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The U.S. “Whole-of-Government Strategy on China” and Its Assessment

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Since Trump took office, he has gradually determined the keynote of strategic competition between China and the United States. Over the last year or so, a trade conflict has become the biggest hotspot in Sino-U.S. relations, and there is a huge historical undercurrent below the surface of this trade conflict, that is, the United States is forming a “whole-of-government strategy on China”. In the current context, the “whole-of-government strategy on China” means that the U.S. government is trying to unify its pace and mobilize all resources to compete with China strategically. This strategy is very different from the previous U.S. strategies on China. Firstly, the U.S. strategy on China has undergone a shift in its paradigm, i.e., from the engagement policy to strategic competition. Secondly, the Trump administration emphasizes the use of all tools within national power, including diplomatic, economic, intelligence, legal, and military factors, to compete with

China comprehensively. Historically, the current adjustment of the U.S. strategy on China has a huge influence, so it is necessary to pay attention to and evaluate it.

I. The “Whole-of-Government Strategy on China” is Being Formed in the United States

During the formation of the “whole-of-government strategy” on China, the Congress, Administration and think tanks of the United States each played their respective roles to co-shape the “whole-of-government strategy on China”.

Recently, the Congress of the United States has been paying attention to issues on China through various legislations, resolutions and hearings, which have profoundly affected the formation of the “whole-of-government strategy on China”. For the Congress, China is a competitor, which promotes industrial upgrading through the whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategies to erode the technological superiority of the United States, and competes with the United States in the military field and affects its leading position in the world. Last year, the Congress of the United States passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 to require the Trump Administration to develop a “whole-of-government strategy on China”. In addition, the Congress passed Taiwan Travel Act, which tried to ensure the exchanges of the U.S. and Taiwan officials through legislation, and Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which required to ensure that Americans should have the reciprocal access to Tibet. The Congress also expressed concerns about certain specific China-related issues through various forms of resolutions and hearings.

The Trump Administration also adjusted its strategy in a timely manner to promote the formation of the “whole-of-government strategy on China”. Officials at all levels of the Administration attacked China on different occasions and exerted pressure on the Chinese government

through various means and measures. In the past year, the Trump Administration's policy toward China mainly focused on three areas. Firstly, it increased the pressure on China in the Western Pacific Region and normalized its free navigation in South China Sea and cruises at Taiwan Strait. Chinese and U.S. armed forces increased their intensity in confronting each other with respect to the issues related to South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Secondly, in the trade conflict, the United States continued to exert pressure on China on several important structural issues. Thirdly, the United States used its long arm jurisdiction to hit Chinese high-tech enterprises. U.S. officials headed by Pompeo took the opportunity of visiting and persuading their allies and other countries to suppress Huawei, which clearly showed their intents.

Finally, as a result of the mobilization of government departments, the think tanks of the United States also joined the discussion on policy toward China. Since Trump took office, the right-wing think tanks have been very active. Hudson Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, Project 2049 Institute and other think tanks actively stated their new strategies on China through various means, which objectively promoted the accelerated introduction of the "whole-of-government strategy on China". At present, except a few observers, few think tanks in the United States speak out from a sense of justice for China. The political ecology of Washington is quite evident.

II. The Intent of the U.S. "Whole-of-Government Strategy on China"

The "whole-of-government strategy on China" is a choice made by the U.S. strategic elites after re-evaluating Sino-U.S. relations. It aims to answer the question of how to compete strategically with China and ultimately win this competition. In general, this strategy can be characterized by the following three intents.

Firstly, it intends to integrate strategic resources. In the opinion of the Trump Administration, the United States needs to integrate the whole government and social resources to compete strategically with China in various fields and at all levels. In particular, some U.S. strategic elites believe that China's strategy on the United States is based on the whole government and has integrated all strategic resources, so the United States must fight back equally. As Mike Pence, vice president of the United States, said in his speech at Hudson Institute on October 4, 2018, "China is adopting a whole-government approach and using political, economic, military, and propaganda tools to enhance its influence and acquire its interests in the United States."

Secondly, it intends to build a consensus between the government and its opposition. By publicizing and even exaggerating China's political, economic, and military threats to the public, the United States conducts strategic mobilization to build strong consensus in the society. The reason for it is that the growth of China's strength and changes in China's behavior have caused concern in the United States. Since the financial crisis in 2008, China's economic, technological, and military forces have been rapidly developing, causing the vigilance of American strategists. In addition, the growth of strength has made China firmer in defending its national interests and increasingly more confident in its behavior, which also fuels the discomfort of the United States.

Thirdly, it intends to coordinate policy actions. In terms of foreign policy, the Congress of the United States has long been holding the President back, and it is difficult for the two sides to reach a consensus on issues such as national defense budget and ratification of treaties. Therefore, for the current United States, the "whole-of-government strategy on China" can bridge the differences between the departments with regard to many major issues, and enable the Congress and Administration to coordinate their positions and unite against foreign countries. Within the Administration, departmental differences and strategic costs can also be reduced.

III. Specific Manifestations of the U.S. “Whole-of-Government Strategy on China”

In terms of foreign policy, the U.S. “whole-of-government strategy on China” is directly manifested in its formation of new policy discourse and political ecology. By gradually making China stereotyped and stigmatized, the United States’ abnormal political correctness increasingly reduces the influence and policy discourse space of moderate and cautious parties in the strategic circle. Specifically, the “whole-of-government strategy on China” is mainly manifested in four aspects.

First of all, the United States has adjusted its existing bottom line of its policy toward China. Traditionally, the leaders of China and the United States have broad consensus on certain sensitive issues, and they also know the seriousness of consequence of challenging these consensuses. However, the United States has currently changed this tacit understanding, causing the issues related to Taiwan and South China Sea to be less sensitive in the U.S. relations with China. The traditional policy red line has been affected and gradually transformed into a vague policy area, leading to the consequence that behavior becomes unpredictable and policy uncertainty gradually rises.

Secondly, the United States makes comprehensive use of political, economic and military means to compete with China in all directions. Since Trump announced the imposition of tariffs on China’s commodities with the value of USD 200 billion on September 17, 2018, the United States has used a variety of policy tools to exert pressure on China, including sanctioning Equipment Development Department of People’s Republic of China, approving arms sales to Taiwan, Mike Pence publicly giving speeches on policy toward China, normalizing cruises in South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, extraditing Chinese intelligence personnel, requesting Canadian government to detain Meng Wanzhou who is CFO of Huawei, releasing policy reports, etc.

These measures do not seem to be connected, but they have basically consistent strategic logic, that is, to use all means rather than a single means to compete with China.

Thirdly, it adjusts Sino-U.S. economic relations and reshapes the international economic order. In the economic field, the relations between China and the United States are full of fierce conflicts in three areas. Firstly, a large-scale trade conflict has broken out between the two countries, which has virtually shaped the global industrial division of labor and to a certain extent may exert an impact on the existing global industrial structure. Secondly, Sino-U.S. competition in the high-tech field has become increasingly prominent. The United States has repeatedly used long arm jurisdiction to try to curb the development and progress of China's high technology to maintain the technological superiority of the United States. Third, the game between China and the United States within the WTO is becoming increasingly fierce. No matter how reforms will be carried out in future, the international trade rules will surely be reshaped.

Fourthly, the United States attaches importance to the role of its allies in competing with China and strengthens information sharing and strategic coordination of "Five Eyes Alliance" in dealing with China. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom share the same ancestry with the United States, and they highly agree with it in terms of values and strategic interests, so they naturally become the core countries in the American alliance system.

IV. Assessment of the Current U.S. "Whole-of-Government Strategy on China"

At present, the U.S. "whole-of-government strategy on China" is still in the process of being formed. Therefore, it is necessary to accurately grasp its future direction and take precautions in a proactive manner. In general, there are the following assessments.

First of all, the “whole-of-government strategy on China” is being formed faster than expected. Over the past year or so, the U.S. strategic elites have completed public opinion mobilization in a short period of time. A new consensus on the strategy on China has been reached among the Congress, Administration, think tanks and press circles. Once the cognition changes, the institutional factors of the two countries will play a key role in the strategic competition. The development of Sino-U.S. relations will be more in the direction of confrontation than cooperation.

Secondly, in view of China’s industrial structure and market size, the Sino-U.S. economy cannot be decoupled in the next three to five years. If American strategists insist on pursuing the economic decoupling between the two countries, it will intensify the political confrontation between the two countries. In the coming year, there may be new economic disputes between China and the United States, and the United States may make a big fuss about China’s “market economy status” and will continue to hurt China in the high-tech field. The two countries will launch fiercer gaming in terms of trade rules within the WTO. The United States does not intend to terminate Sino-U.S. trade conflicts through a negotiation. Multiple games and continuous pressure are choices in line with the logic of the United States. At present, the United States has not yet decided to conduct a full-scale confrontation with China, so it will continue to sound out China’s intents in the security and political fields in the short term.

Thirdly, the “whole-of-government strategy on China” is a major adjustment of the U.S. strategy on China. In addition to trade conflicts, other issues will also need to be brought to the forefront seriously in the coming year. (1) Issues related to Taiwan. The U.S. arms sale to Taiwan is being gradually normalized and the sale amount will be larger in the future; the U.S. military will continue normal cruises at the Taiwan Strait; and high-level exchanges between the US and Taiwan will become a political factor affecting Sino-.US. relations. (2) Issues related to South China Sea. The U.S. military will strengthen its free

navigation in South China Sea, and its coordination with its allies will become more prominent; the Trump Administration will continue to make a fuss about “China’s militarization of the South China Sea” and strengthen its military investment and deployment; if the situation worsens, the United States may choose to conduct military exercises in South China Sea. (3) Issues related to human rights. In terms of issues related to Tibet and Xinjiang, the Trump Administration may encourage the international community to exert pressure on China, and may also unilaterally sanction leaders of China and relevant authorities. It may also link this issue to the Sino-U.S. economic and trade conflict. (4) Cultural and educational exchanges. The United States will continue to tighten regulations on visas issued to Chinese and strengthen its control of certain sensitive professions in education.

Fourthly, in the strategic interaction, China and the United States have their own advantages and disadvantages in terms of their bargaining chips. Although the Trump Administration exerted tremendous strategic pressure on China in the past year, as the trade negotiations gradually deepen, China and the United States will have a deeper understanding of each other’s policy bottom line and behavioral patterns. The overall situation of the trade disputes between the two countries will be more controllable. If changes take place in domestic situations of the two countries and in international affairs, there will still be certain strategic space to improve Sino-U.S. relations.

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