to, post-graduate degrees, journalism and travel writing.
- 7.10 In anticipation of its 125th anniversary, the Society will in 2024 review its principal awards (the Lawrence of Arabia Memorial Medal, the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal and the Special Award) with the aim of aligning the Society's approach to such awards with its current priorities and values.
- 7.11 The Society's journal, *Asian Affairs*, has progressively increased its readership over the last ten years and is well-regarded in terms of its output as well as being an important flagship product and source of income for the Society. Digital access to the journal has grown continuously from about 35,000 downloads in 2013 to over 123,000 in 2022. The number of institutions with access has increased from about 2,200 to 3,000 over the same period. This increased reader access directly affects the journal's income as well as attracting potential authors keen to secure high visibility to their international peers.
- 7.12 Strategies that have contributed to this recent success will be maintained and built on, including sustained but careful growth in the number of articles published, rapid publication of high-quality commentary on important Asian political developments, partnering with major academic institutions such as the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC and King's College London, and participation in the growing moves towards open access publications.
- 7.13 In 2023 the Editorial Board will establish an additional critical layer of international academic supporters based in the major Asian study centres;
- 7.14 Also in 2023 the journal will adopt a modern fully online system for submission of articles, which will improve both submissions and administration for the Editor.
- 7.15 In 2023 the Society has benefited from the support of an intern working on the journal's book reviews. Consideration will be given to making this a regular internship function.
- 7.16 The journal's performance will continue to be assessed several times each year by the Society's Editorial Board, including through the use of detailed measures of article citation in both academic and social media, the number of article downloads, and the geographical distribution of authors and readers, as well as keeping a critical eye on timely publication that matches announced publication months.
- 7.17 Staffing of the Society has been reduced in recent years, in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to reduce costs. But it is no longer possible to sustain the Society's current activities without some addition to the staff and new activities

will add to this need. In 2023 the Society will engage paid interns for some discrete tasks, including the new magazine, the journal and the Schools' Day. It is intended to make further use of interns in the longer term where suitable opportunities arise. A further member of staff will also be recruited to provide a more sustained addition to the Society's capacity to implement this Business Plan.

- 7.18 The Society's organisation of tours for members ended in 2019 as a policy decision in light of the limited return, relatively high administrative overhead, small group numbers and the ubiquitous availability of similar opportunities from other providers. But with the return of international travel post-pandemic, as an additional benefit to members, we will re-engage with travel agencies who may be interested in marketing their tours to RSAA members direct, avoiding any new costs for the Society.

Income

8. The RSAA has three principal unrestricted income streams: membership subscriptions; royalties and commission for publications; and investment income. The Society has not previously engaged in systematic fundraising but is currently in receipt of one restricted grant. Small-scale donations, mostly from existing members, and sale of merchandise make up the remainder of the Society's income.

Market research

9. In 2023 the Society has entered into a short-term contract with a professional fundraiser with the objective (in addition to immediate fundraising) of better understanding the potential sources of funding from which the Society might seek support for specific activities in the longer term, including trusts and foundations, corporate sponsors, individual donors and legacies. This is expected to result in new approaches to funding the Society's activities.

How we reach our market

- 10.1 The RSAA's identity is strong, having benefited greatly from the Society's longevity, publishing record and Royal patronage. A re-branding was undertaken in 2020 to give the Society a more modern image while retaining its heritage and primary focus. It is intended that the Society's 125th anniversary in 2026 should mark a significant further step toward guaranteeing its continuing relevance to all with an interest in contemporary Asia and its recent history.

Key relationships

- 10.2 The RSAA has a number of key partners including Haileybury, Taylor & Francis, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).
- 10.3 The Society's library and archive are housed at Haileybury and are under the care of Haileybury's Director of Learning and Research who is also the Society's volunteer Librarian and Archivist. The collaboration with Haileybury is central to the Society's ability to care for its collections and to make effective use of them as educational and research resources.
- 10.4 Taylor & Francis publish the Society's quarterly journal, *Asian Affairs*. *Asian Affairs* is a well-regarded scholarly journal and an important source of revenue for the Society. It has been published continuously (under a range of titles) since 1914. The journal has a part-time, self-employed Editor paid by the Society.
- 10.5 SOAS has been a collaborator on the delivery of an annual day of lectures and discussion for sixth-form students and their teachers that has been running for sixteen years. We are grateful for the support of The Swire Foundation which in 2023 is funding this strand of the Society's activity.

Premises

- 11. The RSAA rents office space in Westminster for the Society's administration. Its public events are held in a variety of hired venues in central London and online.

People, management and governance

- 12.1 The RSAA currently has two part-time staff and intends to restore pre-pandemic staffing levels by recruiting a third. The Society currently also has two interns, and this experiment is likely to be continued. The Society's journal Editor and its current Fundraiser are engaged on self-employed contracts.
- 12.2 Executive responsibility for the Society's activities and programmes rests with the CEO. The CEO reports to the board, which provides strategic guidance, support and financial oversight for the Society.
- 12.3 The board is composed of between five and twelve individuals (currently twelve) chosen for their skills and experience in charity governance, finance, human resources, membership organisations, publishing, academia and knowledge of Asia. Trustees follow a code of conduct and a register of interests is maintained.
- 12.4 In specific areas the board delegates to and takes advice from sub-committees. These are created according to need. Currently active committees are the Finance and Investment Committee (created in 2018), the Editorial Board and the Library and Archives Committee. Since 2018 all sub-committees have had formal terms of reference that are reviewed periodically, and all sub-committees include at least one trustee. The sub-committees have powers to draw on outside expertise as they see fit.

Risk

13. Risks are monitored continuously by the CEO. High-level risks are reviewed by the board at least annually and mitigations put in place as necessary.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation tactics
Loss of key staff	High	High	Succession planning, larger staff
Insufficient income generation limits activities	Moderate/High	Moderate	Diversify income streams
Declining membership	Moderate/High	Moderate	Diversify income streams
Decline in journal income	Low/Moderate	Moderate/High	Market monitoring

Insurance

14. The Society holds Directors' Liability insurance. Its collections are insured for their full market value. An additional policy is in place for emergency recovery and conservation of damaged articles.

Financial forecast

- 15.1 The Society has a loyal but shrinking membership base generating gross subscription income of about £62,000 per year in 2023. Publishing income is about £70,000 in 2023 and has grown steadily in the preceding decade. Investment income has been stable. In 2022 it was £26,000.
- 15.2 These income streams are expected to remain collectively at a similar level in the short to medium term but with changes of balance between the different elements.
- 15.3 In the current uncertain financial climate and with a UK general election in the middle of the period addressed by this plan, it is difficult to be specific about the detail of the Society's future financial position, but there are a number of factors and indicators that give us confidence that the Society has a more solid basis for future planning than we have had for many years.
- 15.4 In the last three years the Society's cost base has been radically changed. The Society's rented premises are much smaller scale than in the past. In large part this has been facilitated by our partnership with Haileybury where the Society's Library and Archive are now housed and more effectively administered and cared for.
- 15.5 Investment values were badly hit in 2022, but investment income has remained strong. Income from *Asian Affairs* has grown steadily in recent years. Open Access publishing is becoming a more important element in the Society's output but so far has shown no

sign of reducing the income that the journal brings to the Society and has the potential to strengthen the journal's position and, consequently, its income. Although the Membership trend has been downward for many years, in 2023 subscription income has, for the time being, stabilised.

- 15.6 Adoption of up-to-date systems for membership management, accounts and events management have helped to reduce staff hours spent on these tasks and given greater certainty to forecasts of income and outgoings. These have proved sound investments that have allowed the Society to reduce its staff numbers for the last three years and will ensure that the Society is well equipped to deal with the increasing levels of activity anticipated in this plan.
- 15.7 Nevertheless, costs are likely to increase in the near future. Additional staff will be needed, even if some of the extra activity can be based around interns. The costs associated with some of the Society's activities will also rise. For example, the cost of running quality hybrid events is substantially higher than that of purely in-person or purely online events. The Society's new magazine, *Caravanserai*, will entail some new costs in both personnel, production and distribution.
- 15.8 The commitment in this plan to significant investment in the conservation and development of the Society's collections will, over time, reduce the Society's investments and the income from them. But a clear commitment from the Society in this area will also open up the potential for securing funding from other sources.
- 15.9 We are putting significant effort into shaping a fundraising strategy that is intended to give the Society greater scope to deliver its charitable objectives and demonstrable public benefit as the Society approaches its 125th anniversary in 2026. Initial experience with these efforts will enable us to work out more detailed financial projections over the next eighteen months.
- 15.10 We believe that there are good reasons for confidence in this plan and the Society's future.