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## Bad Idea: Banning Chinese Students from Studying in the United States

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In October 2018, leaks [revealed](#) that the White House was considering banning Chinese students from entering the United States. Then in late November, Reuters [reported](#) that the Trump administration may step up vetting measures of Chinese students, including reviewing phone records and social media accounts. Stephen Miller and others in the administration have purportedly argued that Chinese students are conducting espionage and transferring knowledge back to China.

Concerns about Chinese students are not just coming from the White House. A [report](#) by the Hoover Institution also released last week argues that the Chinese Communist Party is using American universities as part of an aggressive influence campaign. Although the authors draw a distinction between their position and the heavy-handed approach of the Trump administration, the report lends credibility to broad restrictions on Chinese students.

That the Trump administration would restrict Chinese entry into the United States should come as no surprise. After all, President Trump has been openly critical of China, as well as foreign citizens coming to the United States. In August, he reportedly [stated](#) that “almost every [Chinese] student that comes over to this country is a spy.” And the 2017 National Security Strategy [promised](#) to “review visa procedures to reduce economic theft.”

Yet, for an administration promising to compete more effectively with China, this is a particularly counterproductive proposal. There are a multitude of legal and ethical reasons not to ban Chinese students from the United States. But even from a purely competitive standpoint—which is the one most likely to appeal to officials in the Trump administration—there is a strong case for continuing to welcome Chinese students who want to study in the United States. Five arguments stand out:

First, the United States needs to better leverage its competitive advantages vis-à-vis China, particularly the openness of the U.S. system. Closing off America is not, and has never been, the U.S. recipe for success. In fact, this behavior helps to excuse the Chinese Communist Party's increasingly closed and repressive policies. Continuing to be open to Chinese students helps to show that people of different backgrounds and views can not just coexist but thrive. This has been especially true in knowledge-based and high-tech sectors where immigrants have played an important role in innovation.

Second, banning Chinese students wrongly implies that U.S. concerns about the Chinese Communist Party's behavior are driven by ethnic or racial issues. This is a frequent Communist Party talking point, but Americans have no issues with the Chinese people. In fact, the 3.8 million members of the Chinese-American community make the United States stronger every day. U.S. concerns are focused on the behavior of the Chinese Communist Party. Banning Chinese students from the United States wrongly equates Chinese heritage with the Chinese Communist Party, reinforcing the Party's own propaganda. The Party wants its students to serve the interests of the state. Let's not [play into the Party's vision](#) by treating China as a monolith in which Chinese citizens in the diaspora have no agency.

Third, Chinese students in the United States are exposed to U.S. principles and ideas, which over time seep back into China. They experience firsthand the benefits of an academic culture defined by open inquiry and freedom of expression -- a culture which stands in stark contrast to the equivalent in China, where the Chinese Communist Party exercises near total control over the information that flows to the Chinese domestic population. Exposing Chinese citizens to foreign ideas, values, and systems helps to broaden their appreciation of other societies and structures. Over time, this can strengthen forces within China that are pushing for freedom of speech, human rights, and representative government.

Fourth, Chinese students subsidize U.S. higher education, helping to maintain American universities as the envy of the world. Chinese students, who often pay full price for an American education, account for roughly one-third of foreign students in U.S. universities, amounting to more than 300,000 students contributing \$12 billion in total to the U.S. economy in sectors ranging from retail to transportation. Banning Chinese students would not only cut badly needed educational funding for American universities but would help their Chinese (and other foreign) counterparts abroad, thereby decreasing the competitiveness of our education system.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Americans should enthusiastically welcome China's best and brightest students coming to, and often staying in, the United States. Surveys [suggest](#) that 80 to 90 percent of Chinese students intend to stay in the United States after they complete their studies, depending on the degree program. Chinese undergraduates and those pursuing advanced degrees contribute to a talent pool that gives the United States an edge in the development of emerging technology and cutting-edge research. They are helping to tackle complex challenges across industries, enabling the United States to sustain its leadership in innovation. Chinese working in labs of American universities make vital contributions to emerging technologies. In short, many of China's best and brightest students want to come study and live in the United States, providing America a tremendous economic and technological advantage.

Think of this in the reverse. If hundreds of thousands of America's best students were going to China each year, would U.S. leaders be pleased? What if more than 80 percent of those students said they wanted to stay in China? In that case, wouldn't U.S. concern about a "brain drain" outweigh worries about the potential intelligence value that could be gained from Americans in China? In short, the large number of promising young Chinese studying in the United States should concern Chinese Communist Party leaders much more than their American counterparts.

To be clear, additional measures to protect against the illicit transfer of intellectual property to China are still merited. Both of us have [suggested steps](#) to more carefully guard against knowledge and technology transfer in critical fields, especially those sectors related to the defense industry. But blunt tools are not the way to go; targeted policy changes would be much more effective. Overstating the threat will cause greater risks to U.S. prosperity and leadership.

That is why, at the end of the day, a blanket ban on Chinese students is not only un-American, it is also uncompetitive.

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