

A Comparative Analysis of Strategic Competition in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify specific policies issues that contribute to the strategic competition in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions. It comprised the grand strategies of Iran, China, and North Korea -as pivotal regional actors- reactions in response to the USA military presence in the Persian Gulf, South China Sea, and Korean Peninsula. The conflicting security between the American global interests and regional powers' interests has brought a sustainable competition in the world. The strategic competition has resulted in conflicting security and conflicts of policy objectives at the regional and global levels. The results also indicated that geopolitical dominance and an ability to launch nuclear weapons are the principal reasons for the strategic competition.

Keywords: Alliances; Foreign policy; Grand strategy; Distribution of power; Strategic interests

Introduction

The conflicting security due to different kinds of regional and strategic interests and policy objectives at the regional and global levels has brought a sustainable competition in the world. The geopolitics of these regions has made a significant contribution to the establishment of the USA military bases in the American alliances in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. This paper reviews the strategic competitions in the three critical and risk laden regions in the world. It explains the strategic competitions of the political players in these regions. It discusses the key issues relating to policies and strategic competitions between the USA as the transregional power, and Iran in the Persian Gulf, China in the South China Sea, and North Korea in the Korean peninsula as the major regional powers in their region. The overall objective of this study is to provide an overview of the existing strategies and distribution of power in the said regions. It is particularly aimed to identify specific policies issues that can contribute to the strategic competitions between the trans-regional and regional powers in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions.

This research pursued to help policy makers, security institutions, research scholars, doctoral students and practitioners to better understand and address the defense policies issues and foreign policy associated with strategic studies as well as global economy and international security.

Background and Significance of the Research

The Persian Gulf and South China Sea are the most strategically important in maritime transportation and global trade which have significant contribution to the world political economy. In the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz is one of the narrowest maritime choke points, located between Iran and Oman. It is a channel linking the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. The Strait of Hormuz provides sea passageways to the Arabian Sea connecting with the Indian Ocean that links to the South China Sea. The South China Sea plays a significant role in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and thus the main corridor between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

According to USA Energy Information Administration (EIA), more than 17 billion barrels of oil passes out through the Hormuz Strait per day. The EIA estimated that more than 85% of the crude oil that moved through this choke point went to the Asian markets [1]. It is a

geographic choke point and main artery for the transport of oil from the Middle East. The USA imports are relatively little of the oil from the Strait of Hormuz, but two American alliances in Asia-Pacific such as South Korea and Japan depended on the imports of crude oil. Thus, the stability of the Persian Gulf will remain an important focus of Western strategy for many years to come. There are also two biggest oil importers such as China and India which heavily depend on Persian Gulf oil which passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

The South China Sea is one such essential waterway for the USA and an estimate shows at least 30% of the world's maritime trade transits, including approximately \$1.2 trillion in ship-borne trade is bound through the sea for the USA annually [2]. The South China Sea is fast emerging as a major zone of conflict in the Asia Pacific, especially the South-east Asian geopolitics.

Although the soul of the conflict remained the centuries old territorial dispute over possession of some geographical features of this maritime zone, it is gradually transcending the periphery of the interstate territorial feud and emerging as the driving force of an Asian cold war of the entry-first century [3]. Consequently, these waterways are two vital shipping lanes in the global maritime trade and international political economy.

Literature Review

The grand strategy comprises the "purposeful employment of all instruments of power available to a security community" [4], and thus each country pursues different grand strategies at different conditions with different degrees of success. In order to formulate a grand strategy, one should have clarity about the national interests and policy objectives and plans for achieving them. The national interests are often referred as either the strategic national interests in security, prosperity,

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and stability, or ideological national interests in the promotion of popular government and human rights [5]. The modern concept of the Grand Strategy refers to both military aspects and also a more complex dimension, which consists of the national security doctrine [6].

Military balance has long been a key factor in shaping the stability of the world. It is also an essential factor in both the international relations and security. The theory of balancing power is based on the principle that international security increases when military power is distributed in such a way that no state is capable of being able to surpass other states. The theory argues that if a government has stronger power than others, it will use its power and attack the weak states. This makes multinational governments motivated to join defensive coalitions. Some realists believe this can be more stable as it prevents aggression and makes it unattractive, although there is a balance of power between the coalitions [7]. The authors cited that liberal theorists share an interest in probing the conditions under which similar interests among actors may lead to cooperation. Thus, the distribution of power plays a significant role in the global security.

During World War I, the USA grand strategy supported Britain and France in the war. Then, the Americans felt they were engaged in a contest with authoritarian great powers who were seeking world domination [8]. In 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour drew the USA into the war, which was a sensible one as Germany was the most powerful member of the Axis and directly threatened the existence of the UK and Soviet Union [9]. In World War II, America became the Arsenal of Democracy by out producing the Axis. Since World War II, the USA traditional objectives have been to prevent adversaries from dominating the region, maintain access to the region's oil and waterways, and defend and support Israel and other friendly states.

In the Cold War, America could not defeat the Soviets militarily, so it organized a system of containment to beat them in a longer-term contest of economic and political systems [10]. The USA has done this through a grand strategy of containment; through multilateral agreements, strategic partnerships, arms sales, foreign aid, Arab-Israeli diplomacy, rapid deployment forces, and intervention to liberate Kuwait [5]. During the Cold War, the world was essentially divided between the USA and the Soviet Union.

The American policy since the end of the Cold War has aimed to ensure that the USA maintains its lofty perch. The Pentagon assessment of the national-security needs of the Post-Cold War has insisted that America maintains its globe-girdling Cold War alliances, along with its Cold War defense-spending levels, even though the threat against which those alliances and budgets that were ostensibly erected has disappeared. Since the end of the Cold War, the USA grand strategy has revolved around maintaining the country's overwhelming military, economic, and political preponderance [11]. In 2002, the USA President, George Bush in his State of the Union speech claimed that North Korea, Iraq, and Iran were the members of "Axis of Evil" [12]. Bush's invasion and attempted democratization of Iraq may be the most flagrant case of American-led regime change in the Middle East. Bush and Obama were both interested in the same fundamental objective; regime change in the Middle East. Likewise, Obama's administration has demonstrated similar instincts. Indeed, it was under Obama's administration that the USA invaded Libya to the catastrophic effect. Obama achieved a partial restoration of alliances as the instruments of the USA foreign policy, especially in Asia as a consequence of the rebalance. The Eastern Europeans fretted about a more aggressive Russia, while Saudi Arabia worried about the regional power balance in a post-USA Middle East, whereas the USA allies in Asia grew more

concerned about the rise of China and inexorable progress of North Korean nuclear program [8]. Lyon stated that Donald Trump's recent statements about the USA foreign policy has indicated a new era of the grand strategy, one in which America relies less upon its traditional alliances [11] stated that great powers have two basic strategic options; they can pursue geopolitical dominance or seek to maintain a rough balance of power among the strongest states in the region or around the world.

The USA strategic interests in the Persian Gulf involved the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, cooperation between the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, USA and European security policies that create an effective deterrent to Iran [13]. The USA defence strategy towards the nation rebalances to the Asia-Pacific regions not only revalidates this posture but also marks a shift that stresses the necessity for far-reaching naval and air force capabilities [14]. The USA containment policy against China to diminish the economic and political growth of the country has failed over the past few decades. In the Korean Peninsula, the USA strategy towards North Korea was to prevent the potential spread of nuclear weapons to rogue states and terrorist groups or others especially in the Middle East, and avoid the proliferation [15].

Methodology

The overall objectives of this study provide an overview of the existing strategies and distribution of power in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions. The purpose of this comparative policy analysis was to compare different kinds of national interests and policy objectives at the regional and global levels. It explained different grand strategies between political players in the Persian Gulf, South China Sea, and Korean peninsula. The principal aim of this research was to identify specific policies issues that contribute to the military power balance and maritime security in the said regions.

It was particularly aimed to identify specific policies issues that can contribute to the strategic competitions between the regional and trans-regional power in the said regions. The scope of study was the reactions of Iran, China, and North Korea as the pivotal regional actors in response to the USA military presence in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions. The qualitative comparative analysis was employed as a technique in determining data set supports in this research. The following sections analysed the regional and strategic interests and policy objectives of the regional and trans-regional actors in the Persian Gulf, South China Sea, and Korean Peninsula.

Strategic competition in the Persian Gulf

The Post-Persian Gulf War (2003) saw that the USA grand strategy remained to ensure the energy security and stability of the Arab governments in the Persian Gulf Region and the long-term security of Israel as an unswerving strategy in the Middle East. The USA relationship in the region is pragmatically based on shared security and economic concerns. In 2017, the White House Office of the Press Secretary stated that the USA has strong military, security, intelligence, and diplomatic ties with several Middle Eastern nations including Israel, Egypt, and Jordan and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the main driver of defense policy is the Iranian military threat combined with internal security challenges. The council leaders arranged to meet annually in this format to review progress made on all the initiatives agreed upon during the summit and look for further ways to strengthen GCC-US strategic partnership [16].

Despite massive arms deals by Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC, the Arab states have continued to rely on the security umbrella of the USA. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies stated that the USA faces major challenges in dealing with Iran and the threat of terrorism and tide of political instability in the Arabian Peninsula. The presence of some of the world largest reserves of oil and natural gas, vital shipping lanes, and Shia' populations throughout the region, has made the peninsula the focal point of USA and Iranian strategic competition [17].

Over the past two decades, Iran has strived to expand its naval forces and missile capabilities simultaneously in countering the regional and trans-regional forces of different existential threats such as the USA and Israel. Iran has accumulated the largest ballistic missile arsenal and robust collection of cruise missiles as well as a sizable fleet of relatively the small, high speed, and highly-maneuverable attack craft in the Persian Gulf. It is making a push to redress a key remaining shortfall in its ability to deny or degrade the USA power projection capabilities in the Persian Gulf [17]. The American military presence in the Persian Gulf is not only as a security threat for Iran but also as a trans-regional force against Iranian regional goals in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf and particularly the Strait of Hormuz serve Iran as a political tool to bargain with the major world powers, especially the USA.

There also exists a conflicting regional interest between Saudi Arabia and Iran for the influence in the Middle East. Both of the regional powers' grand strategies are to become the regional powerhouse in the Persian Gulf. In the biggest regional diplomatic crisis between the American alliances in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain have cut ties with Qatar, accusing it of destabilizing the region with its support for Islamist extremist groups [18]. The conflicting security due to different kinds of regional interests and policy objectives over the Middle East is a serious issue in the region.

The USA strategies of the Persian Gulf were the maritime security through the Persian Gulf as well as to stop the Iranian regional expansion further by military supports of the Arab States in the region. The strategy also supported the consolidation of the Jewish conquest in Palestine over the past few decades. Nevertheless, most of the political trends of the Persian Gulf states concerned around tensions between democratization, political legitimacy, and Islamic extremist groups besides the long-term Arab-Israel peace projects which remain in the Middle East [19-25].

Strategic competition in the South China sea

The USA grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific is designed to achieve long-term economic and maritime security interests in the South China Sea. To achieve the goals, the USA established a monitoring strategy that can be supported by navigation program and multilateral coalition under the uncertain conditions in the region [26]. The freedom of navigation program to preserve strategic interests by the USA navy near the artificial islands in South China Sea has been repeatedly warned by the Chinese army and ordered to stay away from the zone although the USA Navy preference followed by international legal norms in the waterway. Nevertheless, the result of the program with collaborative efforts by territorial claimants as well as the encouraging military rebalance did not assert to obtain tangible outcomes. The Chinese provocative behaviour with a cautious strategy driven by the maritime capabilities has increasingly developed more domination in the world's maritime trade transits in the South China Sea over the past

two decades [24]. It is a part of their grand strategy to expand territorial seas and implement strategies that support greater access to marine resources. The modernization of armed forces and increasing military expenditure of China has resulted in the naval expansionism and building of artificial islands which is not forbidden by the international law and military bases in the isles which developed tensions towards the regionally order in the region. The consequence of the rise in China military activities has also brought an acceleration of the regional arms race in the Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the low economic growth, traditional sea-denial approach, size of armed forces, and geopolitics and sociopolitical tensions in most of the other countries have resulted in China's undisputed sovereignty over the region.

The strategic competition between China and the USA as the two-major political and economic powers in Asia-Pacific alongside rapid the military expansion indicates the importance of the role of geopolitics in military balance. The conflicting security due to different kinds of national and economic interests at the regional and global levels have brought in maritime disputes and resource conflicts in the crucial areas that developed tensions in the South China Sea. The American long-term monitoring strategy for the South China Sea is replied by a cautious strategy adopted by China in the region. China's grand strategy is pursuing military modernization with a focus on information and maritime security to defend its security interests [14].

The Japanese strategy is towards proactive peace diplomacy in the South China Sea, which is a regional reaction to the China's strategy as a major regional competitor [9]. Nevertheless, the political difficulties in Japan such as constitutional restraints in the right of collective self-defence and budget constraints in military expansion as well as low profile in foreign policy, proved to be incapable of constructively influencing the reduction of tension in the region which is aimed towards the peace diplomacy. Furthermore, Japan is surrounded by three longstanding nuclear powers such as China, Russia, and North Korea and it must continue to rely on the security umbrella of the USA. Hence, the multiple claimants seek to address and resolve their issues peacefully due to the facts. Thus, the military expansion and geographical location allowed China's attempts to dominate the South and East China Sea and extend permanent military presence further in proximity to the Southeast Asia.

In 2015, the USA in line with a pivot to Asia strategy pushed forward the initiative of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) expanded to twelve countries including Japan but excluding China. The twelve parties reached a final agreement in October 2015 but the deal was never ratified by the USA Congress [21]. Although Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the 12-nation free-trade deal orchestrated [5]. In the Southeast Asia, most of the countries' political trends are concerned around the tensions between democratization, economic difficulties, corruption, and terrorism.

Strategic competition in the Korean peninsula

Due to the escalating tensions between the USA and North Korea after carrying out the new missile test, the US naval strike group was deployed towards the western Pacific. North Korea also that steadily developed their nuclear forces raised and continued with the missile testing, oblivious to the international economic sanctions and warnings from the USA and China. Pyongyang's goal is to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile that can strike the US mainland, thus will continue until this military ambition is achieved. It is an ultimate goal for the regime known as the Korean grand strategy. Americans long-term nuclear diplomacy and the international economic

sanctions did not work and keep Pyongyang's political behaviour. Thus, the nuclear proliferation strategy towards a crippling political crisis developed tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to date; it is increasingly growing [23].

The multilateral talks for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, international sanctions, and the policy of strategic patience towards North Korea did not result in Pyongyang to stop their nuclear program, and ballistic missile testing has still continued so far [24]. In response to the North Korean missile tests, the US military tested an anti-missile system to intercept an incoming intercontinental ballistic missile. As the experts, it is capable and credible of the deterrent against a very real threat vitally important to the defence of their homeland [25]. It is a reaction to ballistic missile testing by Pyongyang, towards a possible strike on the American alliances in Asia-Pacific; South Korea and Japan as well as the USA mainland and thus to protect the USA and the allies from the North Korean threat. Pyongyang carried out a test launch of the second intercontinental ballistic missile that it was capable of reaching the USA mainland with nuclear weapons.

In reaction, a pair of USA supersonic bombers have flown over the Korean Peninsula, less than 48-hours after North Korea's successfully tested second intercontinental ballistic missile [26]. It is reactions to ballistic missile testing by Pyongyang, towards a possible strike on the Americans alliances in Asia-Pacific; South Korea and Japan as well as the USA mainland and thus to protect the USA and the allies from the North Korea's threats.

Discussion

During the post-Cold War, the USA policies pursued a military presence and possible intervention for two main strategic national interests in security in the world; the Middle East and Asia-Pacific by means of the simultaneous independence and interdependence of different existential threats as the future global conflicts. The strategy was then developed and efforts were made to strengthen related American alliances to stop further regional expansions of Iran in the Middle East and China in the Asia-Pacific as two pivotal regional actors. The policy also pursued the Disarmament of the North Korean Nuclear Program and later the strategic patience in the Korean Peninsula.

The USA grand strategy was supported by the establishment of military bases, navigation program, and multilateral coalition as a complementary strategy under the uncertain conditions in the two vital and critical regions; the Persian Gulf and South China Sea. It also protects Japan and defends South Korea by the presence of the USA military in East Asia against the North Korean threat. The primary goal of the grand strategy is to achieve maritime security and freedom of commercial vessels to transit through the two international waterways in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea. It also supports the stability of the USA's alliances in the internal challenges and external threats and the long-term security of Israel in the Middle East. It is encouraging military rebalance in the Asia-Pacific Nations. The military presence is an effort to address current issues such as long-term economic concern and maritime security interests and policy objectives as an unswerving purpose of the USA grand strategy to achieve their goals. It is also attempting to monitor the regional pivotal military activities and their policy objectives in the said regions.

In the new diplomatic crisis between American alliances in the Arab States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are dividing the southern Persian Gulf states, pushing Qatar towards Iran and Turkey. The conflicting security in the regional interests between Saudi Arabia

and Iran also brought growing support of the rival groups in Syria and Yemen civil war, further developing the tensions in the Middle East. Related to the tension, the Iranian Foreign Minister pointed out that they hope the Yemen war will not spark direct confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the Middle East, Iranian ideological orientation along with spiritual and material support for Islamic resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon keep them at the centre of such important dialogues.

Such regional tensions, political trends of the Arabs state as mentioned earlier and military weakness of the nations will undermine the American efforts to achieve military balance in shaping the stability in the region. Thus, the Arab states should rely on the security umbrella of the USA. It does seem that the military power balance will not yield in the Persian Gulf. In the South China Sea, the maritime disputes and resource conflicts as well as political trends of the countries, as mentioned before, will also undermine the American efforts to achieve military balance in the Southeast and East Asia. It has resulted in China's sovereignty over the region.

The USA military presence has also led to the conflicts of strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea. There were two different replies from the USA Navy versus Iranian and Chinese activities in the regions. As comparison, the USA warships response to the approach of Iranian radar boats in the Persian Gulf, which is more defensive including warning messages and repeatedly fired warning shots which were flagrantly disregarded by the Iranian high-speed boats. Meanwhile, the presence of the USA Navy in the South China Sea is more invasive to approach the artificial islands and disputed areas where the Chinese were involved in military operations that are repeatedly warned by China's army. Although, the competitors attempt to avoid the risk of direct confrontation.

In the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang has newly developed the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and thus brought an imbalanced military capability as well as a new escalation of the threat to the USA in a world class. Thus, the second successful test of the ICBM that proved its ability to strike America's mainland. Therefore, these kinds of questions emerge; will the defence systems be able to destroy the incoming Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles before striking a target land in the USA? Is it capable and credible in a serious missile war for the defence of the regions? Can they rely upon the anti-missile systems such as Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to protect the USA mainland and alliances from the North Korean threat? The main question is; is it a real threat or just an instrument of political blackmail?

As mentioned before, the USA tested an anti-missile defence in a controlled condition, where it was just an exercise against a simulated attack. There is a part of the USA general plan in strategic defence (Strategic Defence Initiative) in which North Korea as a pretext will expand its military infrastructure in the East Asia and risk upsetting the balance of power in the region. Aggravating global sanctions, isolation, and new United Nations resolution could be one of the most likely American choices to impose on North Korea as the instruments of the USA foreign policy.

Any peaceful way out of the North Korean crisis needs China to help control and push Pyongyang to change their nuclear policy to be neutralized without a war although it has been impossible so far. It appears that China is the key to squeeze the Korean regime into the peaceful process. Otherwise, there is not an alternative option to resolve the Korean peninsula crisis and thus military intervention will be inevitable and the only way to end the North Korea's threats.

Accordingly, distribution of power has a significant role in the global security. The geopolitics of these regions has made it a field of regional and strategic competition in the world. The geopolitical dominance in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea for maintaining a balance of power is formulated in the USA grand strategy as the trans-regional and Iran and China as the regional political actors. Thus, the geopolitical regions remained as strategic national interests in security of the regional and trans-regional powers.

Conversely, Korean Peninsula it's not so important in terms of the geopolitics. The division of the Korean Peninsula into the North and South is a legacy of World War II. The importance of North Korea is due to its proliferation of the nuclear weapons and a real threat to the USA. North Korea's recent intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests which demonstrated progress toward an ability to hit the entire USA mainland. Therefore, an ability to launch nuclear weapons is another component of a grand strategy which significant contribution to the national interests in security. It also plays a significant role in the strategic competition in this perspective. The balance of power in the regions as a major political issue still remains intact like the past with a greater intensity.

In addition, due to Beijing-Tehran's diplomatic relations and economic ties, the help by China will be effective for the USA in order to reduce escalation of tension and risk of military intervention in the Persian Gulf. This seems to be a clear approach and accurate speech that the USA needs the help from China in getting a peaceful solution to the tensions in both the Middle East and Asia-Pacific.

From my perspective, related to the North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile tests, it is a tension between the USA-China relations, which has shifted from the economic competition at the global level and the military conflicts in the South China Sea at the regional level to this security threat to the USA mainland. It is also the final stage in the strategic competition. It does seem that the repeated provocations by Pyongyang are an interest in probing United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and particular five permanent members' reactions under the conditions of intercontinental ballistic missile tests.

Conclusion

The conflicting security and different kinds of regional and strategic interests have thus brought strategic competitions through the international waterways as the main sea corridors from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea which continues in the Western and Central Pacific. The USA grand strategy in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea are maritime security through the two international waterways. The strategy pursued an effort to strengthen alliances and partnership in the states to a common security vision and economic concern for the future. The vision does encourage military rebalanced of the USA alliances in the Arab States of the Persian Gulf and Asia-Pacific Nations. The obligation to defend both Japan and South Korea has remained as the USA's strategic interests in East Asia.

Nevertheless, the USA rebalancing strategy was ineffective and did not assert to obtain tangible outcomes to curb further Chinese and Iranian regional expansions and sovereignty over the regions as well as has failed to stop the North Korean missile testing so far. It has not been able to change the political behaviors of the regional powers. In other words, the strategies of containment have failed to prevent Iranian expansion in the Middle East and Chinese dominance in Asia-Pacific as well as to stop North Korean nuclear program in the Peninsula.

Furthermore, the recent intercontinental ballistic missile tests

by North Korea which demonstrated an ability to hit the entire USA mainland.

As a result, the geopolitical dominance and the ability to launch nuclear weapons are two major strategic components which have made a significant contribution to the conflicting security and conflicts of policy objectives at the regional and global levels. It has also resulted in the strategic competition in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions.

Implications of the Findings– Policy and Managerial

The USA strategy has failed in practice in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific that are mentioned in this perspective. The distribution of powers in the geopolitical regions, which are highly unstable towards a situation of fragility. Any regional or trans-regional military intervention in the regions will result in regional instability which has implications for each other and it is also a significant impact on the global economy. A pre-emptive strike on the North Korean nuclear facilities and missile sites bring radioactive places and uncontrollable situation, which are not a moral option to disable the facilities. Technological neutralization could be a better choice of the solution although it is doubtful whether the USA will be able to deactivate the North Korean missile program by technical systems. Thus, the USA needs help from China to achieve a peaceful solution regarding the tensions in the regions.

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