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US Attempting to Prevent China's Technological Rise

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The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill banning scientists from receiving government funding if they are also involved in any Chinese-funded project. Washington's move is part of the U.S.' overall strategy of technological confrontation with China.

In the late 2000's, China adopted the 1000 Talents Program to actively recruit world-class scientists to work in the country. Under the program, such professionals are offered very attractive working conditions: wages equal or even higher than in developed Western countries, visa exemptions for family members, a high degree of scientific freedom, and reduced bureaucracy and reporting.

Initially, the program was mainly aimed at Chinese scientists who trained and worked abroad. According to the American consulting organization Marco Polo, for every 10 people of Chinese origin who attended university and received advanced degrees in the U.S., nine stayed there to work for more than five years. Thus, the 1000 Talents Program was originally intended to provide Chinese scientists with working conditions at least equal to those in the U.S. However, the program was later extended to top scientists of other nationalities.

But the program is facing pressure, with Harvard University Professor Charles Lieber awaiting trial in the U.S. as prosecutors claim that he hid from the government that he was working for China as part of the 1,000 Talents Program. The scientist denies his guilt.

According to Bloomberg, the bill that was introduced by Republican Randy Feenstra is aimed at combating some countries' supposedly unfair policies in attracting talented professionals. The bill also received support because the U.S. had previously passed the Innovation and Competition Act, which included a government investment of $250 billion into basic research and advanced technology.

The Act is designed to increase the competitiveness of the U.S. in science and technology, keeping the country in the lead. Therefore, Feenstra's bill proposes that in order to be in charge of distributing funding, the National Science Foundation must ban cooperation with

other countries. In addition to China, the document also mentions Russia, Iran and North Korea. However, the U.S.' main goal is to limit cooperation with China, the main economic and technological rival of the U.S.

On the one hand, it is true that limiting contact between scientists will hinder China's development in the short term. However, from a strategic point of view, this will not bring any benefit to the U.S. Major American companies, especially those in the Silicon Valley, were built with foreign talent. In fact, the U.S. has traditionally been a technological leader as it has been able to attract the best minds from around the world.

Marco Polo researchers analysed the most successful articles on artificial intelligence cited and presented in 2019 in scientific journals and at leading conferences. Among the papers presented at the industry's largest annual event – Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems, more than half of the papers are authored by scientists from U.S. research institutions and companies like Google, Microsoft Research, Stanford University, Carnegie Mellon University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Of these, 30% of the research was done by Chinese scientists.

Although China has a long way to go in becoming the world's technological leader, as former Google CEO Eric Schmidt (who now heads the U.S. Artificial Intelligence Commission) said, China is closing the gap with the U.S. much faster than expected. Schmidt believes that the U.S. can maintain its advantage over China only if it unites with Japan and South Korea.

It begs the question though whether the U.S. can make Japan and South Korea overcome their centuries-long animosity to focus on China. For now, this seems like an unlikely prospect, even amidst the "Olympic Spirit."

In fact, there is even the potentiality that China will seek to strengthen cooperation with South Korea and Japan in these fields. For Tokyo and Seoul, China is their most important trading partner despite geopolitical challenges. In 2019, a quarter of South Korea's total exports went to China. For Japan, China is the second largest export market – accounting for 20% of Japan's total exports.

Moody's predicts that under the five-year plan, China will increase research and development spending by 7% per year. Japanese and South Korean partners, according to Moody's projections, will hugely benefit from China's technology development strategy.

Although the U.S. is attempting to contain China's rapid technological advancements, decades of relying on foreign expertise has weakened the American talent pool, opening opportunities especially for Chinese and Indian researchers. With China able to offer equal conditions, or in many cases even superior to the West, the Asian country's rise to technological dominance continues unabated despite cynical actions by the U.S. like the Innovation and Competition Act.

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