

First Stockholm Forum on Himalaya

Event Report

October 17, 2024



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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First Stockholm Forum on Himalaya

The first Stockholm Forum on Himalaya was organized by the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) on October 17, 2024, in Stockholm, Sweden.

The flagship event of the ISDP's Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) was titled "Mapping China's Himalayan Hustle." The forum probed the intricacies of China's role as a revisionist power in the Himalayan region, exploring how its infrastructure development, military strategies, and diplomatic initiatives were reshaping the geopolitical landscape. In the context of growing tensions and strategic competition in Asia, particularly in the Himalayas, the conference aimed to foster dialogue among scholars, and experts from India, Europe, East Asia and the United States on the

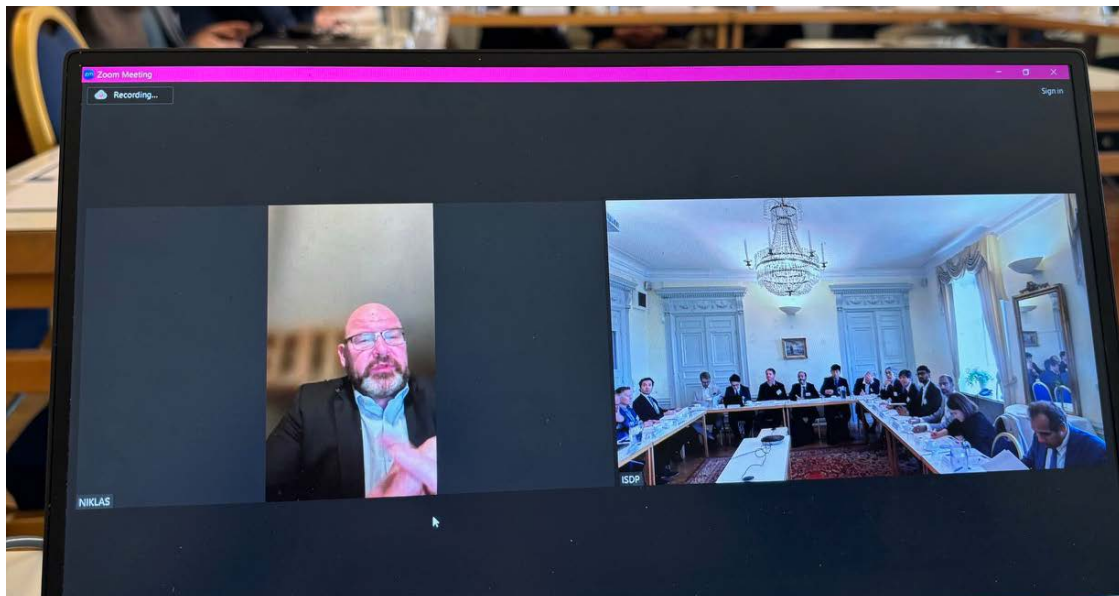
broader ramifications of China's ambitions.

The discussion emphasized the importance of regional integration in South Asia, with India playing a pivotal role, especially in addressing climate-related challenges. The event featured three key sessions, designed to address the multi-faceted nature of China's regional strategy. Against the backdrop of Sjöfartshuset, a historic venue on Skeppsbron 10, Dr. Jagannath Panda, Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs at ISDP, welcomed all the participants and spoke about the theme of the conference.

Opening Remarks

The event began with opening remarks from **Dr. Niklas Swanström**, Executive





Director of ISDP, who joined virtually. He emphasized the importance of the ongoing project, which explored China's growing presence in the Himalayas, and its implications for Europe and beyond.

Dr. Swanström pointed out that the situation in the Himalayas is far more complex than many Europeans may realize. While it has often been viewed as a straightforward border dispute, he stressed that "we have a border issue, but we also have environmental, water, and socio-economic concerns." Dr. Swanström said the multifaceted nature of China's involvement, particularly its developmental activities in Tibet, presented both positive aspects and significant challenges for local communities. He noted, for instance, that although development in Tibet has had positive economic effects, it has also marginalized the Tibetan population. He remarked, "Even the positive developments are problematic when considering the local community's future as they become a minority."

Dr. Swanström further emphasized the destabilizing effects of China's policies in

the region, including its involvement in managing the future of Tibet's spiritual leadership, particularly the Dalai Lama. He expressed concern that China's attempts to control the Dalai Lama's succession would place additional strain on India. Swanström stated, "The Dalai Lama's demise and return are things that China is trying to control, which puts tremendous pressure on the Indian government."

He concluded by expressing optimism about the project's ability to generate interest in Europe and beyond, especially given the holistic view the project aims to provide. He praised the contributions of the scholars involved, as well as Dr. Panda, for leading this initiative. He shared his excitement for the forthcoming publication, noting, "I am convinced the forthcoming publication will be a tremendous success for all of us." Dr. Swanström said he looked forward to engaging with the work produced by the project.

Following Dr. Swanström, the moderator, **Dr. Jagannath Panda**, provided additional context, underscoring the significance of China's actions in the Himalayas, not just

for India but for the broader Himalayan community. Dr. Panda highlighted how China's ongoing infrastructure projects and military modernization pose a national security threat to India and neighboring countries. He noted, "Year by year, we are seeing continued transgressions and changes to the status quo, which raise concerns not just for India but for the entire Himalayan region."

Dr. Panda acknowledged that while countries like Nepal and Bhutan may be more reserved in their public criticism, they are beginning to voice concerns about China's infrastructural expansion. He pointed to the broader regional unease regarding China's activities, particularly in terms of environmental and security implications.

He invited the panelists to offer their insights on whether China can be considered a revisionist power, a radical revisionist power, or a neo-revisionist power. He framed the discussion around how India and the EU could collaborate to address China's growing influence and the challenges it poses to the region.

SESSION 1

China as a Revisionist Power in the Himalayas and Asia

In a panel moderated by Dr. Jagannath Panda, Head of SCSA-IPA at the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Sweden, experts convened to discuss China's role in the Himalayas and its broader implications in Asia. The panel consisted of Dr. Thomas Eder (Austrian Institute for International Affairs), Prof. Jakub Zajaczkowski (University of Warsaw), Prof. Kei Hakata (Seikei University), Prof. Jae Joek Park (Yonsei University), and Prof.

Dominik Mierzejewski (Lodz University). Each panelist offered unique insights into China's revisionist ambitions, global relations, and regional responses to its growing influence. Panelists emphasized China's strategic ambitions to outcompete the U.S. and limit India's influence, with infrastructure development and geopolitical tensions in the Himalayas cited as key areas of concern.

Dr. Thomas Eder began by framing China as a revisionist power, intent on outcompeting the United States in terms of comprehensive national power by mid-century. He focused on China's actions in the Himalayas and the broader Indo-Pacific as part of a strategy to assert dominance and influence over developing countries. Dr. Eder noted that China uses its strength in territorial disputes, such as those in the Himalayas and the South China Sea, to project power.

In particular, Dr. Eder emphasized that China's goal is to be seen as the leading representative of developing countries, particularly in global governance, as evidenced by its opposition to India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council. "China seeks to be the only developing country with permanent membership and is actively blocking India's rise," he stated. According to Dr. Eder, while China will maintain a level of tension in the Himalayas, it will carefully avoid full-blown conflict to preserve its international image as a stabilizing power.

Building on Dr. Eder's points, **Prof. Jakub Zajaczkowski** offered a nuanced perspective, arguing that China's assertiveness has evolved in the past decade. He suggested that China, which was once more aggressively revisionist,



has begun to act more like a status quo power in recent years. This shift, Prof. Zajaczkowski argued, is largely due to external factors such as growing global opposition, economic challenges, and the impact of the war in Ukraine. “China has shifted from an overtly revisionist stance to one more concerned with preserving the current order,” he remarked.

Despite this shift, Prof. Zajaczkowski acknowledged that China continues to challenge the international order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where its assertive policies remain visible. He highlighted key external factors, including the strengthening of U.S. alliances in the region and economic pressures, as driving this more cautious approach by Beijing.

Prof. Kei Hakata expanded the conversation by emphasizing China’s broader hegemonic ambitions across the Indo-Pacific. While he acknowledged Prof. Zajaczkowski’s point that China has shown signs of maintaining the status quo in some areas, Prof. Hakata argued that the broader trajectory of Chinese policy is still

deeply revisionist. “China may appear to be a status quo power,” he explained, “but its actions in the Himalayas and elsewhere reflect a continued pursuit of regional dominance.”

Prof. Hakata also discussed Japan’s role in countering China’s influence in the region, noting that Japan stands firmly with India on issues related to China’s territorial ambitions in the Himalayas. However, he acknowledged Japan’s limitations in directly confronting China and suggested a division of labor where Japan would focus on Southeast Asia while India takes the lead in managing the Himalayan dispute. This strategy, he argued, could strengthen regional efforts to push back against China’s assertiveness.

Prof. Jae Joek Park offered the South Korean perspective on China’s role in the Himalayas, highlighting the interconnectedness of regional security dynamics. He noted that tensions between India and China in the Himalayas could influence broader security relationships, particularly India’s ties with the U.S. and other Quad members. Prof. Park explained,

“As tensions rise in the Himalayas, India may be compelled to deepen its security cooperation with the U.S. and Quad allies.”

Prof. Park also observed that South Korea, which views China as a revisionist power, is increasingly concerned about the broader impact of China’s actions in the region. He linked the developments in the Himalayas with other regional hotspots, such as the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula, suggesting that a rise in Chinese aggression in one area could have ripple effects across the region.

Prof. Dominik Mierzejewski concluded the panel by focusing on China’s relations with developing countries, particularly its diplomatic strategy in regions such as Central Europe and Africa. Mierzejewski highlighted how China has successfully positioned itself as a champion of the Global South, using diplomatic and economic tools to win support. However, he pointed out that this approach is beginning to face challenges as local opposition to China’s policies grows. “China’s initial enthusiasm from countries like Poland and Kenya is fading as skepticism about its long-term intentions increases,” he explained.

Prof. Mierzejewski also noted that China’s refusal to internationalize territorial disputes, preferring bilateral solutions, has been a consistent aspect of its strategy. The internationalization of these disputes secures the current status quo and the post-1989 international system. Additionally, he raised concerns about China’s portrayal of itself as a developing country, arguing that its economic power and global influence suggest it should take on more responsibilities in the international system.

SESSION 2

China’s Infrastructure Planning, Military Muscle, and Himalayan Game Plan

In a panel moderated by Mr. Richard Ghiasy, experts convened to discuss the strategic significance of the Himalayas, a region often overlooked in global geopolitics. The panel included Dr. Antonina Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis, Dr. Brendon J. Cannon, Dr. Jingdong Yuan, and Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy. Each panelist provided insights into China’s infrastructure development, military ambitions, and the geopolitical dynamics shaping the region.

Mr. Richard Ghiasy, opened the session by acknowledging the challenge of bringing together various institutions like SIPRI and ISDP to discuss the strategic significance of the Himalayas. While often overshadowed by other geopolitical hotspots, the Himalayas play a crucial role as the “third pole” of the world due to their environmental and geopolitical importance. He framed the discussion around China’s infrastructure development and militarization in the region, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of China’s strategic objectives.

Dr. Antonina Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis joined the panel online and focused her presentation on China’s hydro-hegemony in the Himalayas. She raised concerns about China’s infrastructure projects, which serve “civilians but can also be used for military purposes”. Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis stressed that these developments should alarm China’s neighbors, particularly India. She introduced the concept of a “tri-challenge” posed by the Brahmaputra River, which traverses the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh,



claimed by China as part of Tibet. The three overlapping challenges identified by Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis included territorial disputes, as China's historical claims over Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh create a persistent source of tension with India. In terms of water management, China, being an upstream nation, controls key water resources, which significantly impacts downstream countries like India and Bangladesh.

Additionally, ideological challenges arise from the status of Tibet and its identity, adding further complexity to the regional dynamics. Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis also highlighted that China often refuses to engage in multilateral water-sharing agreements, preferring bilateral deals where it can exert more control. She noted China's tendency to withhold critical water data, as seen in 2017 when China "did not share crucial data with India during the Brahmaputra floods". She called for increased cooperation on satellite data sharing between the U.S. and India to mitigate China's opaque practices.

Dr. Brendon J. Cannon built upon Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis' presentation by connecting China's actions in the Himalayas to classical geopolitical theories. Referencing Mackinder's Heartland theory and Spykman's Rimland theory, Dr. Cannon explained that China's attempts to dominate this region will provide it with significant leverage over neighboring territories, including India. He emphasized that China's maneuvers in the Himalayas are part of a larger geopolitical plan to secure dominance across multiple fronts, including South Asia and Southeast Asia. "This control of the high ground or dominance of that high ground frees China up to concentrate on its Pacific front, and therefore it does connect very much to the Taiwan Strait issue."

By securing its western and southern flanks, China can focus its efforts on maritime challenges in the Pacific like countering the Quad alliance (United States, India, Japan, and Australia) and other regional powers. Additionally, the speaker touched on infrastructure development in key areas like the Himalayas, comparing



its environmental significance to that of the Amazon and Antarctic regions. Nevertheless, and mirroring Sykman's Rimland theory, states around the rim of Eurasia from Japan in the East to India in the south and European states like the UK and France are drawing increasingly close to offset the potential for Chinese hegemony in Eurasia. This broad convergence of interests prior to any outright conflict involving China is astonishing, and represents not only the strengths of classical geopolitics' explanatory value but also the very real possibility of contestation over territory, not just in the western Pacific across Eurasia.

Dr. Jingdong Yuan shifted the focus to China's broader ambitions in South Asia, with a particular emphasis on its long-standing relationship with Pakistan. He discussed the strategic importance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which forms a critical part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), providing China with direct access to the Indian Ocean and alternative routes to bypass the Malacca Strait. Dr. Yuan pointed out that

China's investments in South Asia are not purely economic; they are deeply tied to Beijing's security concerns, particularly in relation to India. The growing influence of the Indo-Pacific strategy, which seeks to counter China's rise, has only increased China's focus on strengthening ties with Pakistan and other regional allies.

He also discussed the challenges China faces in managing its investments, particularly with changes in government in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Despite these challenges, China remains committed to expanding its influence through infrastructure development, even though this has sometimes led to criticism over issues such as debt dependency. He then shifted to explaining that China's resource-rich government gives it a major advantage in infrastructure investment, unlike Western nations.

To compete, the West must "develop some niche areas and then demonstrate that they can also provide responsible infrastructure projects that will generate local employment and have positive local



just promises, or they'll turn to China." Western countries need to act fast and go beyond talk.

Lastly, **Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy** stated that "Chinese infrastructure investments in the region are mainly designed to cultivate influence and position Beijing as the primary trade and development partner of the region". Mr. Reddy focused on how China's infrastructure investments and trade relations have fostered economic dependency in South Asia. He explained how CPEC projects have rendered Pakistan heavily reliant on Chinese loans, which is further exacerbated by imbalances in bilateral trade patterns. He argued that, as a result, other South Asian countries have grown wary of loans from China, with Nepal and Bangladesh either refusing to participate in BRI projects or limiting their exposure to Chinese development finance. He pointed out that China's development financing is almost always provided in the form of loans rather than aid.

Mr. Reddy also illustrated how China cultivates dependencies through trade relations. He provided the example of

Nepal's decreasing exports to China, which are already minimal compared to the vast amounts it imports, creating a cycle of dependency. Mr. Reddy stated that India and Japan have started offering alternative development models, emphasizing transparency and sustainability—unlike China, which often lacks transparency in its deals. He concluded by noting that while China's infrastructure projects are undeniably attractive due to the immediate economic benefits, South Asian countries are becoming more cautious of the long-term implications of such deals. This shift presents an opportunity for the U.S, EU, and India to strengthen their influence by offering viable alternatives.

The discussion that followed highlighted several interconnected themes. One significant topic was the ability of smaller Himalayan states like Nepal and Bhutan to balance the influence of China and India. **Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis** and **Mr. Reddy** agreed that these countries are not merely passive players; instead, they actively navigate between the two powers to advance their national interests.



This theme of balancing power led to a discussion of China's increasing militarization in the region. Both **Dr. Cannon** and **Mr. Reddy** touched on how China is expanding its military presence, with Mr. Reddy noting that India is responding to China's aggressive posture by developing its own internal capabilities. They argued that China's strategy in the Himalayas is not just about economic dominance but also about securing military advantages, further intensifying the regional competition.

Building on this geopolitical context, the panelists then turned to the question of global involvement, specifically whether NATO and other global powers should engage in the region. While **Dr. Cannon** and **Dr. Łuszczkiewicz-Mendis** agreed that direct NATO involvement is unlikely, they suggested that strategic collaboration with Indo-Pacific partners, such as India, could provide a valuable counterweight to China's growing influence, particularly through intelligence sharing and joint military exercises.

Finally, the discussion shifted to the

environmental risks associated with China's infrastructure projects in the Himalayas. **Mr. Reddy** underscored the potential for transboundary water conflicts, stressing that any international response to China's strategic expansion must also take into account water security and security dilemmas resulting from water infrastructure construction by an upper riparian like China. He argued that failure to address these water security concerns via institutional arrangements could lead to long-term instability in the region, making this a critical issue in the broader geopolitical landscape. The session concluded with speakers agreeing that the Himalayas represent a critical front in the geopolitical competition between China and its neighbors. China's infrastructure development is not just about economic growth but is closely tied to its strategic and military goals.

The panelists underscored the importance of multilateral cooperation, both to counter China's influence and to address the environmental challenges posed by its rapid development in the region. While

smaller states in the Himalayas continue to navigate between competing powers, the broader geopolitical contest between China, India, and other global actors will likely intensify in the years to come.

SESSION 3

Climate, Connectivity, and China's Neighborhood

Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, Director of the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), India, and session moderator, highlighted the geopolitical complexity of the Himalayan region, framing it as a “delicate ecological, economical, and political hotspot.” She argued that issues in the Himalayas, particularly in relation to climate and connectivity, are deeply interconnected and impact the stability and livelihoods of local communities. “When we’re discussing climate,” she stated, “we are actually discussing the impact on very real lives that are in and around the river systems in that region.”

Ms. Pankaj noted that this is the first time the topic is being given serious consideration in the European Union, emphasizing a longstanding gap in awareness. “It’s also a little sad,” she commented, “that the topic India has been struggling with for decades is only now making its central gateway into European dialogue.” According to her, this oversight underscores the need for European involvement in addressing the region’s challenges, where issues of “climate, connectivity, and militarization” shape a complex environment with lasting implications for South Asia.

On China’s role, Ms. Pankaj pointed out that its growing infrastructural dominance adds ecological and economic strain on the region. She discussed how China’s energy

projects are being used as tools to advance its geopolitical ambitions in the trans-Himalayan region. Panelists discussed the impact of these projects on neighboring countries, questioning whether China’s actions are genuine steps toward clean energy or if they primarily serve broader territorial and strategic goals. Ms. Pankaj stressed that foreign interest in the region, especially from the West, is both welcome and overdue, as it could bring necessary resources and attention to these interconnected challenges. International powers, including the EU and the U.S., can respond to China’s growing influence in the region while balancing environmental concerns and competition for resources.

Dr. Nicolas Blarel joined the session online and centered his remarks on the intricate geopolitical and environmental challenges facing the Himalayan region. He underscored the pressing issue of China’s energy and hydropower projects, particularly the construction of dams on the Brahmaputra River, which could significantly impact the region’s water security. Dr. Blarel highlighted that while China’s projects in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Indian Ocean, are frequently discussed, there is far less attention on its activities in the Himalayan area, despite the ecological risks they pose.

He called for more robust EU-India collaboration in monitoring and mitigating the potential damage caused by China’s hydropower projects: “The EU could work with India and other like-minded governments to use international influence instruments, basically to pressure Beijing to abide by certain global norms and conventions (...) the EU could play a bigger role with New Delhi, with Dhaka, with other actors in the region.”



Dr. Blarel also suggested that the EU use its diplomatic influence to press China to adhere to international environmental standards and foster trilateral cooperation involving India and smaller neighboring countries like Nepal and Bhutan, as well as the EU.

Dr. Dattesh D. Parulekar framed his comments around the complex contestation between India and China over the Himalayan region. He presented three historical turning points—India’s opposition to China joining the SAARC in 2014, the 2017 Doklam standoff, and the 2018 BIMSTEC summit—that illustrate how these two powers have maneuvered for influence in the region.

Dr. Parulekar characterized China’s approach to the region as one driven by a combination of coercive hydropolitics and a strategic desire to repurpose water resources from Tibet for its own needs. He contrasted this with India’s security concerns, noting that while China sees the region’s resources as a way to fuel its industrial development, India views the porous borders and water security issues as existential threats.

To address these challenges, Dr. Parulekar called for the inclusion of external actors, suggesting that a Quad-based framework could help foster multilateral engagement. This, he argued, would allow for a more pluralized geopolitical space in the Himalayas and reduce China’s influence, while allowing smaller states like Bhutan and Nepal to assert greater autonomy.

He concluded by saying that “We (India) have to move out of this compulsive feeling that we have to be a net security provider. We have to move into actually becoming a privileged development partner.”

Dr. Henrik Chetan Aspengren provided a European perspective on the Himalayan region, emphasizing the lack of attention it receives in European policy discussions: “The awareness and knowledge about India’s situation and India’s competition with China and the security situation at the border is not widely known.” Despite the EU’s growing focus on the Indo-Pacific, Dr. Aspengren noted that the Himalayas have been largely overlooked. He highlighted the limited public awareness and policymaker interest in India’s security situation along its northern borders, in contrast to the



relatively well-known issues in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait.

Dr. Aspengren also discussed the slow progress of the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which aims to promote sustainable infrastructure and energy projects in regions like South Asia but has faced difficulties in securing private-sector investment. He recommended that the EU consider building stronger partnerships with India in the Himalayan region through existing mechanisms such as the EU-India Climate and Energy Partnership and the green technology component of the TTC (Trade and Technology Council). He also suggested that the EU could expand its engagement with India through more targeted satellite cooperation for environmental monitoring, which could be beneficial in addressing the climate-related challenges facing the Himalayas.

Prof. Saroj Kumar Aryal focused his remarks on Nepal's unique geopolitical position between India and China. He described the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Nepal as largely symbolic, with many projects stalled or unrealized due to disagreements between the two countries

over financing. China prefers to offer loans, while Nepal seeks grants or concessional terms, leading to a standstill on several key projects. Prof. Aryal argued that China's engagement with Nepal is primarily driven by its interests in Tibet, as Nepal's geographic proximity makes it a key player in any potential unrest related to Tibetan independence: "The success of the Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal is a unilateral Chinese player".

On the Indian side, Prof. Aryal pointed out that Nepal has historically been viewed by India through a security lens, which has often limited the scope of their bilateral relations. He called for India to adopt a more developmental approach to its engagements with Nepal and other Himalayan states, moving away from its traditional focus on security concerns.

Furthermore, Prof. Aryal noted the growing influence of the United States in Nepal's internal politics, particularly through development aid and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). This increased U.S. involvement, he suggested, complicates both India and China's strategic calculations in the region, and

India, in particular, needs to adapt to this changing dynamic.

Mr. Ryohei Kasai brought a Japanese perspective to the discussion, focusing on Japan's emerging role in the Indo-Pacific and its potential involvement in the Himalayan region. He emphasized the significant impact of climate change on the Himalayas, particularly the rapid melting of glaciers, and warned that the region's environmental challenges have been exacerbated by infrastructure projects such as China's hydropower dams.

Mr. Kasai highlighted Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which includes initiatives aimed at improving connectivity and infrastructure in South Asia. He suggested that Japan's expertise in sustainable development could be instrumental in helping countries like Nepal and Bhutan develop alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. He also discussed the potential for Japan to play a greater role in building a regional framework that includes the Himalayan states in broader Indo-Pacific cooperation, possibly through trilateral or multilateral mechanisms with India and other partners like the EU.

A lively discussion emerged following the panel discussion, focusing on the role of the Quad, China's intentions in the Himalayas, and India's regional strategy.

Dr. Cannon suggested the Quad could be a platform to address infrastructure projects in the Himalayas, similar to what Japan proposed. **Dr. Parulekar** agreed, arguing the Quad's focus on sustainable development and its ability to bring together diverse countries made it a good fit. However, **Dr. Eder** expressed concerns about the Quad's capacity to handle such

projects given its wide range of activities.

Prof. Aryal suggested China's highway construction in Nepal served both its own interests and opened access for its exports. He believed China might not be as interested in extensive highway construction due to past experiences and the current state of existing roads. **Dr. Parulekar** expressed concerns about including Afghanistan in discussions due to its current instability.

Alexander Droop, intern at ISDP, questioned if the Quad had the capacity to handle infrastructure projects in the Himalayas given its wide range of activities. He also wondered if Australia's recent shift towards China might weaken the Quad. **Dr. Parulekar** argued the Quad could deliver in the Himalayas by focusing on non-controversial areas like human capital development and skill training. He suggested promoting a "non-China alternative" rather than directly opposing China. He acknowledged Australia's recent approach to China but believed it's more about business interests and did not necessarily indicate a strategic shift.

Prof. Zajackowski criticized India for lacking a clear vision and strategy for South Asia. Others emphasized the importance of India's role in the Quad and its potential to influence regional dynamics.

Participants also discussed other potential frameworks for regional cooperation, such as the G7 with its Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), and the importance of involving the EU in efforts to counter China's influence. Overall, the Q&A session highlighted the complex interplay of geopolitical interests, economic development, and infrastructure projects in the Himalayas. It also underscored the need for a more nuanced understanding

of China's intentions and India's regional strategy.

FINAL DISCUSSION & KEY TAKEAWAYS

During the final discussion, the panelists delved into a variety of pressing topics, including the role of the Quad in the Himalayas, security concerns tied to Chinese infrastructure projects, and opportunities for deeper regional cooperation. **Prof. Aryal** stressed the importance of better trade routes for Nepal through India and the need for collaboration between Nepal, India, and China on climate impacts from the Tibetan plateau, advocating for stronger regional integration in South Asia with India at the helm.

Dr. Parulekar emphasized the potential for collaboration between India and the Nordics in areas like digital infrastructure, health, and education—sectors unlikely to provoke China. He also supported the Quad's role in climate initiatives and suggested connecting the Himalayan states to broader global networks. In a similar vein, **Dr. Cannon** proposed that Europe and India work together on satellite imagery to monitor environmental changes in the Himalayas, while also advocating for a more inclusive framing of discussions, suggesting "Eurasian talks" to invite broader participation.

Meanwhile, **Mr. Ghiasy** was more cautious, expressing doubts about large connectivity projects in the region and instead urging a focus on climate issues, which could unite regional and international players. **Dr. Eder** supported digital and connectivity infrastructure but highlighted the need for an EU-India investment agreement

to drive private sector involvement and align governance priorities. **Prof. Hakata** urged a shift in focus from ambitious EU-Himalaya projects to more realistic intra-regional connectivity, drawing on Japan's experience and suggesting partnerships with countries like the Czech Republic and Lithuania.

Prof. Mierzejewski advocated for a "non-China" approach in engaging the Global South on sectoral connectivity like health or digital, drawing on the experiences of smaller countries like Lithuania and Poland to guide future EU-Global South cooperation. Similarly, **Ms. Pankaj** called for deeper EU-India collaboration in research and soft power areas, stressing the importance of structured dialogues on Tibet, while **Prof. Zajackowski** noted the lack of research on the Himalayas' significance in EU-South Asia relations and emphasized comparative research between South Asia and Central Europe.

Dr. Yuan highlighted the opportunity for India and the EU to collaborate on green energy transitions, particularly in the Middle East, and suggested encouraging China to take on a leadership role in environmental issues. **Mr. Kasai** emphasized Japan's critical role alongside India in addressing areas China may find harder to oppose, such as climate change and AI, while also calling for more research on Tibet's environmental and human rights challenges.

Mr. Reddy pointed to the potential for collaboration through institutions like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), particularly in infrastructure, capacity building and regional integration

via minilaterals, while urging deeper research on Tibet and its monastic politics by EU institutions in collaboration with India.

Dr. Aspengren highlighted investment opportunities from European development banks in solar and hydro projects in Northern India. **Mr. Uniyal** brought attention to the urgent need for better healthcare infrastructure in the Himalayas, suggesting the EU could lend its expertise in developing health services in similar regions. Lastly, **Ms. Fargier** and **Ms. Jarmuth** shared their perspectives on Sweden's and Germany's potential roles in the region, with Fargier focusing on sustainable development and environmental protection, and Jarmuth highlighting Germany's unique relationship with China as an avenue for future dialogue.

Key Takeaways from the Forum

- The U.S. and EU should prioritize the Himalayan region within their Indo-Pacific strategies.
- Enhanced partnerships with India are essential to counter China's influence. This can be achieved through joint initiatives focused on environmental monitoring and military cooperation
- China is actively pursuing a revisionist agenda to secure dominance in the Himalayas, which threatens India's global rise and positions China as a champion of developing nations.
- China's extensive infrastructure projects in the region, including roads, dams, and military installations, serve dual purposes:
 - o Military Enhancement:

Strengthening China's military capabilities.

- o Economic Dependencies: Creating economic ties with neighboring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh.

- China's control over major rivers, such as the Brahmaputra, poses significant challenges for downstream nations, especially India and Bangladesh. China's refusal to engage in multilateral water-sharing agreements highlights the risks of "hydro-hegemony."
- The dam-building projects initiated by China could exacerbate water scarcity and flooding in the region. There is an urgent need for increased EU-India cooperation to:
 - o Monitor environmental impacts using satellite technology.
 - o Encourage China towards transparency in resource management.
- China's efforts to control the succession of the Dalai Lama raise significant tensions with India and threaten the stability of the Tibetan community.
- Active engagement from the U.S. and EU is necessary to prevent the further marginalization of Tibetans.
- China's military buildup along the Himalayan border, coupled with infrastructure development for rapid troop deployment, signals an intention to neutralize India's influence.
- In response to these developments, India is also bolstering its military presence, raising concerns about a potential standoff.
- Countries like Nepal and Bhutan

are attempting to balance economic ties with China against their security and sovereignty concerns.

- These nations require greater strategic support from India and Western powers to reduce their dependence on China.
- Japan is emerging as a critical player in countering China's influence in the Himalayas through initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).
- Joint projects in infrastructure and climate initiatives between Japan and India are essential for regional stability.
- Western powers should offer more transparent and sustainable development alternatives to the Himalayan states.
- The Quad (U.S., India, Japan, and Australia) should take a leading role in countering Chinese influence in the

Himalayas. Their focus should include:

- o Sustainable development.
- o Digital infrastructure.
- Joint military exercises provide an alternative to China's presence. China's infrastructure investments often come with strings attached, creating lasting economic dependencies for smaller nations.
- The Himalayas, often overlooked in geopolitical discourse, should be acknowledged as a critical front in the global power struggle.
- European countries can play a significant role in this context through initiatives like the EU Global Gateway, which aims to provide sustainable infrastructure projects.



CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Mapping China's Himalayan Hustle

Date Thursday, 17th October 2024

Venue Sjöfartshuset, Skeppsbron

8:20-9:00:

Registration and Coffee

09:00 - 09:15

Inaugural Session

- **Welcome Remarks**
Dr. Jagannath Panda, Head, SCSA-IPA, Institute for Security and Development Affairs, Sweden
- **Introductory Remarks**
Dr. Niklas Swanstrom, Director, Institute for Security and Development Affairs, Sweden (virtual)

09:15 - 10:45

Session I: China as a Revisionist Power in the Himalayas and Asia

How is China revisionism understood in the Himalayas and Asia and what key challenges should be considered when navigating China's geopolitical pressures in the Himalayan region? How is China's revisionist agenda in the Himalayas reshaping the geopolitical landscape of Asia, and what implications does this have for regional powers like India and smaller states like Nepal and Bhutan? How does China's actions in the Himalayas reflect its ambitions as a revisionist power, and what strategies can neighboring countries and global powers adopt to counterbalance this influence?

Moderator: Dr. Jagannath Panda, Head, SCSA-IPA, Institute for Security and Development Affairs, Sweden

Speakers: (5-7 minutes per speaker)

- o Dr. Thomas Eder, Senior Researcher, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Vienna
- o Prof. Jakub Zajackowski, Professor, University of Warsaw, Poland
- o Dr. Kei Hakata, Professor, Seikei University, Japan
- o Dr. Jae Joek Park, Associate Professor, Yonsei University, South Korea
- o Prof. Dominik Mierzejewski, Professor, Lodz University, Poland

10:45 - 12:15

Session II: China's Infrastructure Planning, Military Muscle, and Himalaya Game Plan

How do China's infrastructure investments in the Himalayan region reflect its broader geopolitical and neighborhood strategies, and how are Western powers responding to these developments? How do Indian and Western perspectives on China's infrastructural expansion in the Himalayas differ, and what opportunities exist for cooperation between India, the US, and the EU to counter China's growing influence in the region? Can China's military modernization on the Tibetan Plateau be effectively addressed through international collaboration, and what role might NATO, the EU, and India play in countering China's strategic ambitions in the region?

Moderator: Mr. Richard Ghiasy, Senior Fellow, Leiden Asia Center, Leiden University, and Director of GeoStrat, The Hague, The Netherlands

Speakers: (5-7 minutes per speaker)

- o Dr. Antonina Łuszczkiewicz, Assistant Professor, Jagiellonian University, Poland (virtual)
- o Dr. Brendon Cannon, Associate Professor, Khalifa University, UAE
- o Dr. Jingdong Yuan, Director, China and Asia Security Programme, SIPRI, Sweden
- o Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy, Senior Research Associate, Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), India



12:15-13:45:

Lunch

14:00 - 15:15

Session III: Climate and the Himalayan Neighborhood

How are China's energy projects being used as tools for advancing its geopolitical ambitions in the trans-Himalayan region, and what impact do these projects have on the neighborhood? How can the neighborhood and, international powers, such as the EU, US, effectively respond to China's growing hydro-hegemony and strategic expansion in the Himalayas while balancing environmental concerns and resource competition? Is there a connectivity competition emerging between China's BRI and EU's Global Gateway? How can the EU cooperate with India and South Asia to challenge the BRI, factoring issues such as non-transparency, sustainable development and resilient infrastructure?


Moderator: Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, Director, Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), India

Speakers:

- o Dr. Nicolas Blarel, Associate Professor, Leiden University, The Netherlands (virtual)
- o Dr. Dattesh D. Parulekar, Assistant Professor & Programme Director, School of International and Area Studies, Goa University, India
- o Dr. Henrik Chetan Aspengren, Senior Analyst and Project Leader, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), Sweden
- o Saroj Kumar Aryal, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland
- o Mr. Ryohei Kasai, Visiting Associate Professor, Gifu Women's University, Japan

15:15-16:00:

General Observation and Discussion



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