

US-CHINA CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPING THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This article aims to study scenarios for the development of the Asia-Pacific region in the context of the US-China conflict of interest in this region.

Methodology: The article is concerned with the conflict of interest between the United States of America and China in the context of the development of the Asia-Pacific region associated with activities of these leading actors of international relations in the Asia-Pacific region and the relevant integration structures and agreements.

Main Findings: The authors of the article have analyzed the US-Chinese relations in the Asia-Pacific region and presented an overview of the international situation.

Applications of this study: Special attention was paid to the expert discussion of scenarios for the probable development of the Asia-Pacific region in the immediate future, including the preservation of the existing state of affairs ("Status Quo"), the global Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic Silk Road Partnership under the auspices of China, the creation of the Asia-Pacific free-trade zone and the "northern" space of economic partnership.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific Region, China, United States of America, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), New Silk Road, Trans-Pacific Partnership.*

INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific region (APR) that can be called a mega-region of the globalization era has become one of the centers of world integration where this process acquired high efficiency, institutional diversity and economic asymmetry unlike in other regions. There are 44 subregional groups in the Asia-Pacific region, including 28 ones among APEC members. They mainly represent bilateral free-trade zones, the most famous of which are the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in North America and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia (SEA).

However, the current situation in the Asia-Pacific region demonstrates not its transformation into a dynamic regional community, but rather into a zone of economic competition and geopolitical rivalry of key Pacific states. In fact, the existing Asia-Pacific regionalism faced a complex problem, namely the conflict of geo-economic interest of the two main regional actors – China and the United States of America ([Zhang, 2016](#)).

After Xi Jinping came to power in November 2014, President of the People's Republic of China gave a new definition of the Chinese foreign policy – "striving for achievements" ([Yan, 2014](#)). Nowadays China is trying to strengthen its power and global influence, which is manifested in different initiatives aimed to establish a new world order. According to James Reilly, "China uses economic instruments of the art of public administration more often, more assertively and more diversely than ever before" ([Reilly, 2013, p. 93](#)). No government has ever controlled as much wealth as the State Council of the People's Republic of China does today ([Blackwill, Tellis, 2015](#)). Naturally, China has already achieved a global influence that seriously exceeds its economic power.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has become the main economic partner for two key US allies in the Asia-Pacific region – Japan and the Republic of Korea. On January 1, 2010, China and the ASEAN signed the agreement on forming a free-trade zone ([Powles, 2010](#)). Since 2012, China and Japan have been making trade transactions not in dollars, but in native currencies. The growing role of China in the Asia-Pacific region and global economy in general in the 21st century made the United States of America concerned and forced the country to search for new opportunities in order to secure its leading position in the region ([Weixing, 2017](#)).

After 2008, China has become an active supplier of foreign direct investment (FDI). Since 2012, the state is the third-largest global investor following the United States of America and Hong Kong ([Belt and Road Initiative Spurs China's Outward Investment Programme, 2015](#)). Unlike American and Japanese investors focused on production, most Chinese investments deal with the energy sector, raw materials and infrastructure. While China is increasing its FDIs, the country also improves its geo-economic power ([Johnstone, 2013](#)).

In September 2013, President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping seized the US initiative to create the "New Silk Road" and announced its Chinese version – "The Belt and Road Initiative" encompassing three Trans-Eurasian economic corridors: the Sea Silk Road (two routes), China-Pakistan and China-Myanmar (through India and Bangladesh) economic corridors ([China's Maritime Silk Road Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region, 2018](#)).

Many European and Asian countries are interested in Chinese infrastructure projects. In addition, it grants China tremendous opportunities to strengthen its influence on close neighbors and extend it far beyond the state borders. Infrastructure alliances mark an important transition from the use of military force to geo-economic tools for forming the country's geopolitical status. If the Silk Road is successfully implemented, China will not only expand its economic ties but also significantly increase its influence in Eurasia ([Wanandi, 2004](#)).

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund are the main investors in Chinese projects, which does not enable the dominance of leading Western states. This approach also includes China's attempts to turn the yuan into an international reserve currency. However, these initiatives can indicate Beijing's desire to increase its economic influence and change the current economic order in the world ([Saunders, 2014](#)).

The "Belt and Road Initiative" and AIIB projects were launched simultaneously. Despite the fact that there was no formal link between them, it is clear that the latter is a financial instrument for implementing the first one. The AIIB's main objective is to finance infrastructure investments in the Asia-Pacific region, but China as the main contributor to this bank also intends to expand its influence and take the leading position in the region. Therefore, the AIIB becomes a competitor to the Asian Development Bank controlled by Japan (the main US ally in the Asia-Pacific region) ([Godement, Kratz, Cohen, Pantucci, 2015](#)).

Southeast Asia is a challenging area for Chinese geoeconomics in the Asia-Pacific region since Beijing aims to disrupt US alliances in Asia and preserve its "old friends" (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar). Beijing has at least eight territorial disputes in the South China Sea with Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam ([O'Rourke, 2018](#)). China's claims include both the extraction of energy resources and the creation of strategic military outposts. If these claims are satisfied, China will be able to restore its territory, establish strict control over trade routes and, more importantly, expand its military influence onto most Southeast Asia and ultimately rebalance US forces in Asia ([Allen, Saunders, Chen, 2017](#)).

China usually uses methods of geo-economic enforcement in Southeast Asia in a very subtle way. Foreign companies find themselves under pressure while doing business in the face of China's intimidation, i.e. increasing tension hinders the supply of products between China and countries of Southeast Asia (especially Vietnam and the Philippines) and has consequences for the global economy. China is working intensively to improve trade and guarantee investment growth for countries of Southeast Asia and is showing generosity towards its strategic partners in this region. Beijing forms cooperation programs under the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) of 2002 and opens up China's markets for importing ASEAN agricultural products. Instead of receiving the maximum benefit, China shares its economic success with countries of Southeast Asia (the "benevolent hegemon") ([Sheng, 2017](#)). James Reilly, the China expert, calls these strategic Beijing's proposals the classic "win-win" opportunity: neighboring countries that are in China's economic orbit simultaneously support China's diplomatic efforts and create commercial opportunities for Chinese companies ([Reilly, 2013](#)).

METHODS

This article aims to study scenarios for developing the Asia-Pacific region in the context of the US-China conflict of interest in this region.

The main research method was interviewing experts in the field of foreign policy and foreign trade relations (expert assessment) followed by mathematical processing of the results obtained to rank the development scenarios for the Asia-Pacific region under discussion.

Twenty-five experts participated in the survey, including employees of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (ten people), employees of the Center for Applied Research "TALAP" (ten people) and independent political scientists, members of the Kazakhstan Association of Political Sciences (five people). The choice of experts representing analysts of geopolitical and geoeconomic processes will fully highlight particular scenarios for developing the Asia-Pacific region in the context of the conflict of interest between China and the United States of America.

The expert discussion was based on the proposed scenarios for the probable development of the Asia-Pacific region in the immediate future:

Scenario 1: "Status Quo".

Scenario 2: The global Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic Silk Road Partnership under the auspices of China.

Scenario 3: The creation of the Asia-Pacific free-trade zone.

Scenario 4: The creation of the "northern" space of economic partnership

RESULTS

We presented the results of the rating and assessing scenarios for the probable development of the Asia-Pacific region in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The results of rating and assessing scenarios for the probable development of the Asia-Pacific region

Experts	Scenarios for the probable development of the Asia-Pacific region			
	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
1	1	3	2	4
2	1	2	3	4
3	2	1	3	4
4	1	2	3	4
5	2	1	3	4
6	2	3	1	4
7	1	2	3	4
8	1	3	2	4
9	1	2	3	4
10	2	1	3	4
11	1	2	3	4
12	1	2	3	4
13	2	3	1	4
14	1	2	3	4
15	1	2	3	4
16	1	2	3	4
17	2	1	3	4
18	1	2	3	4
19	1	2	3	4
20	1	3	2	4
21	2	1	3	4
22	1	3	2	4
23	1	2	3	4
24	2	3	1	4
25	1	2	3	4
Expert assessment (rating)				
Final rating	1	2	3	4

According to the experts, the most likely outcome is the "Status Quo" scenario based on the hypothesis that there will be no prevailing trend in the formation of the trade and economic system in the Asia-Pacific region in the next 10 years; the Trans-Pacific partnership (after the withdrawal of the United States of America) and the "Belt and Road Initiative" due to uncertain priorities of the Chinese business or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (mostly a sub-regional organization) will not become the structural basis of the new economic order in the region.

The Asia-Pacific region lacks a universal scheme of trade and economic relations, therefore different Asian countries will propose a variety of strategies regarding their vision of how its economic system should be formed. At the same time, D. Trump's protectionism and "America First" policies will put pressure on the region and impose bilateral ties instead of multilateral cooperation.

Under such conditions, the United States of America will hardly renew the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), which Washington terminated in January 2017. The remaining 11 countries signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Despite the achieved diplomatic success, the main economic defeat for these countries was the lost access to the American market.

When discussing the second probable scenario – the global Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic Partnership of the Silk Road under the auspices of China – the experts noted that the Chinese government implements the "Belt and Road Initiative" focused on Eurasia ashore and aimed to create "blue economy" corridors through Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean and the southern Pacific Ocean afloat. In parallel, China is developing its own Arctic policy in the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and is giving its strategy an increasingly global and all-encompassing character.

The experts emphasized that the former US President B. Obama tried to implement the so-called regulatory pressure on China through the implementation of the Trans-Pacific partnership, i.e. to encourage the Chinese leadership to switch to American standards of business, investment, protection of intellectual property, etc. After the United States withdrew from the TPP Agreement conditions changed, today's Beijing feels the growing need to develop a "regulatory alternative" for the countries united in TPP-11, which would give the Chinese business an additional competitive advantage. However, it is still unclear whether this result will be achieved in the midterm.

The situation will make China respond to the American strategy of concluding bilateral partnerships with countries of the Asia-Pacific region by introducing a "regulatory component" into the "Belt and Road Initiative". However, China has not done it anticipating a negative reaction to such coercive initiatives from the Silk Road partners, which painfully meet any

sign of the "Chinese pressure". According to the experts, the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" can be amended and made more complex. In this regard, the experts predict the new global Trans-Pacific and Transatlantic Partnership of the Silk Road under the auspices of China will be realized in the Asia-Pacific region in the immediate future.

Another scenario considered by the experts as a driving force behind the formation of a regional system of trade and economic relations in the Asia-Pacific region is the idea of a free-trade zone. However, it will not be promoted in the midterm due to the lack of interest from the United States and other major Asian actors, but this scenario will remain a backup option for the future integration of the Asia-Pacific region.

The least probable scenario is the regional integration to create a "northern" space of economic partnership, whose idea was expressed by the new administration of Moon Jae-in who came to power in South Korea in 2017. They also proposed the "Northern Economic Policy" that implies the creation of an economic partnership space covering the Korean Peninsula, the Russian Far East, Siberia, the Russian Arctic, Central Asia, Mongolia, and northeast China.

The experts claim that this initiative will need more time to become understandable and acceptable to potential partner countries. The success of Seoul's initiatives on the Korean Peninsula will largely depend on the nuclear disarmament of North Korea. Even if the situation on the Korean Peninsula is normalized, the "Northern Economic Policy" will continue to face serious challenges. The possible reorientation of Seoul's economic resources towards Pyongyang in peaceful Korea will naturally limit South Korea's ability to finance interactions with other economies.

DISCUSSION

While discussing the study results, we should dwell on the TPP Agreement aimed to form a free-trade zone among twelve member countries. After five-year-long negotiations, the parties had come to terms in 2015. Twelve countries signed an agreement on the TPP creation on February 4, 2016, which should come into force after ratification by all the members. It should be noted that the project was considered too complex to implement at the negotiation stage due to its large scale. A possible way-out was the creation of mini-blocks followed by the establishment of close ties with each of them.

Prior to the US withdrawal from the TPP Agreement in January 2017, according to the Presidential Decree, the Trans-Pacific Partnership allowed free trade between two of the four largest world economies – Japan and the United States that had not previously entered any bilateral trade agreements. Other TPP countries also found this agreement of great importance. For example, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand mainly strive to balance interests, while Canada, Mexico and Chile aim to join integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region.

If earlier regional trade agreements (RTAs) were created as tariff reduction initiatives and later eliminators of non-tariff barriers, mega-regional trade agreements of the "new generation" pursue more ambitious, deep and comprehensive goals from the very beginning. The Trans-Pacific Partnership regulates not only tariffs, non-tariff barriers, services, investments, intellectual property or competition policy, but also e-commerce, Internet and the digital economy, government procurement, labor and employment issues, small and medium businesses.

The TPP Agreement consists of the preamble, thirty chapters, and annexes (I-IV), and also contains the Related Instruments section ([Trans-Pacific Partnership, n.d.](#)) covering market access; sanitary and phytosanitary conditions, etc.

The Summary of the TPP Agreement identifies its main features: comprehensive market access; regional approach to commitments; the TPP as a platform for regional integration (the agreement is open to new participants in the Asia-Pacific region); addressing new trade challenges (including the development of digital economy, the role of state-owned enterprises in the global economy); inclusive trade (commitments to provide assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises, commitments to develop some trade potential).

Less developed TPP countries are provided with transition periods and mechanisms for developing their potential to implement new commitments. Although the agreement is open to new participants in the Asia-Pacific region, most of these countries are developing economies and cannot join the TPP due to "high standards" of the agreement that are not beneficial for them.

In general, the TPP Agreement signed in the TPP-11 format in May 2018 foresees several scenarios for its further development:

- An expanded network of bilateral free-trade zones in the region and the weighting of a "spaghetti bowl", which will increase the existing institutional diversity and asymmetry of integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region;
- Japan can continue promoting the creation of a free-trade zone with the United States or NAFTA;
- China can "invite" other TPP members into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), or there is a possibility that the TPP and RCEP will merge in the future.

Since 2012, 16 countries (ten ASEAN countries and their regional partners in a free-trade zone – Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India) had been negotiating the RCEP creation. If these negotiations are successful,

one of the world-largest free-trade zones will be created. Thus, seven countries, including Australia, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Japan, will simultaneously participate in both projects – the TPP and RCEP.

The RCEP covers a wide range of issues that are beyond the power of the World Trade Organization like in the case of the TPP. The RCEP issues are trade in goods and services, investment, economic and technical cooperation, intellectual property rights, competition policy and dispute resolution. At the same time, the RCEP Agreement has more flexible liberalization provisions than the TPP (in such areas as competition, services, intellectual property, the origin of goods). It is estimated that the RCEP will account for up to half of the world's population, i.e. 3.5 billion people (nowadays the ASEAN market is 600 million people) ([Kuznetsov, 2017](#)). This agreement is also seen as a platform for negotiating with other regional blocs.

Regarding the US policy in Asia, President D. Trump highlighted his interest in a rational and balanced point presence in the Asia-Pacific region and engagement only in such regional processes that directly affect US national interests, including North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the Taiwan issue, and the freedom of navigation ([RCEP Ministers Agree on "Key Elements" to Speed Up Talks on "Mega Trade Pact", 2017](#)).

The aggravation of US-China trade and economic relations is not only of regional importance but also has an impact on the global economy ([Swaine, 2012](#)). The US-China trade conflict demonstrated a very interesting trend, i.e. D. Trump's administration tries to exert pressure on other countries to reduce its trade deficit relying not on international mechanisms to resolve trade disputes, but on the US domestic law, namely sections 201, 232 and 301 of the Trade Act of 1974.

The US trade policy towards China is likely to preserve such instruments as manipulating import duties and sanction pressure on companies operating in high-tech industries. The latter is proved by the example of the Chinese corporation ZTE that came under US sanctions for supplying telecommunication equipment to Iran.

The deterioration of US-China trade relations can have a twofold effect on other countries. On the one hand, the increase in import tariffs on Chinese products may fill the emerging vacuum with products from other countries. On the other hand, there is still a high probability of a negative effect ([Saunders, 2013](#)). According to section 201 of the Trade Act of 1974, D. Trump's administration imposed import duties on solar panels and washing machines for four years at the end of January 2018. As a result, this decision affected not only Chinese manufacturers but also companies from South Korea.

According to the experts, the so-called "trade wars" between Washington and Beijing may occur with predictable frequency. However, China's interest in open trade as a factor in the growth of its national economy and the growing globalization interdependence of the United States and China as two world economic leaders will determine mutually beneficial compromises reached even during the toughest negotiations.

Kazakhstan's policy in the Asia-Pacific region in the midterm and strategic perspective will be characterized by the uneven and imbalanced formulation and realization of the state's interests in this region. At the same time, Kazakhstan's foreign policy will focus on the Chinese direction, given Astana's willingness to join the Chinese project – "The Belt and Road Initiative".

Nowadays Kazakhstan is searching for ways to accelerate its socio-economic development. In terms of creating external conditions for ensuring the internal development of Kazakhstan, there is a strong need for active intellectual work for the doctrinal support of its Asia-oriented policy in the following four spheres.

First, it is useful for Kazakhstan to study approaches of the so-called strong governments like China, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam to the place and role of the public sector in the economy.

Second, Astana is interested in protecting intellectual property rights; therefore, there is a strategic need to link Kazakhstan's position on this issue with approaches of the United States, Japan, and South Korea that have great experience and authority in the region.

Third, it is essential for Kazakhstan to explain its approach to developing a public-private partnership to expert, business and political elites of the region, both conceptually and practically, taking into account the importance of this issue for planning foreign policies of Asian countries.

Fourth, the Kazakh economic system should bring into accordance its legislation on the protection of intellectual property rights and rules of doing business with the main trends of the "One Belt, One Road" strategy.

CONCLUSION

Due to its nature, the trade and economic system of the Asia-Pacific region cannot be formed regardless of the interests of the two main actors (China and the United States of America) whose economic influence is key in the region.

The conflict of interest between the United States of America and China in the Asia-Pacific region covers such areas of regional cooperation as the TPP Agreement.

The main scenarios for the possible development of the Asia-Pacific region in the immediate future in the context of the conflict of interest between the United States of America and China are as follows:

1. The preservation of the existing state of affairs ("Status Quo") since the Asia-Pacific region has no leading trend in the formation of a trade and economic system;
2. The global Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic Silk Road Partnership under the auspices of China due to the need to develop a "regulatory alternative" for the countries in the region unified by TPP-11;
3. The creation of the Asia-Pacific free-trade zone that is a fallback for the integrative future of the Asia-Pacific region;
4. The creation of the "northern" space of economic partnership, which is the unlikeliest of all possible scenarios.

In general, the Republic of Kazakhstan has every chance to play its game in the Asia-Pacific region based on the following components: the understanding of the current and future states of the Asia-Pacific region; the understanding of strategic goals and capabilities; the determination of concession and compromise that Kazakhstan can make and those "red lines" that Kazakhstan cannot afford to cross in defending its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Further analysis of these issues can be prospective for future research.

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