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## **Sino-U.S. relations under the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **I. Changes in the U.S. China Policy**

The new trend of China policy of the U.S. dates back to 2017 when Trump took office. Since then, it has undergone significant changes. I have observed that from 2009, Sino-U.S. relations started to develop unfavorably. It is during the Obama administration that Sino-U.S. relations started to change, but the changes were not as significant as those after Trump assumed office. Various issues in today's Sino-U.S. relations, including economic and trade frictions, Hong Kong, Taiwan, human rights, the South China Sea, technology decoupling and intellectual property rights were emerging before Trump assumed power in 2017.

Before taking office, Trump made phone calls to Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen, which aroused both opposition from many people in the U.S. and a strong protest from China. After taking office, however, Trump showed ambiguous attitude toward the Taiwan issue. He has focused on Sino-U.S. economic and trade relations, trying to redress the Sino-U.S. trade surplus. This is in line with Trump's ruling characteristics, that

is, focusing on revitalizing U.S. economy in an effort to make the U.S. great again.

Trump, together with the U.S. Secretary of State, Defence Secretary and other staff around him, identifies China as a major strategic opponent, that is, strategic “competitor” and the so-called “revisionist state”. Under “revisionist state”, the U.S. believes that China is attempting to fix the existing international order because it is dissatisfied with the U.S.-led international order. Therefore, the U.S. claims to carry out a full and long-term strategic competition with China in an all-of-government approach.

The first big event that the Trump administration did to China was to create trade frictions, which eventually turned into trade wars. Early this year, China and the U.S. formally signed the phase-one economic and trade agreement, announcing an end to the trade wars for the time being. According to the agreement, China will, in the next two years, buy USD200 billion of commodities from the U.S., including oil and gas, agricultural products, manufacturing products and financial services. Besides, China will also improve protection of intellectual property rights, cease forced technology transfer, and relax exchange rate controls, etc.

Trump had intended to conduct the phase-two economic and trade negotiations after the U.S. presidential election in November this year, the COVID-19 pandemic, however, hit both China and the U.S., creating more uncertainties about the timing and results of the phase-two economic and trade negotiations. In other words, the Sino-U.S. trade dispute stopped temporarily, but the problems have not been thoroughly resolved yet. The U.S. failed to cancel many of the tariffs imposed on China before the phase-one agreement was signed.

The phase-two negotiations may focus on subsidies for Chinese SOEs, market access, foreign investment review, cybersecurity, etc.

COVID-19 broke out in January this year. China had expected more cooperation with the U.S. in fighting the pandemic, but the anti-China words and deeds of the U.S. have not ceased but rather intensified.

Strategically, the U.S. continues to impose pressure on China. Trump insinuatingly criticized China in his recent visit to India. He and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also issued a joint statement, expressing the need to strengthen the strategic integration in the Indo-Pacific region, establish a significant code of conduct in the South China Sea, and support tourism, navigation and security. This is clearly aimed at China. The U.S. is also attempting to undermine China's influence in the United Nations and other organizations. For example, the U.S. recently successfully blocked the nomination of China's representative as the Director-General of the World Intellectual Property Organization. Also, in early February this year, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed in a speech to the National Governors Association that the competition between the U.S. and China is not just a matter of the federal government, but a matter of each state as well. He called on the states to follow the instructions of the federal government to be vigilant against China.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government has not only taken changing attitudes towards China, but also acted inconsistently. In the beginning, Trump praised China for its transparency and openness in the anti-pandemic work. U.S. Vice President Mike Pence also said that China and the U.S. were cooperating. Later they were changing their attitudes gradually. In his speech, Trump directly called the novel coronavirus "China virus" and refuted the claim that the U.S. military carried the virus to China. Currently, the U.S. is smearing China in many respects. In terms of COVID-19 alone, it has said a lot of bad things about China.

In spite of this, there was some cooperation between China and the U.S. The U.S. CDC also joined the World Health Organization in the

inspection of Chinese delegation. The reporter with the New York Times also affirmed China's approach, saying that the U.S. should learn from China.

All in all, currently, there is confused diplomatic information about China and the U.S. COVID-19 has not improved but worsened the overall relationship between the two countries.

In the future, the Trump administration and the U.S. Congress will continue to adopt new policies and measures on many issues related to trade relations, technology competition, cybersecurity, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, etc. to strengthen departmental coordination and exert pressure on China in an all-round manner.

In terms of trade relations, at the end of February this year when COVID-19 was serious, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative began to exempt tariffs on dozens of medical supplies imported from China including masks and medical gloves, which was good for China. But later, the U.S. felt uncomfortable when discovering that it had to import medicines and pharmaceutical raw materials, medical equipment from China. Fearing to be controlled by China in the future, the U.S. decided to produce them itself or purchase them from other countries so as to reduce its dependence on China's medical products and medicines, trying to decouple from China.

In terms of technology competition, the U.S. continues to crack down on Huawei Technologies. Huawei CFO Ms. Meng Wanzhou is still in Canada, but the U.S. is seeking possible extradition of her to the U.S. for trial. It used diplomatic, judicial and administrative means to suppress and boycott Huawei. Senior officials in the Trump administration stressed, on many occasions such as the Munich Security Conference, the dangers of Huawei to national security and democratic political system, attempting to block the application of Huawei equipment in 5G network construction by the United Kingdom and other Western allies.

The U.S. is also discussing how to support its domestic development of 5G industry. The U.S. Treasury Department recently promulgated new regulations on strengthening the review of overseas investors. There are also some coordinating policies in many respects, aiming to prevent the U.S. technologies from becoming tools to help China strengthen its surveillance and military capabilities.

In terms of the Taiwan issue, the U.S. keeps on rocking the boat. In January this year when Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected as Taiwan leader, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that he congratulated Tsai Ing-wen on her re-election, recognized her leadership in the U.S.-Taiwan relations and relations across the Taiwan Strait, and emphasized the democratic value shared by the U.S. and Taiwan. After the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the U.S. claimed that Taiwan should be allowed to attend the conferences of the World Health Organization at least as an observer, attempting to improve Taiwan's international standing.

In terms of the South China Sea issue, the U.S. continues to put pressure on China, by sending its naval reconnaissance aircrafts to fly over the South China Sea, strengthening the Indo-Pacific strategy, and inciting Vietnam, the Philippines and other countries that have disputes over the South China Sea with China to impose new pressure on China.

In terms of the Hong Kong issue, the U.S. passed the "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act" in November 2019, attempting to interfere in China's internal affairs. It also nominated the leader of Hong Kong "democratic movement" to compete for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize.

In terms of the Tibet issue, the U.S. passed the "Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019", openly interfering in China's internal affairs, especially regarding succession of the 15th Dalai Lama, the future leader of Tibetan Buddhism. It incited the Tibetan people to make their

own decision by ignoring the proposal of the Chinese government.

In terms of cultural and people-to-people exchanges, the U.S. has conducted a lot of surveillance over Chinese students within the territory of the U.S. One chemistry professor at Harvard University suffered an unwarranted charge by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). On February 18, the U.S. Department of State also incorporated five Chinese media, that is, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, CGTN, chinadaily.com.cn, and the People's Daily into the scope of the "Foreign Missions Act", regarding them as representatives of the Chinese government and restricting their activities. On February 19, the Chinese government countered by canceling the press cards held by three foreign reporters with the Wall Street Journal. On March 2, the U.S. Department of State further required the five Chinese press agencies in the U.S. to reduce their Chinese employees to 100 and submit the detailed list of them before March 6. In response to this, the Chinese government countered them by canceling the press cards of the reporters with the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and the Washington Post in China.

Also, American think-tanks and other media published in succession reports, papers and commentaries relating to China policy, echoing the tone of the U.S. in its China policy. They even appealed to the U.S. government for stronger policies against China. Several presidential candidates have also lashed out at China. Joe Biden did not mince his words: "If I am elected, I will take strong measures against China, I will in particular enhance the relations with our allies to jointly cope with China". This signifies that the U.S. is attempting to drum up its allies and partners to jointly contain the influence of China in the international community.

In the 2020 presidential election, China issue will also become more eye-catching than ever before. Of course, the presidential election will still focus on U.S. domestic issues rather than foreign relations,

including the traditional issues such as sluggish economic growth, a flash of financial crisis as well as social inequalities, migration, medical and health issues, and education. When it comes to foreign relations, China will inevitably become the first major issue.

Currently, there are different views regarding who will be elected as the U.S. president. Before March 2020, the U.S. economy developed well and the result of a poll released was favorable to Trump. Now, the outbreak of COVID-19 puts enormous pressure on Trump. As the numbers of infections and deaths grow, he himself dramatically changes his attitude towards the pandemic. The opposition criticizes him for this. New York governor once criticized Trump for his irresponsibly referring to this virus as “China virus”, claiming that many Chinese, Chinese Americans and Asians in New York have been suffering racial discrimination. Such a term will only make these people more bullied, which is no good for the U.S. and New York. As the COVID-19 pandemic develops, Trump will suffer greater pressure. Though Trump has no Republican competitor, he will have to compete with the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Whose election will be better for China? I believe they each have their pros and cons.

If Trump is re-elected, he will continue to put pressure on China in trade issues. What’s more, the assistants around him have bad impression of China. The anti-China forces such as FBI, CIA and other U.S. organizations are very powerful. Though Trump praised China for having done a good job and claimed that he and the Chinese president are good friends, what he did in his term of office does no good to China. Trump will be bound to adopt many policies against China after he is re-elected. In 2017 when he took office, Trump adopted anti-China policies. A relatively good point is that in the past few years, Trump has focused on economic and trade relations with China, paying little attention to the issues concerning the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, human

rights and Xinjiang. He even suppressed the extremely anti-China forces. He put economic and trade issues before anything else.

If Joe Biden is elected, he may go farther than Trump regarding China's internal affairs, the South China Sea issue and the international issues. In particular, he may unite other countries to jointly deal with the so-called "China threat". But relatively speaking, Joe Biden has long old links with China. He understands China more than Trump does. He himself does not regard China as the biggest threat of the U.S. In addition, many of the assistants around Biden once served as diplomats during the Obama administration. They have a deeper understanding of China than Trump's men.

All in all, whoever is elected as the American president has his own pros and cons, but as a whole, neither of them does good to the relations with China. The U.S. government will continue to intensify its strategy for competition with China. What's more, the U.S. government and the opposition have a negative impression of China. With all these factors combined, we find it hard to be optimistic about the U.S. China policy in the years to come.

## **II. China's Policy and Attitude towards the U.S.**

On March 16 this year, Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs pointed out in a telephone call with the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that "some U.S. politicians are continuing to slag off China and China's efforts in COVID-19 control and stigmatize China, which has created an outcry from the Chinese people and which China firmly opposes and strongly condemns. We urge the U.S. side to stop all its attempts to slung mud at China, which are doomed to fail. Any act that damages the interests of China is certain to meet with the resolute opposition of the Chinese people. We urge the U.S. side to enhance communication and cooperation with China and



the international community and advance the security of international public health for the shared interests and will of the peoples of China and the U.S. and the peoples of the world”. Pompeo said that China is stigmatizing the U.S. by rebuking the U.S. military for spreading the virus, with which the U.S. is much dissatisfied. In reality, this conversation between China and the U.S. was unpleasing. Reprimanding each other has done harm to the Sino-U.S. relations and the respective interests of both countries.

In the past two years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government, think-tanks, media and public opinion have changed their attitude towards the U.S. For quite some time, Sino-U.S. relations have been a top priority, and China had to keep a low profile in the relations with the U.S. Nowadays, these views have faded away from the mainstream public opinion platforms. They are replaced by the view that China should take a tit-for-tat attitude and dare to draw sword towards the U.S. Artistic works, various videos and articles have even given up hope about the U.S.

In terms of propaganda, promoting the Chinese culture, spreading the successful experience in China’s governance and enhancing the confidence that China approach is leading the world have become the positive energy and central theme. For example, the mainstream media commented that China has performed quite successfully in COVID-19 control, setting a good example for the world. It began to support other countries in the world, including Italy, Pakistan, etc.

For some time, there have been substantially reduced tolerance to the anti-China words and acts of the U.S. among the Chinese government and the civil society. For example, after Daryl Morey, General Manager of NBA Houston Rockets, released inappropriate comments on one social media, China canceled rebroadcast of many NBA programs as a sanction. In response to the incorporation of five Chinese media by the U.S. into the scope of the Foreign Missions Act, China took

countermeasures in February by revoking the press cards of three reporters with the Wall Street Journal in Beijing. Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian reputed the U.S. theory of “China virus” by quoting the remarks made by the U.S. CDC head and claimed that the U.S. owed China an explanation.

The handling of similar events may become a model, that is, zero tolerance for attacks on China from the U.S. Rising Sino-U.S. information war, public opinion war and diplomatic war are becoming an irreversible inertia.

In terms of economy, technology and cultural and people-to-people exchanges, both China and the U.S. are getting less dependent on each other. China even stresses independent innovation in the relations with the U.S. in such fields as trade, investment, finance and technology, etc. We do not expect decoupling of economy, trade and technology between China and the U.S., but we are making mental and material preparations for this. China should independently manufacture the products it needs, whether 5G, aircraft engine or others. The U.S. is on the alert. For example, it has to import many medical products and medicines from China, but it wants all the more to reduce its dependence on China.

During COVID-19, the foreign ministry spokesman evoked harsh criticism on the U.S. setting a bad example by taking the lead to evacuate the staff from its embassy or consulates in China, impose comprehensive restrictions on Chinese citizens and continue to make and spread panic. In view of the attitude and measures of the U.S., the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC warned on February 24 Chinese tourists not to travel to the U.S. This has shown how much China and the U.S. feel disgusted with each other.

Generally speaking, we distrust and disgust the U.S. to such an extent unseen since China and the U.S. established diplomatic relations 41 years ago.

Meanwhile, China and Russia have upgraded their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era, and their political mutual trust has reached an unprecedented high level. China is attaching even greater importance to the relations with developing countries, reestablishing the concept of “international united front” and stepping up efforts to ensure its work in the United Nations and its affiliated organizations such as the World Health Organization, which has proved fruitful. China has played a leading role in the international mechanisms without the U.S., for example, the BRICKS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, etc., including its active promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative building.

All these examples have shown that China is clearly aware of the enormous changes in the U.S. China policy and has made corresponding adjustments in strategy, thinking and specific policies for the purpose of more resolute competition and struggle. China emphasizes as a whole getting real vis-à-vis the U.S., getting prepared for enormous challenges, and preparing our minds for courageous and successful struggle and enhanced competitiveness.

The diplomatic words towards the U.S. currently remain gentle, that is, continuing to “advance a Sino-U.S. relationship based on coordination, cooperation and stability”. After the outbreak of COVID-19, President Xi Jinping and President Trump also expressed the need of cooperation between both sides in a telephone call.

### **III. Comprehensive Judgment of Sino-U.S. Relations**

In recent years, the economic and military strengths of both countries have continued to develop favorably towards China and there have been significant changes in the domestic political atmosphere of both countries, too. The U.S. features political extremism, that is, the Democrats and the Republicans contend fiercely. What’s more, identity

politics is prominent; while China stresses the centralized leadership of the Communist Party of China, intensifies its efforts to strengthen the Party building and fight corruption, and takes stricter measures for ideology and cyber control. As a result, China and the U.S. are facing increasingly prominent contradictions in social systems, values and state interests.

Trade war is only a symptom rather than the cause for the deteriorated Sino-U.S. relations. It has temporarily covered up the conflicts in other fields.

China was more passive in response at the beginning. Since the autumn of 2019, China has underlined the need to fight actively and establish the value of struggle and fought back against the intensive anti-China attacks. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two countries have further cut high-level exchanges. They mainly “shout across the Pacific Ocean”. The objective requirements of COVID-19 control make private communication difficult for both sides, which is not conducive to easing up clashes.

Tourism, cultural and people-to-people exchanges and technological cooperation between both countries are in a state of stagnation. The “track two mechanism for dialogue”, that is, dialogues between government officials and government representatives of both countries in their personal capacity, once worked for China-U.S. communication, but has now ceased. Mutual visits between think-tanks have also decreased. Political concerns and traffic barriers leave us with little hope of restarting such dialogues at least in a short-term.

Compared with the previous crises occurring after China and the U.S. established the diplomatic relations, the sliding-down Sino-U.S. relations at this stage feature duration, extensive fields, strong feelings and profound foundation of public opinion. This round of crisis of Sino-U.S. relations is not sudden but an acceleration of long-term sliding

down. The struggle covers almost all fields including military, trade, human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang and COVID-19. The public opinion of both sides has begun to develop in the negative direction.

In the future, there will be more contradictions and growing tension as well as decreasing room for compromise and maneuver in Sino-U.S. relations. From full competition to full confrontation, the possibility of China and the U.S. being stuck in the “Thucydides Trap” cannot be ruled out.

If this trend continues, the priority strategic considerations are not to avoid “new Cold War”. Compared with U.S.- Soviet relations, the full confrontation between China and the U.S. will cost more than that between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. At that time, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were isolated from each other. There were no economic contacts, no cultural exchanges, or even no technological cooperation between them. They just conducted isolated competition, ignoring each other and their competition was limited to arms race and fighting for spheres of influence. Once China and the U.S. currently move toward full confrontation, the deeply integrated economic, cultural and social exchanges between them will have to be forcibly split, that is, the so-called “decoupling” or “divorce”, generating more complex relations and more profound influence. They look more like falling out and becoming enemies.

Originally, the U.S. had expected much of China. It expected more and more opening-up and liberalization in China and China also believed that Sino-U.S. relations could not get worse any further, because a large number of Chinese students and visiting scholars are in the U.S. There is a great deal of technological exchanges and economic and trade cooperation between both sides. China politically proposed to build new major-country relations in accordance with the principle of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation. This, in fact,

implies that China expected much of Sino-U.S. relations. But nowadays such an expectation has basically disappeared. Oscillation effect and the psychological “internal injury” began to appear.

By contrast, the U.S. and the Soviet Union had no expectations of each other and they did not want to develop good relations from the start. However, China and the U.S. had demands on and expected much of each other. Now they are disappointed. Such a pain is more serious, lasting and hurting than that of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

In the U.S. today, racism and populism have begun to be explicit, for example, the discrimination and panic towards Asian Americans. Due to political factors, the estrangement and discrimination towards Chinese Americans, overseas Chinese and Chinese students studying in the U.S. have turned into reality. The growing cultural superiority and national pride in Chinese people have offended the American people.

In the face of COVID-19, Chinese people wear masks while Westerners do not. This is just a difference in culture and life habits rather than a political issue, but it is mixed with ethnic factors.

In the near future, there will be little possibility of sudden failure in Sino-U.S. relations. First, the phase-one economic and trade agreement has temporarily eased up the economic and trade conflicts. Second, the respective domestic atmosphere makes both countries strive to avoid sudden serious changes in bilateral relations. China is going all out to strive for the victory against COVID-19 and achieve the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. Now resumption of work, production and schooling has been put on the agenda. In addition to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. is busy with the presidential election and mutual attacks between the two parties. Third, COVID-19 is spreading globally including the U.S. Its development is hard to predict and the forces that stir up confrontation between China

and the U.S. are hard to succeed. Therefore, though Sino-U.S. relations are getting difficult, they are unlikely to break off or suffer an all-round deterioration. Of course, the possibility of such a sudden change cannot be ruled out in the future.

#### **IV. International Situation and the Attitudes of Other Countries towards Sino-U.S. Relations**

Sino-U.S. relations are an important part of the world major-country relations and the whole international relations. In terms of the political and economic dynamics of other countries in the world, new changes have taken place in Russia and Putin is likely to be in office until 2036. Nationalist rightists and populism rise in European countries. The Middle East is stuck in turmoil. South Korea and Japan are busy with their own internal affairs. The ASEAN countries are concentrated on their internal affairs, for example, in Malaysia, the prime minister is to change hands. Turbulence appears in succession in Latin American countries including Chile.

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is included in the already fragmented and diversified world pattern, resulting in problems in many places. Global economy is generally declining and even seeing risks of depression.

In the face of Sino-U.S. relations, the majority of other countries are unwilling to join one side in confronting the other. Therefore, I do not think the world is in a bipolar pattern. The U.S. polar has been weakened, and the cohesion between the U.S. and Europe during the Trump administration has shrunk significantly. China has made great contribution to the world through GDP growth and export-oriented economy, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative. It is rather difficult for China to get another country to stand firmly together to confront the U.S. It is reality that China's status in the world continues to rise, but we do not expect to form an international front to confront

the U.S.

## V. Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a considerable impact on Sino-U.S. relations. The bilateral relations are declining faster. Official relations are almost frozen. There is an increasingly serious lack of strategic mutual trust. There are unprecedented feelings of mutual disgust among people of both countries. In the future, it will be more difficult to implement the phase-one economic and trade agreement between China and the U.S., it is already an irreversible trend for economic and technological decoupling, and the exchanges in various respects will be further cut down. This is the toughest period since the 1970s when China and the U.S. improved their relations. It is hard to predict the duration of this stage and the bottom line of the decline.

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