Free, Open, and Sharper-Edged: America's Embrace of Strategic Competition

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G7 Quebec, June 2018. Angela Merkel and Donald Trump with other leaders. Source: AFP.

One year after publishing its first National Security Strategy, the Trump administration has put to bed any questions about whether or not it was serious about "great power competition". Long gone are the days of chocolate cake-fuelled camaraderie between President Trump and President Xi at Mar-a-Lago. The administration's national security wing and economic nationalists seem to have found common cause in a vision of strategic competition with Beijing that has emerged as the animating force of U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Although President Trump continues to speak warmly of his personal relationship with Xi, the administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy both make clear that the administration sees deeper and profound structural problems in the U.S.-China relationship.

Vice President Pence outlined the administration's position in stark terms in a recent speech, critiquing what he called "a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda" to erode U.S. geopolitical advantages. In his speech, he outlined a litany of grievances with Beijing—ranging from intellectual property theft to coercion of U.S. media and educational institutions and even attempts to influence U.S. domestic politics. The administration is not just paying lip service to these concerns. It has moved aggressively in recent months to put substance behind the rhetoric, beginning with $250 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods, support for new legislation to restrict Chinese access to sensitive U.S. technologies, and more aggressive efforts to prosecute Chinese intellectual property theft.

Although the objective of U.S. policy is now clear, what is less obvious is where the administration's new strategy is headed. Are we heading toward the free and open Indo-Pacific the Trump administration envisions,