

The Biden China Initiative, a Flawed and Dysfunctional Policy

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Abstract: *President Biden is continuing the disengagement policy toward China that began under Donald Trump, now with strong bipartisan support. The policy has all the elements of containment of China, including restrictions on technology, trade, investment, formation of the informal Quad (US-Japan-Australia-India) alliance, sale of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, continuation of high tariffs on Chinese exports, and increased official contacts with Taiwan in a period of growing China-Taiwan military tension.*

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One element, which until recently had strong support across the US political spectrum, is educational and scientific exchanges with China. Approximately 370,000 students and scholars from China, by far the largest number of any country, are in the US, nearly a third engaged in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) research. But now, as relations with China have deteriorated, Democrats and Republicans alike view Chinese graduate students and researchers, especially those in science and technology, with suspicion and even hostility. Biden, like Trump, [has made obtaining J-1 and F-1 visas very difficult for Chinese graduate students and researchers, denying them based not on individual cases but on any possible connection they may have to any Chinese “entity” doing “military-civil” research](#). Sadly, [many Chinese students no longer feel welcome](#).

Following Trump’s lead, the Biden justice department and FBI are engaged in intense oversight of universities and laboratories that have agreements with Chinese entities. This so-called China Initiative is designed to catch not only Chinese nationals but American citizens, especially those of Chinese descent, who are suspected of engaging in theft or

transfer of information that benefits Beijing. [The scope of the Initiative is exceptionally wide](#), extending beyond theft of trade and intellectual property secrets to “potential threats to academic freedom,” surveillance of Chinese registered as foreign agents, prevention of threats to supply chains, and identification of possible corruption in Chinese companies that compete with US companies.

The China Initiative is deeply flawed in two respects: its built-in bias and its failure to recognize the many benefits of exchanges with China. The bias stems from a presumption of guilt and guilt by association, hallmarks of the McCarthyism era. That much is clear from the mindless attacks on Confucius Institutes, which are typically attached to US universities and provide free language and cultural instruction to nearby communities. [From personal research as well as the research of others who have interviewed university officials and community members](#), I can say with confidence that charges against these institutes, in particular from Congress members, of being communist party organs and seeking to undermine academic freedom are spurious. Yet the charges persist, making no distinction between education and espionage or between Confucian Institutes abroad (where there have been cases of political interference) and those in the US. And the charges have been backed not just by tighter visa requirements but also by threats to universities to either eliminate their Confucius Institute or lose federal funding. The threats have worked, reducing the number of CIs from over 100 to fewer than 40. Among the universities that have closed their CIs under US government pressure are the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon, the University of Maryland, the University of South Carolina, and my own Portland State University.

The federal government’s bias also has a racial element. A large group of Stanford University faculty, in calling for termination of the China Initiative, wrote to Attorney General Merrick Garland on September 9, 2021: “the China Initiative disproportionately targets researchers of Chinese origin. Publicly available information indicates that investigations are often triggered not by any evidence of wrongdoing, but just because of a researcher’s connections with China.” In response to complaints from Asian American and other academic groups, some Democratic congress members urged the justice department to investigate “the repeated, wrongful targeting of individuals of Asian descent for alleged espionage . . . ” [Their letter](#) reminded the department of America’s long history of anti-Asian prejudice and its contemporary consequences—the increased violence against people of Asian ethnicity on city streets. What they failed to call out was the hostility toward China stoked by the Trump and Biden administrations that had prompted the violence. Still, the letter gives voice to the view of Chinese researchers in the United States, *including those with American citizenship*, who believe they are being targeted for having any connection with China, however ordinary.

Scientists have also voiced their concerns. As one group put it, while the government has a legitimate need to tighten rules governing research security, “a response that chokes off legitimate scientific contacts only compounds the problem it seeks to solve.” Regarding the FBI arrests of Chinese and US researchers—the justice department report cited above contains a full listing—these scientists wrote that “many of those now accused are accomplished scientists engaged in university research in fundamental science, with close collaborations in China.” Putting Chinese science students under scrutiny, the group added, [defied the facts and “could deprive our country of some of its most talented future scientists.”](#)

Fact is, exchanges with China benefit the US as much as they benefit China. They bring

language and cultural training to K-12 classrooms in small communities. Chinese graduate students staff laboratories and medical research facilities working, for example, on cancer. Their research produces patents valued in the billions of dollars. Their tuition and other costs of study are a major source of revenue for universities and colleges, measured in the billions of dollars. ("Every 1,000 Ph.D. students blocked in a year from U.S. universities costs an estimated \$210 billion in the expected value of patents produced at universities over 10 years and nearly \$1 billion in lost tuition over a decade, [according to an analysis from the National Foundation for American Policy](#)." Their time spent in the US exposes Chinese to the virtues of free expression, cross-cultural awareness, independent research, and respect for human rights.

The overwhelming endorsement of these exchanges by everyone from university administrators to small-town teachers reflects a positive aspect of US engagement with China that should be honored. Failure to do so leads to reciprocal punitive action by China, as seen in crackdowns on US social media and journalists there, the closure of once-thriving joint educational programs, and refusal to cooperate on finding the origins of COVID-19.

The bottom line is that restricting scientific collaboration stifles innovation and undermines the very competitiveness that President Biden is depending on for US economic recovery. As Caroline Wagner, who specializes in exchange programs, writes:

The US government's scrutiny of Chinese Americans and Chinese scholars runs up against the value of open scientific exchange. My research on international collaboration in science has shown that open nations have strong science. Nations that accept visitors and send researchers abroad, those that engage richly in cross-border collaborations and fund international projects produce better science and excel in innovation. Closing doors inhibits [the very trait that makes the US innovation system the envy of the world](#).

The department of justice has prosecuted some Chinese and a few Americans who do indeed seem to have stepped over the line in their research. But some people have been released for lack of evidence and others have failed to report ties to China rather than committed economic or security espionage. Moreover, the numbers of accused are miniscule when placed beside the tens of thousands of Chinese and millions of Chinese Americans who abide by US law and have no political motive for being here. Those people should be considered *an asset* and treated with respect. As the Stanford faculty's letter says, "Many of our most challenging global problems, including climate change & sustainability and current & future pandemics, require international engagement. Without an open and inclusive environment that attracts the best talents in all areas, the United States cannot retain its world leading position in science and technology." In recent years, a substantial share of the best talent has come from China and the rest of Asia.

It is particularly disappointing that the Biden administration has taken Trump's road, failing to distinguish China's harmful behavior from its cooperative behavior. Our schools, our economy, and our society suffer the consequences.

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Featured image: Biden and Xi Jinping in more hopeful times (Source: APJFF)

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