

Chinese Students Might be the “Trade War’s” First Civilian Casualties

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The escalating “trade war” between the US and China is reportedly causing some in Washington to consider imposing legal restrictions on Chinese students in the interests of national security, which shows that all the trade talk was really just a front for justifying more comprehensive “containment” measures against the People’s Republic in order to preempt its global rise.

Reuters released a report on Wednesday about how “[U.S. lawmakers prep bills targeting China spy threat on campus](#)”, which included details about some proposed legislation that would impose legal restrictions on Chinese students in the interests of national security. Some ideas are to prohibit Chinese students from studying in the US if they’re affiliated with a military-linked institution, as well as regulate the amount of money that universities can receive from the People’s Republic.

Other proposals include limiting access to sensitive academic research out of concern that Chinese students might take this proprietary knowledge with them back to China whenever they finally leave and therefore undercut America’s competitive know-how advantage over their homeland. Had it not been for the “[trade war](#)”, it would have been unthinkable that the US would contradict its own much-touted principles of “freedom, democracy, and respect for all” in such a way, but therein lies the crux of the matter because the “trade war” was never entirely about trade at all.

No one disputes the fact that trade forms the bedrock of American-Chinese relations and is unquestionably its most important component, but despite what most people might believe, it’s impossible to separate politics from economics in this case. Actually, US-Chinese trade is inherently political because of the strategic purpose that it’s hitherto fulfilled for the People’s Republic in enabling it to develop at an unprecedented pace due to the decades-long imbalance of hundreds of billions of dollars that ultimately compounded into countless trillions over the years. Pre-empting China’s global rise and its possible replacement of the US as the world’s most important Great Power is the chief concern of the Trump Administration, which decisively acted to curtail the trade deficit between the two through tariffs and then use the economic dimension of their competition to justify more comprehensive “containment” measures against it such as the lead-in news event about the possible legal restrictions that might be imposed on Chinese students.

The “trade war” should therefore be reconceptualized and even rebranded if it’s to be strategically accurate because it’s not about profits or lack thereof at all, but about the Great Power competition between the US and China over the future of the evolving world order, with economics being the key determinant but also comprising much more than

simple trade ties. The relevancy of legal restrictions on Chinese students speaks to the fear that the US government has of them acting as fifth column proxies of the Communist Party ideologically committed to stealing American secrets in order to help their homeland surpass its main geopolitical rival. It's not within the ambit of this analysis to argue whether such fears are justified or not, but just to point out that it's the sovereign right of all states to regulate the entry of foreigners into their borders however they see fit, no matter how seemingly unfair or hypocritical their actions may be, though the US should understand that China might very well respond reciprocally if Congress' proposals come to pass.

It would be absurd to allege that all Chinese students are secretly communist spies, just as it would be equally absurd to say the same about American ones vis-a-vis the CIA even if a few of each of them might really be abusing their student status as a cover for intelligence collection and other unsavory activities, meaning that Chinese students might become the first civilian casualty of the "trade war" after which American ones would probably follow soon thereafter. After reconceptualizing the "trade war" as a [New Cold War](#) and accepting that the public economic focus is really intended to mask the behind-the-scenes "containment" measures being quietly taken against China in parallel with the tariffs, it makes sense why a special category of the country's nationals in the US (students) are now being targeted as the next phase of this Hybrid War escalation.

If it's ever called out for hypocritically contradicting its internationally exported morals, ethics, and principles, the US can always plead "self-defense" by pointing to its national security concerns, though that nevertheless might not be convincing enough for many who are finally beginning to see the US for what it truly really was all along, which is a global hegemon that endeavors to maintain its leading position in International Affairs by hook or by crook. Soft power is an important part of its grand strategy, but is more than easily sacrificed in the interests of ensuring its hard power, practically all of which is dependent in one way or another on economics and technology. By rectifying the trade imbalance through tariffs and overreacting to intelligence threats by restricting the activities of all Chinese students in the country, the US hopes to finally regain the competitive edge that it was at risk of losing up until this point and turning the tables in the New Cold War.

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