



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE

Post Conference Report
NDU-RDDC Roundtable

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

DURING AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

19-20 August 2025



Jointly Organised by
National Defence University & Royal Danish Defence College

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Introduction

“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.”

- Attributed to Vladimir Lenin

In recent years, global power balances have shifted and traditional alliances have been tested. This challenges all types of multilateral cooperation as well as the foundations of international law as the global security architecture is being reshaped in real-time. As Lenin's oft-quoted reflection suggests, international affairs can move in sudden, revolutionary leaps rather than through slow, incremental developments. The early months of 2025 have been just such a leap, with the new U.S. administration reshaping its strategic priorities thereby setting in motion a new phase of global change and uncertainty, if not outlining a new world order.

In August 2025, researchers and practitioners from the National Defence University (NDU) of Pakistan, and the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC) convened to discuss the implications of these recent changes, focusing on two critical arenas of geopolitical competition: the Arctic and the Asia-Pacific. As the academic debates highlighted, these regions serve as key sites for assessing the future of international security cooperation.

Drawing on regional perspectives from Europe and South Asia, the NDU-RDDC roundtable exchanged perspectives under the roundtable headline of “Conflict and Cooperation During An Era of Uncertainty”. The agenda included a keynote session by Dr Mona Sheikh, followed by three working sessions where perspectives from South Asia and Europe were presented by NDU and RDDC speakers respectively. Details are as under:

1. Working Session 1: Geopolitical Confrontation in the Arctic & the Third pole
 - South Asian Perspective was presented by Dr Khalid Mahmood Shafi, Dir ISSRA
 - European perspective was presented by Dr Jon Rahbek Clemmensen, Assoc. Prof, RDDC
2. Working Session 2: Geopolitical Confrontation in the Asia Pacific
 - South Asian perspective was presented by Brig Zarrar Haider, DS FSS, NDU
 - European perspective was presented by Dr Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, Assoc. Prof, RDDC
3. Collaborative Workshop: Trend Analysis on US-China Relations.

The roundtable was part of a series of collaborative exercises between RDDC and NDU, since 2014. Once again, the event highlighted the strength of the partnership between the two institutions, providing a platform for mutual learning. As the topics discussed were of strategic importance to both countries and institutions, the authors have strived to balance perspectives, include nuances, and highlight points of disagreement – all while respecting the mutually agreed upon Chatham House Rule, under which the entire roundtable was held. This report summarises the findings.



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The roundtable began with a keynote address, delivered by Dr. Mona Sheikh, Senior Researcher and Head of Unit at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), under the title “Rethinking World Order: Competing Visions, Crises, and Continuities in Global Politics”. Drawing on three distinct perspectives, or analytic approaches, her presentation examined how the concept of “world order” can be approached and reimagined at a time of profound geopolitical flux.

The first perspective was a positivist approach, rooted in the traditional understanding of states as the primary actors in world politics. In this view, hard power, such as military and economic capability, remains the key determinant of power in the global system. From this perspective, unipolarity prevails as the US continues to be the hegemon. However, it could be moving toward multipolarity as emerging regional powers are reaching new levels of might.

A second perspective was the value-oriented approach, which emphasizes the global set of norms and rules. Examining the post-1945 “liberal, rules-based world order” as the prominent case for a framework grounded in norms, law, and ideology, designed to regulate power politics and ensure stability through shared institutions, Dr. Sheikh noted how this order has increasingly been challenged in recent years, not least by U.S. policies under President Donald Trump, which have shifted the global conversation back toward traditional great power competition. In this perspective, a key component of the power struggles between the United States, China, and Russia is the revival of ideological clashes taking place.

Finally, she presented the critical approach, which attempts to question how we perceive a “world order”. From this perspective, all world orders are based on normative assumptions, often shared by a particular set of individuals in a particular period of time. According to this view, the liberal order is but one of several grand narratives: China, Russia, and other powers advance different historical and normative conceptions of how the world is and should be organized. Understanding these competing perspectives, the speaker stressed, is essential for avoiding misperceptions. In this regards, an issue based coalition between Europe and Global South could be a starting point.

The speaker emphasized two developments as particularly significant. The changing role of the state has altered the balance between sovereign authority and transnational dynamics. Challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and deglobalization are systemic, transcending the capacity of states to manage them alone. At the same time, the regionalization of world politics has accelerated. Regions now constitute arenas where dominant actors project power

in pursuit of self-interest, yet this process also opens opportunities for new forms of leadership. Regionalization, or regionalism, she argued, should not be mistaken for the demise of multilateralism but rather understood as its transformation, as a venue for supply chain diversification.

Following the presentation, participants debated whether the current 'crisis of world order' is primarily a Western crisis, noting that while Europe has only recently felt the consequences of U.S. retrenchment, many other regions have long navigated these shifts. Questions were raised about the future of cooperation: the dysfunction of the UN was acknowledged as predating Trump, yet revitalizing the institution was seen as essential for restoring some form of global leadership. Continuing the debate on international institutions, some noted the paradox that China, by excelling within the Western-built system, has become a serious competitor to its architects.

Overall, the keynote underscored that while erosion of a rule-based international system, where U.S. hegemony brings risks of fragmentation and violence, it also creates space for recalibrating global governance, including new avenues of peaceful engagement, including its rules and values. The emerging world order may thus be both more contested and more inclusive, shaped by diverse actors and visions that extend beyond the West.



WORKING SESSION 1:

**Geopolitical Confrontation
in the Arctic and
the Third Pole**

The first working session explored how the regions, Arctic in the North and the Himalaya-Hindu Kush region, often referred to as the “Third Pole”, are becoming arenas of geopolitical contestation.

The European perspective emphasized the strategic dynamics shaping Arctic security and the implications for US-European cooperation. It was argued that while Europe and the US share broad interests in preserving stability, important differences complicate their approaches. Three dynamics stand out. First, the US views China as the primary long-term challenge in the Arctic, while European states, by contrast, remain far more concerned with Russia's military posture. Second, Russia's forces in the Arctic have been sapped by the war in Ukraine. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has further weakened Russia's position by extending the Alliance's presence directly to its northern borders. Third, the Arctic is not a single, uniform theatre but a patchwork of subregions where local dynamics matter.

This complicates the strategic picture and underscores the importance of not reducing any actor (state or organisation) to having a single set of interests.

Greenland was highlighted as a symbolic but contested issue. While the Trump administration's interest in acquiring Greenland was framed in geopolitical terms, it was suggested how this was most likely driven more by ideology than military strategy. The US already secures its military needs and access to rare earth minerals without having sovereignty over Greenland, making direct political control unnecessary and potentially counterproductive.

Turning to the South Asian perspective, the presentation examined the “Third Pole” as a critical but under-recognized security complex. Unlike the Arctic, the Hindu Kush Himalaya lacks a governance body comparable to the Arctic Council, leaving disputes to be managed bilateral and often ad-hoc. Spanning eight countries, 10 rivers and providing water to 24 % of the world population, the Third Pole region is crucial for the survival of billions. Recent attempts to weaponize water, such as the suspension of the Indus Water Treaty by India in May 2025, underscore how geopolitical motives are aggravating the ecological challenges in the region. The unresolved Jammu & Kashmir dispute intensifies these risks as any escalation has the potential to spill beyond the South Asia and trigger broader instability. Existing ecological stressors, such as smog, wildfires and water scarcity, further exacerbate tensions.

Unlike the Arctic, where low-stakes cooperation has historically prevailed, the Third Pole is the “beating heart of Asia,” with far less margin for error. Policy recommendations included reviving cooperative mechanisms, establishment of a 'rule-enforced order' with surety from international guarantors, pursuing science diplomacy, and demilitarizing climate hotspots. Without such measures, the region risks becoming a multiplier of global insecurity.

The interactive discussion contrasted the relative stability of the Arctic with the volatility of the Third Pole. Several participants highlighted that the Arctic has remained peaceful because 1) the governing mechanism, the Arctic Council, was set up during a geopolitical “window-of-opportunity”, in the years after the Cold War, and 2) because the Arctic is not yet a primary theater of great power rivalry, and because Russia's dependence on resource extraction incentivizes cooperation. By contrast the Third Pole has witnessed a recurring pattern where a dominant power, driven by historical ambitions of pre-eminence, has repeatedly undermined mechanisms of peace without facing meaningful accountability. This persistent disregard for collective arrangements has destabilized the regional order, making the Third Pole markedly different from relatively rule-abiding zones, making heightened volatility to be a defining feature of the region.



WORKING SESSION 2:

**Geopolitical Confrontation
in the Asia-Pacific**

The second session examined how the Asia-Pacific, in particular the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, has become an arena for great-power rivalry, with cascading effects on security architectures, trade corridors, and the credibility of international law.

From a South Asian perspective, the region can be analyzed as a system in transition from US-led to competitive multipolarity, driven by technological and economic decoupling, and intensified competition over critical materials. In Southeast Asia, states face mounting pressure to align with Washington or Beijing, even as most pursue hedging and prize ASEAN centrality. However, deepening economic ties with China complicate these balancing strategies. Turning to South Asia, the presenter noted that there is an absence of effective security dialogue mechanisms amid overlapping territorial disputes and the proliferation of nuclear capabilities. Although Pakistan is not a primary player in the Asia-Pacific, its strategic location along key sea routes renders it an important stakeholder in regional security. For Pakistan, the Indian Ocean's rapid militarisation is particularly of concern. Under the US Indo-Pacific strategy, India has emerged as a dominant regional actor, receiving enhanced military cooperation that has emboldened its hegemonic posture and altered the regional conventional military balance. These dynamics were visibly reflected in the escalatory developments of May 2025, where it was argued that western backing gave India the confidence to launch unprovoked air and missile strikes into Pakistani territory. Pakistan responded firmly and decisively, defending its sovereignty with resolve. This recent escalation in South Asia revealed how external alliances can intensify regional insecurity and made blatant border violations a norm, particularly impacting Pakistan's security. Despite this, Pakistan continues to advocate for peaceful resolution of bilateral disputes, including Kashmir, and supports comprehensive cooperation aimed at stabilizing vital economic corridors in the Asia-Pacific region.

From a European perspective, the Asia-Pacific is the focal point of an evolving world order, driven above all by China's rise. The United States and China increasingly view one another as the primary competitors, and this rivalry sets the framework for how smaller states must calculate risk. For Europe, it was argued that engagement in Asia-Pacific is necessary. Not only to help shape rules and standards where tomorrow's world order is being written, but also to sustain transatlantic cohesion, especially given efforts in recent years to link Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. Here the motto is "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow". European states have some options, but their resources are limited with Europe taking on more of the burden in Ukraine. Furthermore, the presenter urged more focus on Asia-Pacific, also beyond maritime flashpoints to other dynamics, such as the Central Asian states and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The interactive discussion stressed that competition in the Asia-Pacific is different, and potentially more volatile than Cold War bipolarity. The level of economic interdependence overlaps with military rivalry, narrowing room for small-state agency. Asked what the EU can do beyond trade, Pakistani participants encouraged Europe to engage and to invest in conflict-management tools, not just market access.

COLLABORATIVE WORKSHOP:

**Trend Analysis
on US-China Relations**

The entire second day of the conference was devoted to an interactive workshop, designed to synthesize insights from the previous sessions while looking forward. Using the tried-and-tested RDDC framework for collaborative trend analysis, all participants collectively explored how US-China relations are likely to evolve over the next decade and what this implies for global and regional security.

The exercise was structured around two regional cases; East- and Southeast Asia and Europe, with mixed groups of Pakistani and Danish participants assigned to each. Each group worked through a sequence of steps: identifying relevant trends, debating their drivers and inhibitors, mapping them according to probability and impact, and finally presenting their findings in plenary. This process was designed not only to generate foresight analysis but also to uncover underlying assumptions, clarify divergent perspectives, and foster mutual understanding.

In the East- and Southeast Asia group, participants reached agreement on three trends: 1) China's increasing assertiveness and ability to project military power, particularly in the South China Sea, as a central driver of confrontation with the US. 2) The still-increasing US presence in Asia, as part of the overall pivot to Asia. As China's own sphere of influence is of an explicit strategic importance for the US, this will lead to increased rivalry in the region. 3) The third trend concerned the region's smaller states, especially ASEAN members, which must navigate heightened pressure to align, or “pick sides” with one great power while attempting to preserve autonomy. The group argued that ASEAN countries most likely will align with China, as trade and economics will dominate, while the US has been pushing partners away in recent months. These trends were assessed in terms of probability and impact, which can be seen on figure 1 (below).

The Europe group also identified three overall trends. 1) The strengthening of a politically unified EU, which allows the EU to speak with one voice, and assert influence vis-à-vis US and China. This would have an inhibiting effect on the US-China global rivalry, as the EU could potentially act as a countermeasure. 2) The current strengthening of Europe's industrial, technologic and economic capabilities, in particularly its capacity to compete in critical technologies and secure supply chains. It was argued that the level of which the EU will be able to establish and define such new patterns of global trade will determine its relevance in US-China rivalry, and its potential role as a “third rival”. 3) Finally, the war in Ukraine was thoroughly discussed as its outcome will shape Europe's cohesion and transatlantic relations,

and indirectly affect how China positions itself globally. While dependent on the Ukraine War outcome, the group identified the normalization of EU-Russia relations as trend. This could strengthen relations between US and Europe, and further pressure China. These trends were assessed in terms of probability and impact, which can be seen on Figure 1.

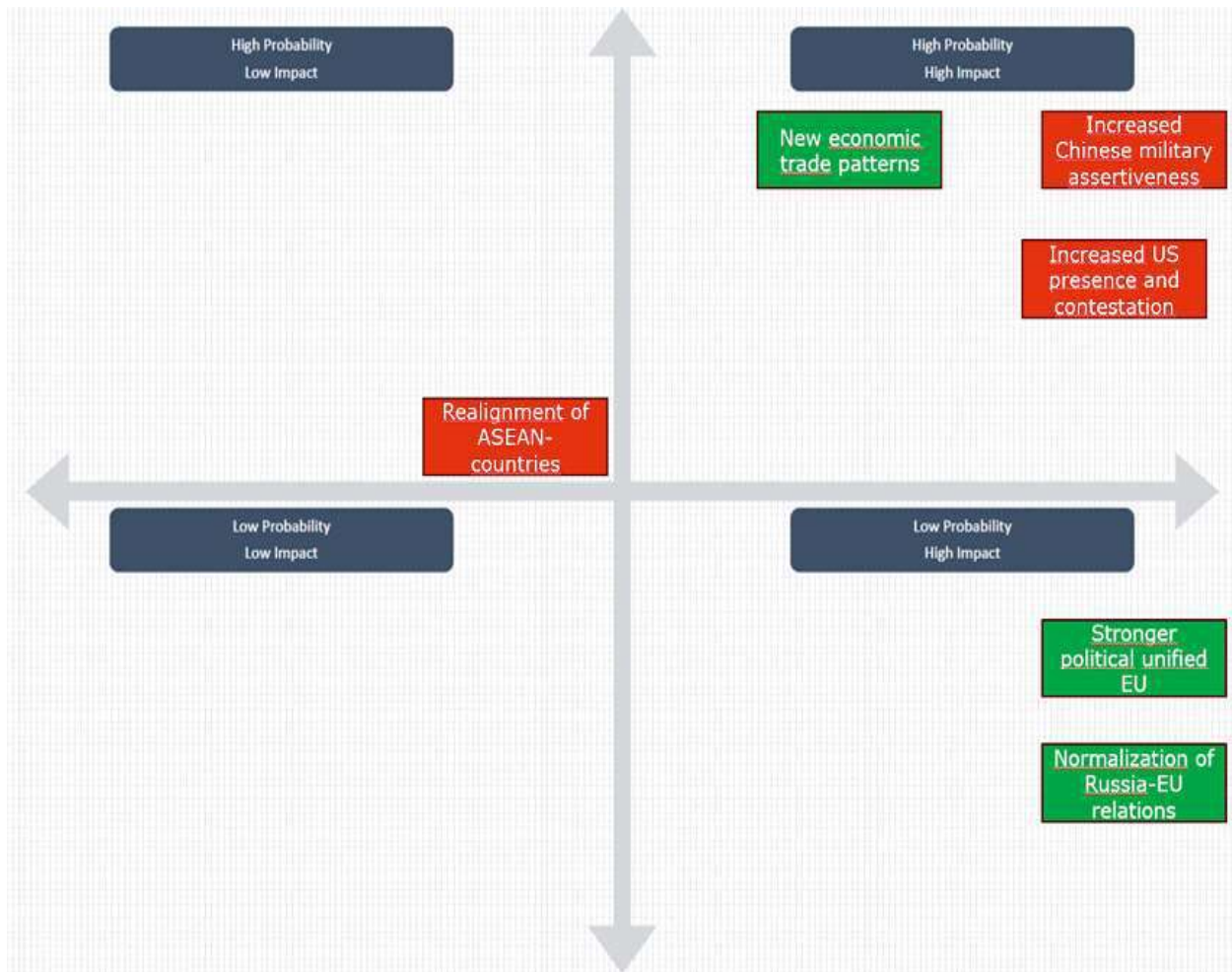


Figure 1: Visualization of level of probability and impact by trends identified

Note: Red boxes are trends for East- and Southeast Asia. Green boxes are trends for Europe.

When findings were compared in plenary, several cross-cutting general observations emerged. First, US-China rivalry will intensify across domains, such as military, economic, and technological, leading to further regionalization (regionalism) of global politics. Second, both powers will increasingly compete for attractiveness in the eyes of smaller and middle powers. While the US has not prioritized this “soft power” competence, both China and the US ability to provide credible security partnerships and sustainable economic ties. Third, while Europe matter, participants agreed that Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular, will remain the most important arena for US-China competition.

Conclusion

The NDU–RDDC roundtable underscored that the turbulence of today's world order is both a crisis and an opening. As global power balances are reconfigured, regions are emerging as critical testing grounds for the resilience of international norms and the adaptability of cooperative mechanisms. The contrast between relatively stable, rule-abiding arenas and volatile spaces lacking credible institutions highlights the stakes: where respect for collective arrangements prevails, stability endures; where dominant actors disregard agreed frameworks with impunity, insecurity multiplies.

From a European vantage point, the prime challenge lies in preserving cooperative frameworks amid intensifying great-power rivalry. This involves not only protecting fragile governance structures but also strengthening regional bonds and deepening engagement with the Global South as strategies to mitigate the polarizing effects of US–China competition.

From a South Asian perspective, the foremost challenge lies in India's persistent disregard for peace mechanisms, aggravated by ecological fragility, unrestrained nationalist ambitions, and the absence of credible institutional safeguards. This condition stems from the unqualified support extended to India under the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which has not only disturbed the regional security balance but also emboldened its hegemonic posture. The consequences of this alignment, compounded by entrenched rivalries and historical grievances, were starkly reflected in the heightened tensions of May 2025. Collectively, these dynamics continue to generate volatility with implications that reverberate well beyond the region itself.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that the future of international cooperation will hinge not merely on power balances, but on the ability to construct adherence-based frameworks of accountability that reduce risks without enforcing decoupling. Only by reinforcing shared principles and revitalizing mechanisms of cooperation can states hope to navigate the uncertainties of an era where decades indeed happen in weeks.

PICTURE GALLERY



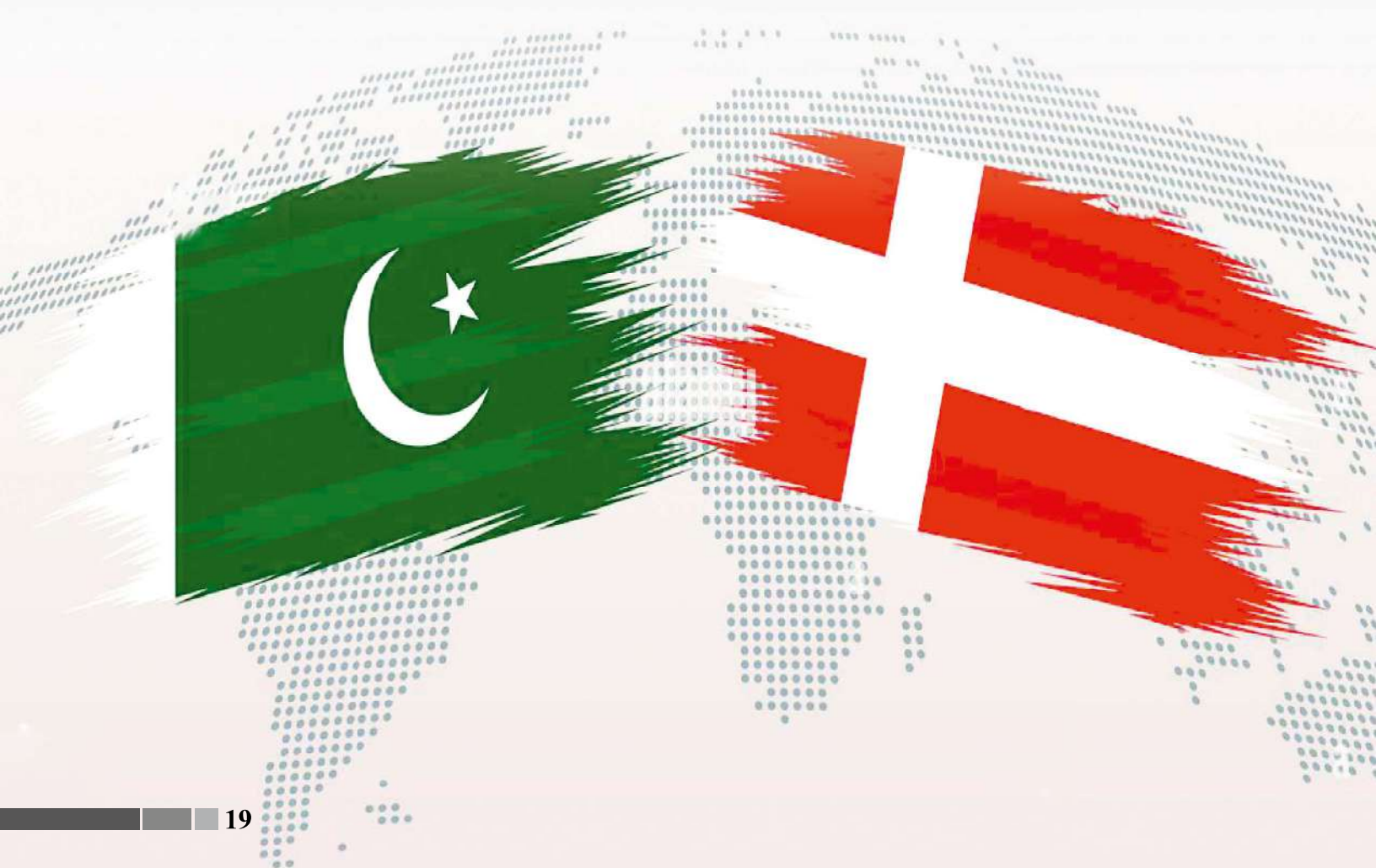


PROGRAMME

<div>18th August 2025 (Monday)</div> <div>Visit to Asia House</div> <div>Dress code:</div> <div>Business Casual</div>			
Time (hours)	Activity		Remarks
13:00-15:00	Visit to Asia House		
<div>19th August (Tuesday)</div> <div>Seminar Day 1</div> <div>Dress code:</div> <div>Lounge Suit</div>			
Introductory Session			
Time (hours)	Activity		Remarks
0930-0945	Arrival, Coffee/Tea and Registration		
0945-1000	Welcome and introductory remarks by heads of delegations		
1000-1030	Keynote by Mona Skeikh, Senior Researcher and Head of the Unit, Global Security and worldviews at the Danish Institute for International Studies		Topic: Rethinking World Order: Competing Visions, Crises, and Continuities in Global Politics
1030-1100	Q&A		
1100-1115	Short break		
Working Session 1: Geopolitical Confrontation in the Arctic and the Third Pole			
Time (hours)	Activity	Guest Speaker	Remarks
1115-1120	Introductory Remarks by Moderator from Pakistan	Faiza Qureshi RA at ISSRA, NDU	
1120-1140	Presentation from Denmark	Dr. Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen, Associate Professor and Head of Section for the Strategic Studies and Great Power Competition at the Royal Danish Defence College	Topic: Arctic Security: Implications for US and European Cooperation: Perspectives from Europe
1140-1200	Presentation from Pakistan	Dr Khalid Mahmood Shafi, Director Internal Security Studies, Institute For Strategic Studies, Research An Analysis at National Defence University Pakistan	Topic: From Arctic to Third Pole: Implications for Global & Ecological Security: Perspectives from South Asia

1200-1300	Interactive Session		
1300-1305	Wrap-up by Moderator		
1305-1400	Lunch		
Working Session 2: Geopolitical Confrontation in the Asia Pacific			
Time (hours)	Activity	Guest Speaker	Remarks
1400-1405	Introductory Remarks by Moderator from Denmark	Ambassador Michael Zilmer-Johns , Former Ambassador and Senior Mentor at the Royal Danish Defence College	
1405-1425	Presentation from Pakistan	Brigadier Zarrar Haider , DS Faculty of Security Studies, National Defence University	<i>Topic: Perspectives from South Asia: Great power contestation in the Asia-Pacific</i>
1425-1445	Presentation from Denmark	Dr. Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen , Associate Professor at the Royal Danish Defence College	<i>Topic: Perspectives from Europe: Great power contestation in the Asia-Pacific</i>
1445-1545	Interactive session		
1545-1550	Wrap-up by Moderator		
<p align="center">20th August 2025 (Wednesday) Seminar Day 2</p> <p align="center">Dress code: Lounge Suit</p>			
Workshop: Trend Analysis on US-China Relations			
Time (hours)	Activity	Guest Speaker	Remarks
0930-0945	Arrival, Coffee/ Tea and Registration		
0945-1000	Presentation of workshop program by Moderator from Denmark	Mr. Rasmus Petersen & Mr. Anders Streubel-Kristensen , Head of Section at the RDDC.	
1000-1230	Workshop Session 1: Trend analysis on US-China relations, including the Ukraine War		
1230-1300	Lunch		
1300-1500	Workshop Session 2: Continuation and conclusion of Trend Analysis		

Closing session		
Time (hours)	Activity	Remarks
1500-1515	Closing remarks & Group picture	
21st August 2025 (Thursday) Visit at Peder Skram and sailing tour with the Marine Home guard Dress code: <i>Smart Casual</i>		
Time (hours)	Activity	Remarks
1000-1200	Guided tour of Naval Station Holmen and Peder Skram	
1200-1300	Lunch at Holmen	
1300-1400	Briefings by the Marine Home guard	
1400-1600	Sailing tour with the Marine Home guard	
1600-1630	Transport from Holmen	







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