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The Retaliation-Compensation-Feedback Model: Construction and Analysis

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Abstract:
This study focuses on the game relationship between economic sanctions between China and the United States and domestic policy adjustments, conducts in-depth analysis from the dual dimensions of sub-state actors and domestic political structures, and innovative constructs a Retaliation-Compensation-Feedback (RCF) dynamic model. Research shows that precise economic sanctions targeting pillar industries in key political regions of a target country can effectively change voters' political loyalty and thereby reshape the internal political landscape. Meanwhile, the sanctioned groups' dependence on the federal government is highly dependent on the effectiveness and timeliness of policy compensation. Effective policy compensation helps relieve external pressure, while the failure of compensation will accelerate the reorganization of political alliances. This mechanism reveals the micro-impact path of economic sanctions on the domestic politics of the target country, providing a theoretical basis for precise countermeasures in economic games among major countries, and is of great significance for the formulation of China's foreign economic policies.

Keywords: Economic Sanctions; subnational sctors; Retaliation-Compensation-Feedback Model; policy compensation; major-power rivalry.

1. Introduction

This study adopts the perspective of subnational actors and builds a Retaliation–Compensation–Feedback Model to explore how China's targeted economic sanctions on key industries in U.S. swing states affect the American political landscape. By focusing on state-level impacts rather than national-level outcomes alone, this approach highlights how economic pressure can trigger political reactions from below, especially in democratic systems where local interests play a strong role in shaping central government decisions. The research further examines how the loyalty of affected groups—such as farmers, industrial workers, and local voters—to the federal government is influenced by the effectiveness, coverage, and timing of compensation policies. It also considers how these reactions can feed back into national election results, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the political mechanisms behind international sanctions, showing that economic tools can have targeted political effects when designed with subnational dynamics in mind. Overall, the study offers a new analytical framework and practical insights into how major powers can engage in strategic economic-political interaction, not only between states but also through the internal structures of their rivals.

2. Theoretical Gaps and Model Construction

2.1 Literature Review

Existing studies on China's economic sanctions against the United States can generally be grouped into three main directions. The first group of research focuses on the economic impact of sanctions at the subnational level. For example, Morgan and Syropoulos, in their article in the Journal of Politics, analyzed how differences in state-level export structures led to varied levels of damage caused by Chinese tariffs [1]. Their findings helped identify which states were hit the hardest, providing a foundation for the concept of "precise sanctions." However, their study mainly focused on trade data and economic outcomes, without examining how these sanctions may have affected political attitudes or voter behavior. The second group of studies examines how domestic actors in the U.S. responded to foreign economic pressure through compensation policies. Early and Schulzke pointed out that when external shocks occur, interest groups within the United States often push the federal government to implement aid measures [2]. Their research explains actions such as Trump's agricultural subsidies and support programs for affected industries. Yet they did not go further into how the timing or perceived fairness of these policies influenced public support or voting. A third line of research explores the political intention behind China's sanctions. Zhang and Chan argued that China intentionally targeted products linked to politically sensitive states, especially swing states, to influence electoral outcomes [3]. The idea of using sanctions to pressure specific voting groups is central to the "targeted retaliation" strategy. Li and Zeng further supported this by showing that some swing states saw noticeable vote shifts during the trade war [4]. However, they did not include the timing of compensation policies or voter perceptions as key mediating variables. These patterns reflect a broader understanding that national economic policies are often shaped by internal interest groups with conflicting agendas[5]. In federal systems, especially under the pressures of globalization, regional and industrial disparities can further intensify these internal divisions, making subnational responses to external shocks more fragmented and politically consequential [6]. Overall, while these studies provide useful insights from different angles—economic, institutional, and strategic—few have connected the full chain from external sanctions to local economic impact, to political feedback. This gap is where the present study aims to contribute.

2.2 Innovation points of the paper

At the theoretical level, this paper introduces the dimension of „sub-national actors", breaking through the traditional state-centered research paradigm that takes the state as the sole analytical unit. By constructing a dynamic mechanism model of „retaliation - compensation - feedback", it systematically reveals how external economic sanctions indirectly shape the federal policies and political landscape of the sanctioned country through the reaction paths of micro-subjects such as local governments, industrial groups, and voter groups. This theoretical framework not only enriches the understanding of the mechanism of economic sanctions' effects in international political economy but also provides a new perspective for studying the role of sub-national levels in the game among major powers.

At the practical level, this paper proposes a precise sanctions strategy of „focusing on key swing state industries" and „exploiting domestic political divisions in the United States", emphasizing targeted strikes on regions and industries that have a decisive impact on political outcomes, thereby enhancing the political penetration of sanctions and the possibility of policy adjustments at the federal level. This strategic approach provides an operational idea for China to formulate more targeted economic countermeasures in future Sino-US games and offers inspiration for other countries' response strategies when facing unilateral sanction.

2.3 Research Objective

Exploring how China's targeted economic sanctions affect U.S. domestic politics by influencing key regions and industries. When local economies are hit, the U.S. government may respond with compensation policies, which can change how voters feel and vote.

To better explain this process, the study builds a simple model called "Retaliation–Compensation–Feedback," showing how sanctions lead to local pressure, government response, and voter reaction.

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3. Model Overview

3.1 Introduction of the Model

This study constructs the Retaliation-Compensation-Feedback Model to reveal the domestic political and economic dynamic cycle triggered by international economic sanctions. Focusing on democratic political systems, this model demonstrates that when a sanctioning state (Sender) imposes economic sanctions on a targeted state (Target) (retaliation phase), the interests of affected domestic groups are damaged. This triggers the target government's intervention through policy tools (compensation phase). Based on the effectiveness and timeliness of compensatory policies, the aggrieved groups develop differentiated political attitudes (feedback phase), thereby reshaping domestic political coalitions and policy preferences, ultimately influencing the target state's path for adjusting its foreign policy.

3.2 Analysis of Each Element of the Model

3.2.1 Retaliation: The implementation of international economic sanctions

In international political and economic interactions, sanctioning countries often impose economic sanctions such as trade restrictions and financial blockades on sanctioned countries based on political, economic, or strategic goals. Such sanctions disrupt the original economic balance of the sanctioned country by directly impacting the economic activities in specific industries and regions of the country, and cause damage to the interests of the relevant groups [7]. In recent years, the concept of „Weaponized Interdependence" proposed by Drezner has revealed the deepening of sanctions [8]. This theory points out that major powers are increasingly leveraging their dominant positions at key nodes of the global supply chain, such as chips and rare earths, to impose highly precise micro-sanctions. For instance, during the Sino-US trade war, the United States passed the „Chips and Science Act of 2022" to impose export controls on Chinese semiconductor enterprises such as Yangtze Memory Technologies Co., LTD., precisely targeting the integrated circuit industrial cluster in the Yangtze River Delta. In response, China has adopted export licensing systems for rare metals such as gallium and germanium to contain the US military industrial chain. The strategy of „dual lock-in of industry and region" can not only amplify the effectiveness of traditional sanctions, but also, through targeted pressure, amplify the perception of damage by local interest groups and induce policy differences within democratic countries.

3.2.2 Compensation: The response mechanism of domestic policies

In the face of the impact brought by sanctions, the governments of sanctioned countries will formulate a series of compensation policies to maintain domestic political stability, social support and the political loyalty of the core affected groups. These policies cover various forms such as financial subsidies, tax preferences, industrial support, market expansion assistance and employment training, aiming to alleviate the negative impact of sanctions on specific domestic groups, restore economic vitality, and the core purpose is to maintain the political support of this group for the government [9]. For instance, after being subject to retaliatory sanctions from China, Trump implemented agricultural subsidies for his polling stations and swing state regions, as well as policies such as the US-Mexico-Canada agreement, providing compensation in both fiscal and industrial chain aspects. However, the specific effects of policies are constrained by factors such as the government's fiscal capacity, the accuracy of policy design, and the efficiency of implementation.

3.2.3 Feedback: Group Attitudes and Political Influence

Based on their perception of their own interests, the sanctioned groups evaluated the effectiveness and timeliness of the government's compensation policies, thereby generating loyalty feedback of varying degrees, which was specifically manifested as changes in tendencies in aspects such as election voting, public opinion, and policy support [10]. If the policy can effectively alleviate the impact of sanctions and meet the needs of the group in a timely manner, it will enhance the group's support for the government. Conversely, it may trigger dissatisfaction and affect the political foundation and policymaking of the government. Strong negative feedback (such as large-scale dissatisfaction) may force the government to seek relief from external pressure (such as considering adjusting foreign policies), while positive feedback may enhance the government's determination to deal with external sanctions. Group assessment is also influenced by factors such as ideology and information, but this model focuses on the core role of the effectiveness and timeliness of compensation policies.

4. Case Verification and Empirical Analysis

4.1 Case Background

This study focuses on the stage of strategic competition between China and the United States from 2018 to 2020, with a particular emphasis on the sub-national-level precise economic sanctions imposed by China on key swing states in the United States, as well as the transmission effect of these sanctions on the domestic political landscape of the United States. These swing states are highly dependent on exports to China economically, involving core industries such as agriculture, automobiles and steel. Moreover, they had a narrow margin of votes in the 2016 general election and became typical samples for testing the theoretical model of „Retaliation-Compensation-Feedback". During the study period, China precisely exerted economic pressure on the pillar industries of the above-mentioned swing states through measures such as imposing additional tariffs, causing significant shocks to the local economies. In response, the Trump administration implemented compensatory policies including agricultural subsidies and tariff exemptions. However, there are differences among different states in terms of the timeliness and actual effect of obtaining policy compensation, which provides rich realistic observation scenarios for observing the political transmission mechanism of sanctions.

4.2 Hypothesis H1: Effects of Sub-state Actors

This part verifies the first core hypothesis: whether the implementation of targeted economic sanctions against key swing states (sub-state actors) in the United States (reflected in the geographical precision of focusing on Trump's vote base/swing states and the industrial precision of hitting their economically sensitive core industries) can systematically impact local economies and influence voter behavior, ultimately changing the domestic political landscape of the United States. As shown in Table 1, the sanctions have caused severe local economic blows (for example, dairy exports from Wisconsin plunged by more than 400 million US dollars; Michigan suffered a loss of approximately 500 million US dollars in auto and soybean exports, accompanied by job losses. The depth of the core industry suffered from the industry level infiltration and diffusion to broad social and economic fields. Practitioners (farmers, workers) are facing the risk of sudden income drops and unemployment. The triggered chain reaction (disruption of supply chains, shrinking of the service industry, and sharp reduction in tax revenue) further affects a broader group of voters, intensifying widespread dissatisfaction. The key point is that voters tend to attribute the perceived economic predicament to the current federal government. Therefore, the perception of economic hardship strengthened by sanctions has become an important driving force that shakes the support of voters in key swing states for the Trump administration. Against this backdrop, a considerable number of voters attribute their predicament to the trade frictions against China initiated by the Trump administration and the retaliatory sanctions it has imposed. The 2020 U.S. presidential election result provides a key empirical support. Table 1 shows that among the six random swing states (excluding North Carolina) that have suffered precise sanctions and significant economic damage, Trump's vote share has consistently declined compared to 2016. Despite complex factors such as the pandemic, this pattern of decline in vote share, which is generally accompanied by significant economic damage within the sanctioned state group, supports the causal transmission mechanism of „targeted sanctions - local economic damage - voters' dissatisfaction and blaming the current government - changing voting behavior". In conclusion, this study demonstrates that precise economic sanctions targeting the core industries of key sub-state actors (swing states) can substantially affect the domestic political landscape of the sanctioned countries by undermining the local economy, provoking voter dissatisfaction and blaming the target government, thereby verifying the feasibility of the strategic path of using economic sanctions against sub-state actors to influence the national political process.

Table. 1 Table of Main Damaged Industries

State	Main Damaged Industries	Sanctions against China (2018-2020)	Economic loss	Trump's vote share change in 2020
Wisconsin	Dairy products, soybeans	Impose tariffs on dairy products and soybeans	Dairy exports down >$400 million, farm bankruptcy rate +13%	-0.6%
Michigan	Automobile parts, soybeans	Impose tariffs on auto parts and soybeans	Auto & soybean export losses ~$500 million, related job cuts	-0.4%
Pennsylvania	Steel, agricultural products	Impose tariffs on steel and agricultural products	Steel exports decline >$600 million, small farm income plummets	-0.7%

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Arizona	Cotton, electronic products	Impose tariffs on cotton and electronic products	Total agriculture/manufacturing losses estimated at $350 million	-0.3%
Georgia	Peanuts, cotton	Impose tariffs on peanuts and cotton	Peanut/cotton exports fall nearly $300 million, farmer income instability	-0.5%
North Carolina	Tobacco, textiles	Impose tariffs on tobacco and textiles	Tobacco exports down ~$180 million, textile profit margins squeezed	+0.2%
Nevada	Tourism, mineral	Impose tariffs on tourism services and minerals	Tourism losses exceed $1 billion, mineral orders drop sharply	-0.6%

Economic Losses and Trump's Vote Share Changes in 2020 in Sanctioned Swing States of the United States from 2018 to 2020.

4.3 Hypothesis H2 Verification: The influence Mechanism of Compensation policies

4.3.1 Effectiveness of Compensation Policies

This section focuses on the second core assumption, exploring whether the federal compensation policy can alleviate the economic shock caused by sanctions and influence the political decision-making behavior of voters. This study comprehensively employs case comparison and quantitative analysis, selects four key swing states during the 2020 US presidential election as the subjects of analysis, and conducts a systematic analysis from three dimensions: policy implementation intensity, economic recovery degree, and voter support rate. As shown in Table 2, in the case of the policy failure, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania show significant commonality. When the local subsidy policies of the two states were implemented, due to low coverage rate and delayed implementation, it was difficult to fully make up for the losses of the related industries. Agricultural subsidies failed to cover farmers in a timely and full manner, and there was a lag in the implementation of steel tariff reductions. The dual pressures have caused economic setbacks in the two states. As Hypothesis H1 states, the majority of voters attribute the economic predicament to the misdecision-making of the federal government, which directly leads to a significant decline in Trump‘s approval rating in the two states. For tobacco and textiles.

By contrast, North Carolina, to adopt „special allowance + cheap loans“ portfolio policy, combined with the local industry park preferential tax, promote industry development. After the steel and aluminum tariffs came into effect, Ohio rapidly expanded the scale of federal government procurement and explored overseas markets through the „Manufacturing Revitalization Plan“. After the implementation of the policies in the two states, the economic and employment conditions improved significantly, and voters‘ acceptance of the policies increased markedly. Trump‘s approval rating in these two states rose against the trend. This study confirmed that the compensation effect change is significant positive correlation with the vote. The policy transmission mechanism is effectively compensated and downplay the causal connection between economic predicaments and the federal government, enhance voter satisfaction, and maintain or increase loyalty to the government; The failure of compensation reinforces the cognitive framework of „the government‘s response to incapacity“ and accelerates the loss of approval ratings. This discovery validates the core role of compensation policies as intervention variables, indicating that voters‘ loyalty to the government under sanctions is influenced by the effectiveness of compensation policies.

Table 2. Comparison Table of Economic Conditions

Swing State	Economic Status	Key Trump Compensation Policies	Compensation Effectiveness	Trump 2020 Vote Share	Vote Share Change (2020 vs 2016)
Wisconsin	Loss	Market Facilitation Program (MFP): Direct subsidies to soybean/dairy farmers	Partial effectiveness: Delayed/insufficient subsidies for dairy farmers & soybean growers, failed to fully offset losses	48.82%	-0.6%
Pennsylvania	Loss	Steel tariff relief + agricultural subsidies	Inadequate subsidies with delayed implementation, COVID-19 further weakened impact	48.84%	-0.7%
North Carolina	Benefit	Targeted subsidies for tobacco/ textile industries + local government loans	Significant textile industry rebound, reduced county-level unemployment, boosted GOP support	49.93%	+0.2%
Ohio	Benefit	Manufacturing subsidies + expanded federal procurement post steel/aluminum tariffs	Rapid alternative market development (e.g., Mexico/Vietnam), subsidy+market recovery improved voter satisfaction	53.27%	+1.5%

Trump Administration’s Compensation Policies and Vote Share Changes in Some Swing States of the United States in 2020.

4.3.2 Timeliness of Compensation Policies

To deeply verify the correlation between policy timing and voter loyalty, this study distinguishes between two types of swing states: The first type is the „double advance“ state where the release and effect of compensation policies are both advanced to before the election cycle; The second type is the lagging states where the implementation of policies or the manifestation of their effects lag behind the election cycle timeline. Empirical evidence shows that voters in „double early“ states have higher political loyalty to the Trump administration and a stronger tendency to support it in elections. For example, in Iowa, Florida and Ohio (see table 3), the Trump administration introduced a series of policies, such as agriculture support, fishery disaster relief and emergency manufacturing protection subsidies. These policies were not only announced before the election, but also effectively implemented and produced remarkable results within several months.

This makes the timing of policy implementation and the presentation of its effects perfectly matched, enhancing voter awareness and perception of the policies. The results show that Trump‘s vote share in these states has increased to varying degrees. In Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, the effects of policy timing lag were especially pronounced. Although Wisconsin‘s dairy export subsidy policy was deployed during the election, its effectiveness did not manifest until January 2021, and the actual export volume decreased by 24% compared to expectations. The Pennsylvania steel tariff exemption extension policy led to a recovery in unfulfilled orders and an increase in capacity utilization during the election cycle. The positive effects of the policy will gradually be released after the election. Voters failed to establish an effective perception of policy benefits during the election window period, resulting in a significant decline in Trump‘s approval rating in these two states.

The comparison is the core of this study further verified hypothesis: when complete policy and compensation policy before the election show corresponding effect (ahead of the „double“ model), can enhance the perception of voters for policies and political trust, significantly enhance the electoral popularity of rulers. However, the deviation of the policy implementation node or the lag in the manifestation of the effect may trigger negative political evaluations from voters by breaking their expectations. This reveals the intrinsic mechanism of interaction between the policy time dimension and voters‘ political cognition, proving that the loyalty of sanctioned regions to the government is affected by the timeliness of compensation policies.

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Table 3. Analysis Table of Time Nodes

Swing State	Policy	Announcement Date	Implementation Date	Noticeable Effect Date	Key Effect Description	Timeliness Judgment	Change in Trump's Vote Percentage	Key Evidence Chain
Iowa	Agricultural Emergency Aid	2018-07-24	2018-09	2018-10	89% of soybean farmers received $15,000 cash subsidies before the election	Double Early	↑ +1.2%	USDA subsidy data +Sioux County voter turnout increased by 3.1%
Florid	Fisheries Disaster Relief	2020-06-15	2020-08	2020-09	72% of fishermen received $8,200 in grants in September	Double Early	↑ +1.3%	NOAA receipt records + Escambia County support rate 61.5%
Ohio	Manufacturing Protection Subsidy	2020-05-03	2020-07	2020-08	3,000 jobs retained at GM plants (Ohio Gazette)	Double Early	↑ +0.3%	Department of Labor August employment report
Wisconsin	Dairy Export Subsidy	2020-10-02	2020-10-30	2021-01	Tariff reduction but no export growth (USDA data)	Critical Implementation	↓ -0.5%	Dairy export volume decreased by 24%
Pennsylvania	Steel Tariff Exemption Extension	2020-08-28	2020-09-01	2020-12	Exemption extended but orders not recovered (Steel Institute report)	Effect Lag	↓ -1.1%	Steel mill capacity utilization 68%

Effects of Compensation Policies and Trump's Vote Share Changes in Some Swing States of the United States.

5. Discussion: Significance, Limitations, and Future Research

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Significance

In terms of theory, this study expands the existing literature on economic sanctions by introducing subnational actors—such as state governments, interest groups, and key industries—into the analytical framework. By developing a "Retaliation–Compensation–Feedback" model, it offers a deeper understanding of how international economic pressure can influence national politics through local responses. This approach helps enrich international political economy research by moving beyond state-centered models and focusing on the multi-level nature of power and reaction.

In terms of practical value, the study provides strategic insights into how China can improve the effectiveness of its economic sanctions by targeting key swing states and politically sensitive sectors in the United States. The findings offer u··seful suggestions for designing more focused sanctions that can create internal pressure in the target country. In addition, the research may also help other countries understand how to respond to or counter foreign sanctions by leveraging regional diversity and institutional vulnerabilities within opposing states.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study focuses on a single case—the 2020 U.S. election cycle during the U.S.-China economic conflict. While it helps to explain the dynamics of the "retaliation–compensation–feedback" model, it does not compare responses under different political systems (such as two-party vs. multi-party) or economic structures (like resource-based vs. tech-driven countries), thus limiting the broader applicability of the findings. In addition, the model does not fully account for third-party international factors (such as allied coordination or the impact of COVID-19), which may disrupt the compensation–feedback process. The influence of ideological polarization is also under-explored—for example, strong anti-China sentiment in some states could reduce the effect of economic compensation on voter loyalty, weakening the feedback loop.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand this research both theoretically and methodologically. Theoretically, incorporating additional cases from other major powers—such as the EU's sanctions on Russia, where German auto and Polish agricultural sectors reacted differently—can help test whether the "retaliation–compensation–feedback" model applies across different political and economic settings. Also, the idea of subnational actors can be refined by dividing them into interest groups (like farm lobbies or labor unions), local governments (e.g., policy debates in state legislatures), and multinational capital (such as supply chain relocation pressures), to see how their interactions shape compensation policies. On the methodological side, future research could include more diverse variables, including an exploration of how "coordinated compensation" mechanisms among allies (like NATO countries jointly subsidizing affected industries) might weaken the effects of sanctions. Social media analysis could also be integrated—for example, using Twitter sentiment data to understand how narratives and ideological framing affect public perception and voter loyalty under economic pressure.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Research Conclusion

In conclusion, this study constructs the RCF theoretical model and based on the empirical analysis during the strategic competition period between China and the United States, reveals the core mechanism by which the precise sanctions of sub-state actors affect the internal politics of the target country. The research finds that: First, targeted sanctions against pillar industries in highly politically sensitive areas within the target country (such as key swing states for elections) can effectively trigger the causal chain of „economic losses → voters blaming the federal government → decline in political loyalty → changes in voting behavior". This indicates that it is feasible to drive the national political process through pressure at the sub-national level. Secondly, the compensation policy serves as a critical moderating variable shaping political feedback within the target country. Its effect highly depends on two core attributes: effectiveness, that is, whether it can substantially cover the economic losses of the sanctioned groups; Timeliness means that the effect of compensation must be manifested and widely perceived within the crucial election window period.

The success or failure of compensation directly determines whether the political pressure triggered by external sanctions can be accurately and powerfully transmitted effectively to the federal decision-making level. Thirdly, the RCF model reveals the effectiveness of such sanctions mechanisms and the specific vulnerabilities they bring under representative democratic political systems. The root cause lies in that sanctions can precisely act on key voter groups closely related to the election results (such as practitioners in the impacted industries), forcing the ruling authorities to make policy responses to the pressure of sanctions in order to maintain the stability of the political alliance. This process is deeply dependent on its internal feedback channels and highlights the structural vulnerabilities and political asymmetries in the effectiveness of economic sanctions.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the above findings and revealed mechanisms, this paper proposes several actionable recommendations for optimizing China's strategy in its economic contest with the United States. Firstly, deepen the precise sanctions strategy, establish an assessment matrix of „political sensitivity - economic dependence" to lock in high-margin targets, and monitor the compensation effect in real time to dynamically adjust the intensity of the sanctions scope and prevent the dilution of effectiveness. Secondly, strategically grasp the implementation sequence: Precisely utilize the political cycle of the United States, especially during the sufficient window period before crucial elections (6 to 12 months), control the pace of sanctions, shorten their response time, and maximize the likelihood of the US government compensation and public opinion reversal.

In addition, efforts should be made to build a coordinated countermeasures system. Together with key global supply chain node countries, a „joint control list" and a networked mechanism should be established to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness. At the same time, domestic special legislation (such as the „Strategic Resources Export Control Law") should be accelerated to incorporate

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the control of rare earths and other resources into the legal framework to provide countermeasures. The comprehensive application of the above-mentioned strategy combination will effectively enhance China's initiative, resilience and bargaining chips in the complex economic strategic game between China and the United States.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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