

The Impact of the China-US Competition in East Asia on the Security of the Asia-Pacific Region

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Abstract: Despite some disagreements on the scale and scope, most international observers might reach a consensus that the theme of the current East Asia international relations is the competition between the US and China for the ruling position in this region. Based on the current reality of the coexistence of the US and China in East Asia, this paper analyses their competition and implications in the Asia-Pacific region. The main argument of this paper is that with the implementation of America's Pivot strategy, China and the US have launched fierce competition around the dominance of the Asia-Pacific region, and this game not only affects the economic development itself but also affects the stability and prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region. This paper advocates that all parties should enhance cooperation and find common ground to prevent unnecessary conflicts, to maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: China-US relations, East Asia, Geo-strategy, Asia-Pacific security

1. Introduction

Recently, the US has been trying to maintain its traditional sphere of influence in East Asia to manage China's rise in the most recent decades. To this end, the White House adjusted its global grand strategy from Middle East-centric to Asia-Pacific region by first introducing the "pivot to Asia" during the Obama administration and then developing the Asia Reassurance Initiative in Trump's administration [1]. Under this circumstance, the power transition theory revived as one of the most popular theoretical frameworks in interpreting and forecasting US-China relations. The prevalence of the discourse like "Thucydides Trap" portrayed a fraught picture for the future of Asia-Pacific. However, the Chinese and Americans must find a way to coexist peacefully for the sake of all humanity considering the degree of interdependence between the US and China, as well as the potential consequences of unchanged confrontations between great powers in East Asia [2].

As a legacy of the Cold War, the US-led East Asian alliance structure is the foundation of its regional security. Countries like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are among those in the region dedicated to maintaining a high level of military and economic cooperation with the US. In late 2011, Obama proposed a comprehensive plan to boost US security, diplomacy, and economic assistance to the region with this existing alliance framework, known as the 'Asian rebalance'.

Policymakers began to predict the future dynamics of the global system with the end of the Cold War. The unipolar world is characterized by a Western-dominated liberal system featuring democracy and capitalism. However, in the following decades, this structure of the international system has

become vulnerable with the decline of the US and the rise of other major actors like China. After 911, the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and involvement in civil wars in Syria and Libya have distracted US strategic resources and waned its global power projection capabilities. As a result, the balance of power tilted toward a situation that was unfavored by the US in the following decade.

The US finally recognized that the political void it created with the resources reallocation to transatlantic affairs had been filled by the Chinese. Now, this giant has returned and appears poised to play a more active role in the Asia-Pacific region to counter China's growing power. However, the US efforts reflected its misperceptions of China's intentions. It is not in Chinese genes to fight for hegemony. The Chinese always accept the existence of competitors without resorting to confrontation due to the Chinese nation's concept of universal harmony which has been constructed and inherited through its 5,000-year-old history [3]. The making of China-US relations and the regional order in Asia-Pacific should follow this understanding of Chinese strategic culture for mutual interests in prosperity and development.

Against this background, this paper aims to explore the historical origins, interest demands, military power, economic strength, and other power indicators between the two countries in East Asia, as well as the formation mechanism of the ascendancy in the Asia-Pacific, illustrating the implications of US-China competition in global security, potential stability, etc. [1].

2. Strategic Dilemmas Through Power Transitions

Great power politics has long shaped international relations in the Asia-Pacific, and despite the leveraging importance of small states and regional institutions in East Asian politics, major powers like the US, China, and Japan still dominate the contour of this regional system. In an increasingly interdependent world, managing the process and impact of the "transition of power" in the international system is a key issue for both countries. They understand the risks of seeing each other as adversaries, as their economies are closely bounded and face many similar challenges. The US also needs China to accompany in addressing traditional and non-traditional security issues, such as the North Korean nuclear issue, climate change, and global terrorism [4].

In the Asia-Pacific region, the transfer of power in the international order can take three forms: maintaining the status quo, negotiating changes to the status quo, and transitioning power. Against this international backdrop, the main goal of the two countries in the Asia-Pacific region is to ensure that the US-China Strategic Dialogue can play a role and that new geopolitical realities in the region can be established.

Changes in the structural situation require both sides to reassess their goals, positions, and roles in the Asia-Pacific, rather than conflicting transitions of power scenarios or a difficult choice between containment and engagement. If China, as an emerging superpower, can get a piece of the pie as it deserves, then regional stability is likely to be assured. Therefore, whether the two countries can successfully establish and maintain their relations in a new regional order and move towards the direction of "peaceful coexistence" that both sides desire is a question worth pondering. In the Asia-Pacific security system, maintaining the status quo implies that China accepts the existing dominance of the United States in the region. If China and the United States can maintain their current relationship, it will be thanks in large part to the gradual adjustment of the regional balance of power brought about by the rise of China and the continued hegemony of the United States [5].

On a global scale, the United States sees China as a competitor. However, China's diplomatic relations of peaceful coexistence, its principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences, as well as its multi-faceted and wide-ranging interactions between regional and global diplomatic levels are neither hegemonic nor chaotic. Although China is becoming more and more capable in this new era, it is clear that it will not claim hegemony. To pursue a foreign policy that is appropriate for multilateral development, all governments, including China and the United States, must abide by the

new reality of asymmetry in negotiations, and the Cold War model of the past no longer exists and must follow the status quo or develop new forms [6].

The Asia-Pacific region has become the next centre of gravity for global geostrategic and geoeconomic interactions. China, as a major player in the regional security architecture, is unlikely to succumb to the US approach to strategic containment, despite its current military and technological disadvantage. There is a complex interdependence not only between China and the United States but also between their neighbours. The security environment now in place is designed to maintain the status quo, without any overt hostility that could harm their economic interests.

Conflict management negotiation is about limiting or minimizing tensions and disputes without altering the status quo or the parties' powers, values, and interests. Transforming conflicts into negotiations allows different countries to resolve disputes and conflicts, avoid armed conflicts, promote regional and world peace, and primarily anticipate that some conflicts and differences will continue.

In the short term, the North Korean nuclear issue is becoming increasingly serious, and the strategic alliance between the United States, Japan, and South Korea continues to develop. There are many potential geopolitical crises. While it seems unlikely that a major conflict between the major powers will occur in the region, on the one hand, the superiority of US military power in the region is an obvious strategic fact. On the other hand, China, a responsible power, longs for a peaceful environment and develops together with its neighbours. It is clear that, at least for the time being, the status quo cannot be changed by force. As a result, over the past few decades, all major countries in the region have chosen other priorities, such as economic development and social reform, to focus their efforts [5].

3. Strategic Dilemmas Through Complex Interdependence

In international relations, scholars have always been interested in the relationship between economics and international conflict. One of the most pressing issues in the Asia-Pacific region is the impact of regional economic dependence on regional conflicts. The growing economic ties between Asian countries seem to have an unforeseen impact on intra-regional relations, as the Asia-Pacific region is now the world's leading economic engine.

The correlation between economy and conflict is always a popular topic for the international relations community. A common wisdom is that economic interdependence helps to mitigate international conflicts and promote cooperation across countries. Free trade will bring countries together and inspire them to maintain long-term peace and trade relations with other countries. The 19th-century British economist John Mill once said: "It is the development of commerce that makes war rapidly obsolete because it strengthens and expands the interests of individuals who are naturally opposed [7]."

Economic interconnectivity will help enhance international security while promoting economic well-being. With economic liberalization and globalization, Asia-Pacific has been integrated to an unprecedented level in terms of business and economy. Based on the wisdom aforementioned, a more stable East Asia is supposed to be seen, given the region's economic interdependence has reached unprecedented levels. However, the vision of economic integration-led political stability has not become a reality in Asia-Pacific [7]. A series of uncertainties such as the South China Sea dispute, the Taiwan issue, and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis have generated even greater instabilities in this region. This phenomenon is worthy of further discussion, but there is one certain thing: economic interdependence has paved a route for multilateral cooperation, at least in the fields of business and economic development.

4. From "Balancing Cooperation and Competition" to "Balancing Competition and Confrontation"

The dynamics of the competitive landscape between the United States and China, as well as the pessimistic attitude towards cooperation, are undeniable facts. Changes in domestic politics in both China and the US have fueled this paradigm shift. In the United States, at the individual level, many everyday Americans view China as a long-term threat to the United States; on the state level, congressmen of both parties support a more aggressive China policy and resort to it for their political ends. With the growth of nationalist criticism of US policy toward China, "wolf warrior diplomacy" has become one of the most powerful examples. At this juncture in the relationship, as Putnam's two-level game model suggested, domestic politics will play an important role in the making of a country's foreign policy. With the increasing negative perceptions on the other side in both the US and China's domestic politics, it is not surprising to see both countries resort to more aggressive and assertive in dealing with each other [8].

The strategic competition between China and the United States has led to the emergence of what has been described as the "China Threat Syndrome." Western scholars and policymakers often refer to the syndrome, or their literature/remarks reflect some symptoms of the syndrome, such as the repeated warning of China's expansion delivered by Michael Beckley, and the establishment of the Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the CCP. If we are looking forward to a more stable and manageable competition between the US and China, a prerequisite is the healing of this syndrome.

5. Strategic Failure

What is clear is that the United States is in relative decline to continue its "rebalance to the Asia-Pacific" strategy, and success is mixed despite Obama's previous attempts to reassure Asia-Pacific leaders that the United States will continue supporting allies and partners in the region. In general, related states lack confidence in the US's commitment [9].

While the ascendancy of China has fundamentally changed the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, the US's preference for dominating the order in this region remains solid. To fulfil this preference, the US had to resort to all measures to tilt the balance of power in its favour.

Mistrust and suspicion of their neighbours and outside powers are deeply rooted in East Asia states' perceptions. That is one reason we observed there is an "organizational gap" in this region, as most actors place greater emphasis on sovereignty and independence than most Western countries. In this region, apart from the alliance with the United States, there are only a handful of allies. Despite efforts to develop regional cooperation, strategic mistrust between China and the United States and between China and Japan remains. In terms of economic cooperation, regional countries cooperate well. This is in stark contrast to international organisations such as the European Union giving up their sovereignty and independence for the sake of regional interests [10].

The United States is primarily focused on deploying and strengthening its armed forces in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthening US military alliances and partnerships to contain China. At the same time, China relies primarily on its peaceful "soft power" (i.e., non-coercive powers), including economic exchanges, foreign trade, "smiling diplomacy," and so on.

Since 2009, the United States has obtained remarkable achievements in its diplomatic activities in East Asia with "more active, integrated, and self-confident". The United States has greatly enhanced its power projection capability in this region and consolidated its traditional partnership with South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan, thus significantly enhancing its implications in East Asia. However, the overall economic, financial, and trade importance of the United States in East Asia is steadily declining.

6. One Challenge, Two Prescriptions

What is explicit is that, at least in the region of Asia-Pacific, the relative power of the US is in decline, and it can only reluctantly deploy its Pivot policy. Results were mixed despite the US's reaffirmation to its regional allies that support from the US will be as solid as ever. Regional actors, especially countries in Southeast Asia, are now losing confidence in the US's commitment. In these countries' vision, regarding the ascendancy of China in Asia-Pacific, the US is no longer omnipresent nor omnipotent.

Another factor that impeded the effectiveness of the US's commitment is the national trait of Asian countries. As mentioned before, mistrust and suspicion of their neighbours and outside powers are deeply rooted in East Asia states' perceptions. This trait could be attributed to their shared memory of being colonized. Most regional powers, like Malaysia, Indonesia, and even Vietnam, resort to balancing or hedging in dealing with the US-China competition, rather than picking a side. This reality limited both the US and China's efforts in "making friends" in this region [11].

Regarding this challenge, China and the US have chosen different tracks to expand their influence in the Asia-Pacific. China focuses on creating economic and development coalitions within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The achievements are remarkable, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

On the other hand, the US concentrated on restoring its conventional deterrence capability in this region, and even more assertively, near China. Since 2009, the US has significantly enhanced its military presence and power projection capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, solidifying its relations with regional allies such as South Korea and Japan. The US has also assisted Chinese Taipei in enhancing its deterrence capability. Moreover, the Pentagon is currently collaborating with counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo to establish a united command chain, a system similar to the NATO command structure [12].

Both China and the US have been successful in developing their approaches to the reality of the Asia-Pacific, and both approaches have yielded results. However, it is undeniable that the consequences of these two tracks of competition are distinct. China is fostering a network for regional economic integration that will ultimately benefit regional development. The US's military and intelligence alliance is injecting more uncertainty into the already complex dynamics of the Asia-Pacific. Both sides should not only acknowledge but also recognize that political and security stability in the Asia-Pacific is not an agenda that can be achieved unilaterally [13]. Comprehensive dialogues and institutionalized crisis management mechanisms are required for the common welfare of the world.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this paper highlights the economic, political, and security developments of the East Asian competition between China and the United States, while examining its security implications for the Asia-Pacific region. Given the enormous potential of the East Asian region as an engine of global growth, the consequences of failing to manage potential conflicts in this region could be dreadful. Against this backdrop, the power transition between China and the United States and their involvement in East Asian affairs have complicated relations between regional countries and the United States and China. If there is a conflict between the Chinese and US militaries, cooperation could turn into competition, posing a significant threat to the security of the Asia-Pacific region, as pointed out by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who highlighted it as "the most important geopolitical challenge to US-China relations this century."

China's rise signalled the melting of the unipolar world order the US enjoyed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, Washington shifted its strategic focus and reallocated resources from the Middle East to Asia Pacific to counter-balance the rising of China's influence in this region. However, neither side of this competition views a new Cold War or decoupling as a promising or acceptable future (quote, Biden, Yellen, Sullivan, Curl Campbell, Blinken etc.), regarding the confrontation's global economic implications, regional political stability, the margin of each side's capability, and the reality that other Asia-Pacific actors are reluctant to pick a side in the forthcoming conflict.

This vague and evolving consensus can be readily identified when closely examining a series of high-level interactions between Washington and Beijing in the past two years. Despite lingering disagreements on the specifics of "competition," both sides are now approaching their foreign policies cautiously with a principle of "peaceful coexistence." Numerous diplomatic efforts have reflected this shared understanding. However, diplomatic operations alone are insufficient. As discussed in previous paragraphs, there is a need to internalize and institutionalize this common mindset regarding the vision of US-China competition in the future. Therefore, it is worthy of further discussion in the future, what such a mechanism will look like, and whether it will be a well-structured secretariat centre, or perhaps merely two red phones on the president's table.

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