GLOBAL VIEWS

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Countering tech fragmenting

China should address the demands of countries within the 'de-risking' circle, seek targeted cooperation and expand its circle of friends in a positive way

In recent years, the phenomenon of technological innovation being influenced by geopolitical factors has become more common, and technological development has shown a trend toward de-globalization and fragmentation. On the one hand, some countries place greater emphasis on localization and autonomy in innovation and application, viewing technology as a fundamental core capability for maintaining national security, with a focus on reconstructing national security strategies. On the other hand, some countries continue technological blockades, isolation, and decoupling, creating technological barriers and forming economic blocs while excluding global cooperation, attempting to gain monopolistic advantages in some emerging technological fields.

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This has led to systemic differentiation and fragmentation in some fields, and the competition for governance standards and rules has further fragmented the global technology governance system.

The trend of geopolitical development goes against the natural laws of sci-tech progress, thus artificially raising barriers and thresholds for technological progress, casting a huge shadow of uncertainty on the prospects of global technological development and governance. Maximizing cooperation and sharing globally, optimizing the allocation of research and development resources worldwide, and deepening cooperation in science and technology are essential requirements for global technological advancement.

At the same time, the explosive development in technology and the rapid flow of talent and resources on a global scale make it difficult for a single country or region to maintain an absolute leading advantage in all high-tech fields. Global technological progress demands communication, exchanges, and complementary strengths on a global basis.

However, with intensifying tensions in the field of technology among countries, especially among major technological powers, the "de-risking" policy guided by geopolitical thinking will also lead to the division and isolation of the global sci-tech system and the increase of the cost of sci-tech innovation. Meanwhile, the development of different technological systems in major countries will inevitably have a long-term impact on future technology research and development, production, application, and standard setting. Against the backdrop of a profound "digital divide" that still exists globally, the artificially created inconsistent standards and compatibility will inevitably affect the collaborative supervision and governance of global technological development, increase the difficulty of international cooperation in addressing high cost global issues such as climate change and cybersecurity, hinder the collaborative resolution of global crises, and also have an adverse effect on sustainable growth worldwide.

First, in response to the trend of geopolitical development in global sci-tech advancement, countries should abandon the confrontational thinking toward the global technology system, highlight the common risks faced by all humanity, actively participate in and promote technological globalization and expand their opening-up.

As human society is grappling with common challenges such as climate change, the digital divide and poverty, it is essential for all countries to cooperate and solve these global problems through technological means. As a beneficiary and contributor to technological globalization, China is making efforts to realize the sharing of tech innovation achievements and knowledge experience worldwide. China firmly adheres to its opening-up strategy that features mutually beneficial and win-win outcomes. It continues to intensify its high-level opening-up efforts, expand institutional opening-up, enhance the inclusiveness of China's economic growth and technological progress by promoting international sci-tech exchanges and cooperation with more open thinking and measures and creating an innovation climate with global competitiveness, and working together with other countries to build an open, fair, just, and non-discriminatory environment for the development of science and technology.

Second, in the face of geopolitical development in technology, it is necessary to reform and innovate the content, means, and theories of national security. Seeking supply chain security does not mean pursuing complete self-sufficiency. The focus of seeking sci-tech independence and safeguarding national security should be on improving the domestic innovation ecosystem, optimizing the structure and transforming the management model of technological innovation, encouraging scientific research organizations to reform models, so as to obtain original and leading achievements in the next generation of sci-tech innovation, and form unique advantages in key links of the global value chain.

Last, it is imperative to accurately analyze the "de-risking" or "autonomy" policies of different countries, and strive to seek consensus with more countries on respecting market laws, maintaining fair competition and promoting sci-tech cooperation. Under the influence of uncertain and unstable factors such as the turbulent international political situation, frequent regional conflicts, unstable world energy supply, and the economic slowdown, the international community generally desires to avoid risks. It is normal to reduce the risk of economic dependence by diversifying supply chains. However, the essence of the United States' de-risking policy is far beyond the scope of normal competition among nations; it is about maintaining its own monopoly position in technology, dividing the global technological system, and advocating protectionism, which is not consistent with the interests of other countries, especially those countries from the Global South.

Therefore, China needs to deeply identify the different risk perceptions and demands of various countries, especially those within the "de-risking" circle, adopt targeted response strategies, actively seek targeted cooperation, consolidate the existing cooperation foundation in trade, investment, talent exchange, and infrastructure construction, and expand its circle of friends in a positive way.

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Perception dilemma

In the closed-loop interaction among the US and its allies, negative perceptions of China are continuously strengthened and escalated

The summit between the heads of state of China and the United States in November sent positive signals for the stabilizing of relations between Beijing and Washington. However, the relationship is still confronted with various structural issues, and the deterioration in their perceptions of each other continues.

At the beginning of this year, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan delivered a speech with a stark negative tone toward China at the Council on Foreign Relations, despite having long talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, on multiple occasions, including in Vienna and Bangkok.

The key is to improve relations and enhance the quality of communications to reduce negative perceptions. For China-US relations to stabilize and take a turn for the better, emphasis should be given to avoid the two sides' perceptions of each other, especially the US' perception of China, sliding into a dilemma of "internal circulation", mainly manifested in the following three aspects.

First, the dilemma in US' perception of China being reflected in the increasingly domestic nature of its construction of perceptions about China, which has become more of a domestic conversation. In recent years, due to the continuous deterioration of China-US relations, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, direct communication channels between China and the US have been significantly impacted. The China-US relationship used to rely on a rich network of dialogue mechanisms across various levels and fields. These channels not only implied and fostered interdependent interests and friendly exchanges but more importantly constituted an important platform for constructing accurate perceptions of each other.

A dense and direct communication dialogue network offered the possibility for the both sides to construct accurate, rational and pragmatic perceptions of the other, as well as opportunities for correcting negative perceptions. In international relations, the perception of other countries should be a dynamic process constructed through a myriad of interactions. Unfortunately, due to a severe lack of direct, high-quality communication dialogues and the internal pressure formed by the mainstream negative perception of China, the US' perception of China has increasingly evolved into a "domestically circular" mode of self-affirmation of its negative perception of China. In this mode of perception construction, correcting negative perceptions becomes increasingly difficult, and the drawbacks of perception solidification not only make it difficult for the innovation of internal dialogues but also stimulate the escalation of China's negative perception of the US.

Second, the dilemma of the US' perception of China is manifested in the emphasis on synchronized perceptions of China among "like-minded countries". In recent years, "like-minded countries" has become an increasingly frequently used phrase in US and Western diplomacy. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the theory of expanding and deepening cooperation among "like-minded countries", as a lesson from the Ukrainian crisis, has become increasingly popular in the West. This logic has also extended to perceptions of China.

Following this logic, the military deterrence corresponding to China's "aggressiveness" and the "partial decoupling" in economic security have emerged. Once such narratives become mainstream among "like-minded countries", they are continuously repeated and reinforced through summits, joint statements and news conferences. With the negative tone already set, these meetings easily become platforms for competing to identify problems with China, and negative perceptions of China are continuously strengthened and escalated in this closed-loop interaction among allies. This is observable in the interactions within the US' bilateral alliances, the G7, or the AUKUS framework, which, in turn, stimulates the escalation of China's negative perception of the US. However, the international community is a large family composed of nearly 200 countries, and international relations are in a historic period of major changes. It is normal for countries to have diverse and fluid perceptions of international relations. This means that the stability of international relations requires communication and dialogue among countries with different views, seeking common ground while reserving differences, and achieving consensus for cooperation.

Third, the dilemma of the US' perception of China is also reflected in the discourse system built on a basis of unilateral superiority, which is conveyed through the media to society, leading to a negative perception of China in US society. In recent years, the discourse systems of the US and the West have frequently stressed that the liberal international order is facing unprecedented shocks. Whether it's the National Security Strategy published by Washington, the G7 declarations, or the "Indo-Pacific" strategy, "the liberal international order" is a key term. Within this discourse system, China is directly or indirectly identified as a major challenger to the so-called liberal order, and this perception is continuously replicated through the Western media network, deepening the stereotyped view of the US and Western public.

For China-US relations to achieve sustainable improvement, it is necessary to promptly restore various channels of communication to avoid falling into the dilemma of "domestic circulation" in perception, where negative perceptions of each other are continuously escalated in a closed environment, creating an "echo chamber effect". Otherwise, dialogues will become an endless "spinning of wheels", consuming patience between each other and exacerbating mutual accusations, which in turn causes a negative escalation of perceptions. Pragmatic, rational, friendly, and peaceful mutual perceptions require genuine dialogue, with mutual respect the essential foundation.

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