

Major Precursors of Change in the United States-China Relations

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Abstract

The United States' relationship with China has eventually grown in the course of time and is significantly transforming with the changes in the strategic and economic landscape of the world politics. This article is, therefore, an attempt to identify the major precursors of change in the US-China relations. The article asserts that China's continuous rise as a major power since last four decades has gradually transformed the global perceptions about the power and prominence of the United States. This has resulted into the growing anxiety about the relative decline of the United States' influence and primacy in the world politics and particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. It also asserts that change in the power dynamics between the US and China as well as the emergence of Asia-Pacific countries (including China) as a new economic powerhouse has contributed to the shift in the strategic and economic power towards the Asia-Pacific. Thus, the power configuration as well as power interplay between the United States and China has been increasingly changing in the Asia-Pacific theatre. In this backdrop, the article argues that these three major precursors of change– the rise of China on the global stage, the growing perceptions of the US decline and power shift to the Asia-pacific have dramatically transformed the contours of the United States-China relations.

Keywords: *United States, China, precursors of change, rise of China, decline of the US, power shift to the Asia-Pacific.*

Introduction

The global political and economic structure has significantly transformed in the last decade due to some changes in the power configuration and global perceptions about the position and prominence of the predominant power–the United States and the rising power–China. The rise of China is not an unexpected event of this century. Renowned columnist Kristof (1993) had predicted earlier that the China's emergence on the global stage “[would] be the most important trend in the world for the next century”. Some eminent scholars like Fishman (2004), Shenkar (2006) and Elliott (2007) assert that China's rise has transformed the twenty-first century into

the 'Chinese Century'¹. While Beckley (2011), Gurtov (2013) and Shambaugh (2013) are quite skeptical and critical about the notion of 'Chinese Century', they argue that there is more to go for China and this century would not belong exclusively to China. Thus, someone may disagree with the notion of 'Chinese Century', but no one can deny that this century is undoubtedly witnessing the 'rise of China'. Most of the major countries believe that sooner or later if present trends continue, "China would replace the United States as the world's leading superpower" (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2011). This has grown the anxiety about the implications of China's rise to the outside world, particularly to the United States.

During the Cold War, United States engaged China to balance the Soviet Union power and it always regarded China as secondary in significance. But after the rise of China's economic and military power and continuous shift in the global economic and strategic power towards Asia-Pacific, for the first time the United States has "to deal with China for its own sake and is anxious to see whether or not latter will challenge US predominance in world affairs" (Zhao 2008:6). China has now replaced the US as Australia, Japan, South Korea and ASEAN's largest trading partner (IBT 2015; Lan 2011) and has increasingly become the key source of the economic growth of the Asia-Pacific region.

On the other hand, although the United States has vital interests in the Asia-Pacific but it has been preoccupied with the war on terror, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq (now also in Syria against the Islamic States). Hence, the US engagement on multiple fronts has resulted in the relative decline of its influence (not power) in the Asia-Pacific region. Also the 'global financial crisis'² in 2008 presented tremendous challenges to the United States and its European partners while china was economically growing at the same time and hosted one of the most vibrant and expansive Olympics in the history that showcased China's maturation into a great economic and to some extent a political power. These instances undoubtedly have grown a perception about the relative decline of the United States in the global community. In addition, the ongoing 'power shift'³ to the Asia-Pacific, especially driven by the rapid rise of China's economic and military

¹ The Chinese Century is a neologism suggesting the possibility that the twenty-first century will be dominated by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

² The global financial crisis of 2008 was a major financial crisis that became prominently visible in September 2008 with the failure, merger, or conservatorship of several large United States-based financial firms. It rapidly evolved into a global credit crisis, deflation and sharp reductions in shipping resulting in a number of European bank failures and declines in various stock indexes, and large reductions in the market value of equities (stock) and commodities worldwide. The crisis further led to a liquidity problem and the de-leveraging of financial institutions especially in the United States and Europe.

³ Power shift denotes the shift of the centre of gravity of economic and strategic power from one region to another. With the rise of Asian economies, preferably China, the centre of gravity of power is continuously shifting from Trans-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific.

power in many ways have presented a new set of challenges to the United States. China's rising profile has likely enabled it to influence the major events in the global politics and various issues related to the regional and global security architecture and the global economy. Hence, many of the countries of the world now believe that china's influence was spreading to a noticeable amount in the Asia-Pacific region where the US interest could be compromised. The contours of the United States and China relations, therefore, have been significantly transformed due to the emergence of major precursors of change in the global politics. The first and foremost precursor of change is the 'rise of China on the global stage', second is the 'growing perceptions of the US decline' and the last but not the least is the 'power shift to the Asia-Pacific'.

1. Rise of China on the Global Stage

The rise of China on the global stage has eventually changed the contours of its relations with the predominant power—United States. China's rise is primarily in terms of economy. Its economy has been remarkably successful since a reform of the economic system and an opening up to the outside world, was promulgated in December 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (Huenemann 2013). An economic reform in China was a partial reform strategy which has been characterized by institutional innovations and regional experimentations (Qian and Xu 1993). Economic reforms in China can be categorised in three policy initiatives, namely; Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), State-own Enterprises (SOEs) and the open door policy to create Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

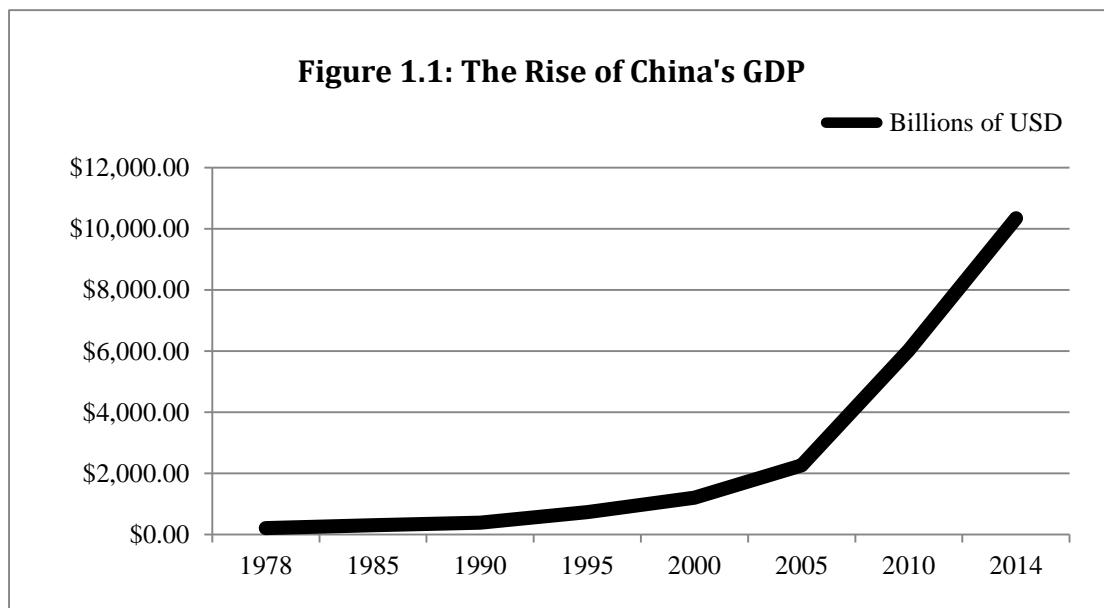
The creation of TVEs in 1979 injected industry and market orientation into the rural economy, particularly agrarian economy⁴. It gave incentives to farmers so that they could retain some return on their effort within a framework of communal ownership of land as a profit. The output of the reform grew rapidly and China's growth began in the countryside. When these rural measures were seen to successful, China introduced further reform into urban areas in 1984 as SOEs that granted more autonomy to the Manager and allowed them to retain a portion of the profit. Urban reforms further bolstered the status and income of urban residents by an 'iron rice bowl' policy that guaranteed lifetime employment and comprehensive social security. This 'dual track transition' whereby economy has both the market and a state-administered track, brought China on track of robust domestic economic growth. The final prong of China's reform was the open door policy. China created SEZs which are essentially export processing zones that were open to international trade and foreign direct investments (FDI) (Yueh 2007:36-37).

In 1988 Deng Xiaoping further proposed a 'comprehensive deep reform' to take the economy to next level. During his famous southern tour in 1992 Deng promoted the 'deep reform' phrase as the spirit and substance of political change and economic development. Under deep

⁴ An Agrarian Economy is an economy which relies on farming.

reform, the open door policy has progressed to the comprehensive opening in the context of globalization. The Chinese government also adopted two major policy measures to advance foreign trade, namely; currency devaluation and export subsidy. These initiatives have led to a sharp rise in both foreign trade and FDI (Liu 2009: 64-65).

At the same time, Deng Promoted a cooperative relationship with the United States to avoid Soviet intervention and gain advanced technologies and FDIs. All these measures led to the China's entry into the WTO in 2001. The comprehensive opening of China to the outside world is reflected in the growing volume of trade, financial transactions and other exchanges between China and all other major regions of the world. Thus, the economic reforms in China certainly transformed China into a major economic power. The GDP of China has risen from USD 216.81 billion in 1978 to USD 10354.83 in 2014 (World Bank Report 2015) that showcases the rapid growth of Chinese economy (see Figure 1.1). China has now surpassed Japan as a world number two economy and becomes the largest trade partner of most of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region.



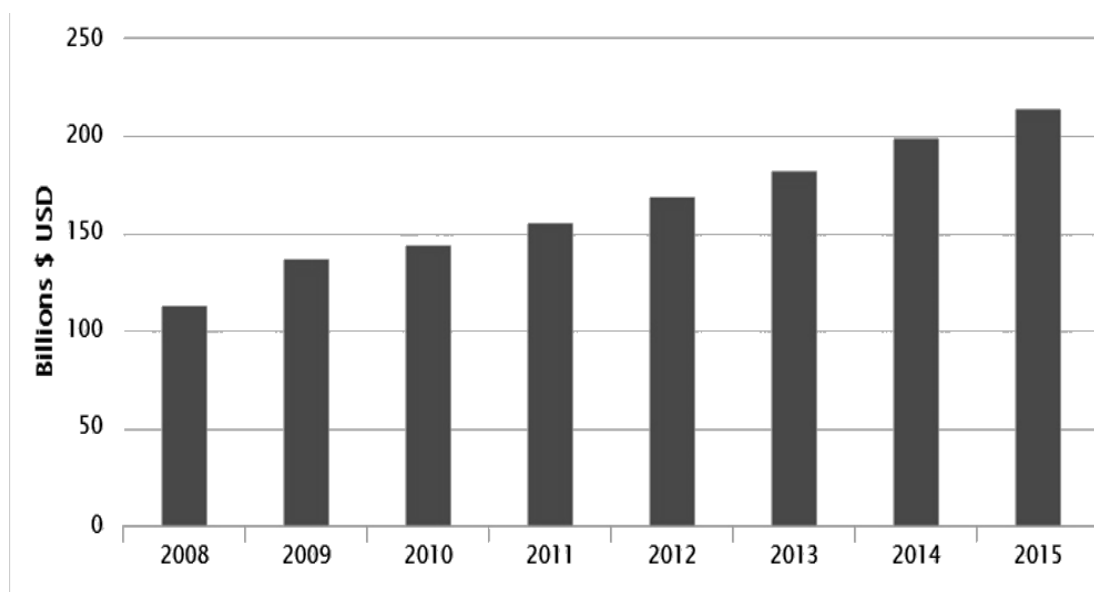
Source: Illustration is result of researcher's own extrapolation of data available at World Bank Report 2015

While China's performance has been impressive, it also has the potential to maintain this growth. It has a massive population, which represents not only a large domestic market but also a cheap labour source. It is also a country that is blessed with vast natural resources. The global financial crisis of 2008 has not had a major impact on China, though there is now a slowdown in annual economic growth rate in China. Nevertheless, the fact is China's economic rise is one of the most noticeable events of the twenty-first century.

As a result of the economic rise and expanding regional and global involvement, China's strategic and military postures have also been changed, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. The

rapid economic growth of China provided it the resources to become a major military power with increasingly advanced technological capabilities and it laid the foundation for a steady increase in Chinese military power (Cordesman and Colley 2015:44). “No matter how often China has emphasised the idea of a ‘peaceful rise or peaceful development’⁵, the pace and nature of its military modernisation inevitably cause alarm” (The Economist 2012). It forced the regional powers as well as global power the United States to adjust their relations with China and to cope with China’s increasing power (Swaine 2011:5-6). According to the SIPRI (2015), the military spending of China has grown from USD 113.9 billion in 2008 to USD 214.5 billion in 2015 (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Military Spending of China (2008-2015)



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015

A huge GDP spending in military modernization in China enable it to influence regional as well as global security architecture. The increasing military spending and modernization tend to assume that China is more aggressive in transforming its economic prowess into military might. However, it is a fact that most nations increase their military power as their economic strength increases and China is not an exception.

In the realm of military security, China’s growing ability to project power beyond its border has had a major impact on the US security perceptions and the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Most notably, China’s increased military presence in the region is challenging the US

⁵ ‘China’s peaceful rise’ was an official policy in China under the leadership of Hu Jintao. The term was implemented to rebut against the ‘China threat theory’. As China emerged as a great political, economic and military power, China wanted to assure other countries that its rise will not be a threat to peace and security. China implements this policy by internally harmonizing China’s society and externally, promoting a peaceful international environment. The term suggests that China seeks to avoid unnecessary international confrontation.

military predominance in the region. As well as in economic arena, China's emergence as an economic powerhouse and a dynamo of trade and commerce, and its simultaneous integration with the world economy, have greatly raised its importance as a influential key player in both the world's economic stability, and the growth and vitality of the US economy (Swaine 2011: 6).

Therefore, China has now become a prominent figure in all global affairs. There is a general expectation that China would be among those that shape the geopolitics of the rest of the century (NIC Report 2004). Thus, it is certainly now impossible for the United States to regard China as a secondary in significance because China is only second to the US in both economy and military prowess. Indeed, most of the policy initiatives of the United States is today, directly or indirectly centered to counter China, and the US is anxious to see whether China would challenge its primacy and influence in the global and regional affairs, or not.

2. Growing Perceptions of the US Decline

US economy has featured a relative decline in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008. The two costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also underpinned the limitations of American power. It has eventually grown the perceptions of the decline of the United States' power and influence; particularly in the Asia-Pacific region as there China's trajectory was on the rise. Most of the major countries, therefore, believe that sooner or later if present trends continue, "China would replace the United States as the World's leading super power" (Pew Global Attitude Project 2011). Thus, the global perceptions have also seen a shift. Even when the US image still remained positive globally, many countries have already started considering China as a leading economy and a next super power (Pew Global Attitude Survey 2014)

It has certainly initiated a scholarly debate over the decline of American power in 2011. The prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs* ran a special issue on the thesis of US decline entitled "Is America Over?" (Foreign Affairs 2011) Perceptions of US decline make headlines across the global media, policy, and academic circles. The 2012 US presidential election also saw the robust debate over the American decline and its relations with the rising power China. In the 2012 State of Union Address, President Obama categorically stated that:

Anyone who tells...that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about. ..That not the message we get from leaders around the world, who are eager to work with us...Yes, the world is changing. No, we can't control every event. But America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs (The White House 2012).

Thus, the message was clear that temporary shortcoming of the economy or the rise of China cannot obstruct the United States path of global leadership. The United States is still very strong in key areas of global vitality. It has had the most competitive major economy in the world

over the past several years, according to the World Economic Forum. It has trustworthy allies in NATO, the EU, the Group of 20 industrialized countries, and elsewhere that usually help it meet national and international goals. It possesses a military that is far ahead of its rivals, allowing the US to operate at great distances in unique ways. Difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan are not a commentary on its military capability but on strategy and the challenges of nation-building.

There are three schools of thought on American decline: the Relativist, the Absolutists, and the Rejectionists. The Relativists argue that the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have weakened America's military might and also the 2008 financial crisis has considerably degraded its latent capacity to exert its influence globally. The simultaneous rise of China has further accentuated America's downfall from the echelons of global hierarchy. The US, therefore, is witnessing a phase of relative decline. However the US will recuperate from its current decline since its essentials are strong but it will be a slow and gradual process. The Absolutists views US decline in absolute terms. They argue the days of American unipolarity are now over. China is the main challenger to American power. The rejectionists, however, rubbish the claim of the US decline. They argue that the debate over the decline is notwithstanding, the US soon recovered from the financial crisis. China's rise will also provide a bounceback situation to American influence. Chinese neighbours want to balance against Chinese power and will increasingly look toward the US for assistance (Pant and Joshi 2016: 14-15)

Thus, the perceptions of US decline come in different shades. Despite the fact that the world is debating on the US decline, it is an important turn in global affairs that has changed the dynamics of US-China relations in several ways. First, it provides substances to the supporters of 'Power Transition Theory'⁶ that predicts major conflicts in a world order where an existing hegemon (the United States) faces a relative decline in front of a rising challenger (China). However, Nye (2011) dismissed the idea of power transition between the US and China. He argued that:

Describing power transition in the twenty-first century as an issue of American decline is inaccurate and misleading. Such analysis can lead to dangerous policy implications if it encourages China to engage in adventurous policies or the United States to overreact out of fear. America is not in absolute decline and it is likely to remain more powerful than any single state in coming decade (Nye 2011:203)

Second, the perceptions of US decline leads to an automatic decrease in the US influence that is a worrisome aspect. Third, this relative decline has forced the US to make policy adjustments. The concept of G-2 in 2009 and the announcement of rebalancing to Asia-Pacific could be seen in this regard. Therefore, it is very obvious to say that the perception of US decline is one of the major precursors of change in the US-China relations, particularly in the Asia-Pacific

⁶ The Power transition theory is a theory about the cyclical nature of war, in relation to the power in international relations. The theory was first proposed in 1958 by A.F.K. Organski, in his book, World Politics.

region.

3. Power Shift to the Asia-Pacific

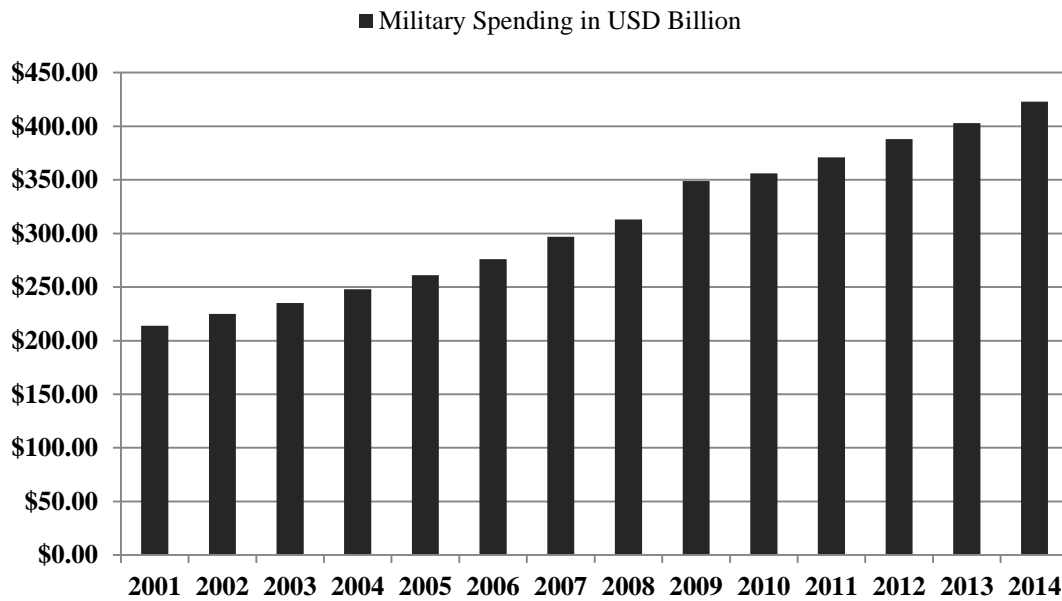
Asia-Pacific is now the new centre of global politics. The growing economic strength of Asia-Pacific countries and emerging strategic significance of the region have been significantly shifting the global economic and strategic centre of gravity from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. Asia-Pacific has a “number of important centres of a world economy whose goods, tools and services are competing with the West in many ways. Asia-Pacific thus provides both a competitive edge and an economic challenge to the west” (Shafiq 2014:81-82).

Asia-Pacific is home to the half of the world’s population and two of the three largest economies (China and Japan). The region is a vital driver of the global economy and includes the world’s busiest international sea lanes (Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait and the Strait of Lombok) and nine of the 10 largest ports. By any meaningful measure, the Asia-Pacific is also the most militarized region in the world, with seven of the world’s 10 largest standing militaries, as well as five of the world’s declared nuclear nations (USPACOM Strategy 2008:4). It is the second-largest arms market in the world after the Middle East. Some of the world’s biggest arms buyers are found in this region, including Taiwan, Japan, Australia, China, South Korea, and India (Bitzinger 2004).

According to the data of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the economic growth in Asia-Pacific is higher than developed economies. Asia-Pacific economies were less affected by the 2008 financial crisis and it is projected to increase to 5.8% in 2015 from an estimated 5.6% in 2014. The overall economic performance of the region will continue to far outstrip growth in major developed economies of the world in coming years and thus continue to drive the global recovery (ESCAP 2014:2)

According to World Bank Report (2015), now the share of Asia-Pacific in world GDP is about 41 percent that is much higher than any other region of the world.

Thus, the economic breakdown of Atlantic region and fall of Eurozone in the wake of global financial crisis as well as the increasing global wealth of the Asia-Pacific region have brought it to the centre of the global stage. These ongoing transformations compelled the United States to move its strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific. The shift in strategic focus of the United States towards Asia-Pacific not only changed the nature and pattern of interactions among the emerging powers of the region but also with the United States. The US relations with China have eventually changed with the shift in the centre of gravity of power towards Asia-Pacific. This shift resulted in the gradual increase in the military spending in the Asia-Pacific region. Military expenditure in Asia-Pacific has increased from USD 214 billion in 2001 to USD 423 billion in 2014 (SIPRI 2015). A double growth in the military spending of the region is seriously a dangerous sign for the stability of the region (see figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: Increase in Military Spending in Asia-Pacific Region (2001-2014)

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015

Note: Illustration is result of researcher's own extrapolation of data available at SIPRI database

Though the China's economic growth and its rapid military build-up are in the centre of all these momentous transformations but it is not something that solely came with the rise of China. IR discourse has begun to talk about power shift as early as the last decade of the twentieth century and it came with the rise of Japan and four dragons of the East Asia—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, when their economies boomed at the annual growth rate of seven percent in the middle of 1990s. The world major population, resources and markets are concentrated in the region. So this region is dynamically becoming the core of global affairs. And power is also concentrating in this vast region of Asia-Pacific.

Despite the significance of China's rise, it is tempting to conclude that the Asia-pacific regional system is becoming China-dominant, is premature. China shares the regional stage with the Japan, ASEAN countries, and India as well as the most powerful actor in the region—the United States (Shambaugh 2005:23). Though the United States remains the predominant power of the region, its primacy is increasingly challenged by China's economic power and military prowess. That makes the Asia-Pacific region very susceptible to future instability (Pant 2011:13).

Conclusion

The US-China relationship has grown eventually in the course of time and significantly transformed with the rise of China. China's rapid economic growth and increasing military

modernization have not only changed the global view about the power and predominance of the United States, it also contributed to the ongoing power shift to the Asia-Pacific. It is now, therefore, on the top of the United States foreign policy priorities to keenly watch and respond to the rise of China that eventually transformed the relations between the two countries. Furthermore, the power Shift and the growing perceptions of US decline (more specifically relative decline) have dramatically decreased to some extent the US primacy and influence in the world and particularly to the Asia-Pacific. As a result of these highly dramatic changes, the dynamics of US-China relations have changed now in the Asia-Pacific region. All these instances not only changed the dynamics of United States and China relations but also transformed the Asia-Pacific region into a centre of concert of power because the coexistence, cooperation, competition, and confrontation will simultaneously continue to exhibit in the region between the two countries. Moreover, the worrisome aspect of this situation is the possibilities of instability and security conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region.

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