

## Opinion: Trumpism and Universities: Advantage China?

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Like never before, universities have become instrument of national competition but diplomatic relations between large and powerful nations can have major repercussions. When the US and China were on the verge of normalizing relations in 1979, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping became adamant about having a thousand talented scientists who are recognized around the world. Ezra Vogel recounts the story of a 1978 phone call from China to President Jimmy Carter at 3:00 a.m., Washington time, by his science advisor because Deng wanted quick approval to send several hundred Chinese immediately to study at American universities, followed by thousands within a few years. Since then, diplomatic relations between the US and China have steadily improved through not without regular periodic strains over economic, political and military issues. Nevertheless, economic interdependence and finely tuned statecraft ensured that cool heads prevailed in times of stress and economic progress for both countries continued for several decades.

Yet, there are signs that US-China relations are in for a jolt with the newly installed US president who has threatened to undue forty years of US-China diplomacy and ignite a trade war between the world's two largest economies. Both country leaders have a similar goal. For President Trump it is to make America great again by making better deals to ensure economic might. For President Xi it is to rejuvenate China and restore it to its place when it lead the world in GDP for 17 centuries. While China has opened further and declared its support to deepen economic globalization, the new US administration has turned inward to save jobs for workers who fell victim to what Tom Friedman calls the "flattening world."

Trump's vitriol was initially met with anger from Beijing. That soon turned into laughter at what the Chinese press perceived as amateur statesmanship.

However, the possibility of new tariffs to block access to the US market is being met by plans for a Chinese economic pivot. If tensions continue, there could be several potential consequences for universities.

First, American educational programs and campuses that now operate in China may feel more pressure from a Trump administration than from the Chinese government. While the political atmosphere has tightened at Chinese universities, American campuses in China continue to operate with little interference. Nevertheless, Republicans in Congress have already begun to harass American campuses for compromising academic freedom without evidence. Meanwhile, they ignore Scott Walker's attack on academic freedom on the campuses at the University of Wisconsin.

Second, Trumpism's contention that China is stealing American jobs, even though the decision to transfer jobs was made by American corporations, may come to affect universities. Chinese scientists who graduate from US universities and join the American workforce may find a backlash or even tougher visa restrictions if they are perceived as taking jobs from American graduates. Trump stokes suspicion about Chinese as hackers, which may create an even more toxic atmosphere for Chinese scholars studying and visiting the US universities, especially in fields such as computer science, a field that China sees as essential to its economic restructuring.

Third, the Obama initiative to send thousands of American students to China for language study may find itself less popular in an environment of China bashing under Trumpism. The aim of the Obama initiative – to build future trust and understanding, could be severely compromised.

Fourth, the illiberal turn of Trumpism, and toughening of entry for scholars from majority Muslim countries, may make young scholars and scientists from

some countries give more serious consideration to the long term advantages of study at a Chinese university.

Fifth, while Trumpism weakens the resonance of liberalism and globalization in American universities, China stands to gain as it takes a lead in economic globalization with its Belt&Road initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the space left by the elimination of Obama's TPP proposal. With as many college educated citizens as the US by 2020, several globally competitive universities, and generous funding for attracting noted scientists for short-and long term visitors, China stands to gain. While much energy at American universities will be focussed on fending off Trumpism amidst an international atmosphere made unsteady by questions about possible change in US policy in Europe and Asia, China's top tier universities may gain in global influence. China is already the third most popular destination for international students and climbing.

Sixth, the wild card is tension in the South China Sea. For the PRC, Taiwan in non-negotiable and territorial claims are a matter for countries in that region who have claims. Should this situation intensify, educational and academic exchanges would surely fall victim to any conflict. For example, China may restrict the Fulbright program as it has done in the past. Such a move could lead to a tit for tat with Confucian Institutes in the US. Moreover, Trump's reversal of the TTP weakens Southeast Asian nations' balancing act between China and the US. Overseas study of Southeast Asian students would shift even more than at present to China.

In short, there will be no winners in a changing relationship between the US and China. Universities in both countries could suffer. Nevertheless, the advantage could go to China if it continues to invest heavily in teaching and research, while ceding more autonomy to universities, and furthering its internationalization. China's research universities with increased institutional autonomy will not only help to restructure the economy by injecting more innovation into the mix, but also extend its influence on international higher education. The US-China relationship under the new administration will surely test the autonomy of universities in both countries, and the potential of the

academic community to be a force for rational communication. This is an opportunity for universities to distinguish themselves not only as instrument of national competition but also as institutions for international peace. Universities in both countries may not be able to eliminate the confrontations that may be in store under a Trump administration but there is much they can do to keep US-China relations on an even keel until 2020.