

Emergency Pod: The Trump Administration restricts Harvard International Enrollment as State Department Reviews Chinese Student Visas

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Show Open

Jeremiah Jenne (00:00)

Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne on our special emergency pod edition of the escalation of the general nuttiness in U.S.-China relations precipitated by not only Donald Trump's crusade against Harvard University and their many international students of whom the Chinese contingent takes up quite a bit of space, but also the statement by Secretary of State Marco Rubio that they were going to be giving extra scrutiny to all Chinese student visas in the United States, searching for all of those who have had any connection with the Chinese Communist Party.

David, is this an own goal? Is this the beginning of something? Is this peak nuttiness or where are we right now?

David (00:49)

Yeah, this is not fun. I don't know. I think the core of all this chaos is Trump. And he is erratic, pathologically disconnected from reality and mercurial. He changes every five seconds, you know. So when I first saw this, I guess when we both saw the news yesterday, my time anyway. The news was that they were going to proceed to cancel or annul foreign visas for the students. And then when I woke up this morning, a Boston judge had already annulled the executive order or whatever. Or it said it was unconstitutional. So that's how fast things are. I don't know what's going to happen.

The first thing when I thought of this, we were going to do this podcast, it seems ironic that you and I have been trying to bring American students to China to sort of fulfill that gap. And now the US is trying to block Chinese students from going to America.

The Whataboutism Problem

Jeremiah Jenne (01:42)

Well, there's certainly a contingent of people online who are engaging in the sort of useless

whataboutism that always accompanies these discussions. This idea, well, how many American students are allowed to study at Chinese universities? And doesn't the Chinese government look at social media profiles for when they're processing applications? And what's the freedom of speech in China like? And all of that. But I don't think they're winning the argument they think they're winning because the strategy is not how do we become more like China, which is exactly every time one of these directives comes down the pike supported by the party—by the party here, I mean not the Chinese Communist Party, but what's left of the Republican Party.

Then I just think, well, you are opposed to all forms of CCP influence. You're opposed to all kinds of Chinese influence. The Chinese Communist Party is the enemy. And yet every action that is taken by this administration in regards, especially to China, is to act more like China. And then when Secretary of State Rubio comes out, I think the same day, if not the day before, with something like, we're going to be very stern against those countries that restrict freedom of speech. And he said so without the slightest hint that he was understanding irony these two statements in close proximity to each other.

It doesn't look—it makes it seem like the strategy is based mostly on vindictiveness against China, vindictiveness against Harvard than any actual kind of tactics.

Trump's Psychology and Strategy

David (03:19)

Well, I totally agree with that. I don't think anyone really believes that this is all about security. For me it's about optics partly, it's also I think it has to do with everything has to do with Trump if you're wondering what the motive is or what the strategy is. There is no strategy. There's just emotion and it's Trump at the heart of it.

What struck me—in his form of Twitter is called Truth Social, that right? Such an Orwellian term, Truth Social. What he wrote was, "Harvard wants to fight. They want to show how smart they are, and they're getting their ass kicked." And I thought, there it is. This tells it all. Dictators always have an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the intelligentsia, and the arts. Hitler hated artists because he was a failed painter. And I think for Trump, it's all about revenge and retribution.

Red Meat for the Base

Jeremiah Jenne (04:09)

Well, I think that there are two separate issues here. The first one, of course, is the war that's being waged by the Trump administration or by Donald Trump himself against Harvard, which is red meat for his base because it's the epicenter of whatever they think the coastal elites are. It's the epicenter of all of those woke kids and their ideological crusades against the rest of America or whatever they believe.

And then you have the second part of this, which is specifically attacking China or international students and in particular Chinese students. And I do think that there are threads that connect them. They—both of them are about energizing the base. You throw out the words China, you

throw out the words coastal elite and immediately that core 30 to 35% of people who will support Donald Trump, even if they saw him on television lighting the constitution on fire with the flaming carcass of a bald eagle while wearing a "I hate Jesus" t-shirt. They would still support him and this is red meat for them. He gets his dopamine hit. He gets his validation for by how much they love him and how much they fan the flames of his, as you said, weird insecurities.

But I also think part of this too with that base is there are people who support him, who I think believe that their kids are not getting into Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, whatever, because the spaces are being taken up by undeserving and possibly subversive elements being foisted upon these institutions by foreign countries. That is to say, you know, Bobby in Florida's kid who get all the money for his SAT prep, but still couldn't get into Harvard. The reason why, of course, is because Xi Jinping is sending his kid to Harvard as a potential subversive element into the great United States. And therefore it's a double whammy. We must both strike back at China and also save those spaces for our children, no matter how moronic they might be. After all, look at their parents.

The Failure to Defend Institutions

David (06:15)

I think in terms of Harvard and elite universities and academia, we kind of had a long period of time where we didn't really have to justify the setup and the format of these universities. The idea that you had to have foreign involvement, had to be international, it had to be open, it had to be about freedom of speech. We sort of took all these things for granted, that we didn't need to stress those, we didn't need to keep bringing them up. And no president, no democratic president ever actually spent much time praising institutions and universities for this reason.

And so what happens is Trump now applies this America First sort of fascistic kind of nationalistic trope and for the first time his base and probably a lot of people are actually thinking of this and being aware of it and as you said they feel an injustice. "My Tommy didn't get into Harvard" you know so why are all these Chinese in there, right? and other places, and even some people that may hate us, who may not like America?

And they're coming here and getting a degree and going back. And actually, that's what we thought was an obvious framework and an obvious value and an obvious soft power value and an obvious way to cement and retain America's relations with its allies. All these things that we thought were just self-evident, why should we mention them? Trump suddenly mentions them, but he frames it in his way.

And I think this is going to be a hard-fought battle for Harvard and some of these institutions. Trump holds so much sway, he gets so much information, so much of the spotlight is on him, that this outrage he wants to stir up will probably succeed This is very dangerous time. Columbia already folded somewhat. Harvard may think it's the last bastion, but I mean we'll see what happens. And we'll see what happens with the constitutionality of the whole thing.

What Actually Makes America Great

Jeremiah Jenne (08:07)

I know that's being framed as America First, but, and I also am willing to admit that I perhaps have a different view of America than many of Trump supporters. It's one of the great things about the United States. Everybody has a slightly different take on what makes America great. So leaving aside that slogan, what makes America great has been the fact that people have come from all over the world to American universities. American universities for a long time were perhaps one of the few institutions that were respected around the world, regardless of whatever people felt about America generally. People wanted to send their kids to American schools.

Many of those people who came to the US to study stayed in the US and they invested, they created companies. If you think about the 128 corridor that was all around Boston because of all the students who came to study at Harvard, MIT, stayed in Massachusetts. You think about Silicon Valley, the number of students who came from India, China, other countries, studied at Stanford, studied at Caltech, studied at some of these institutions and then stayed and built businesses—some of the most successful businesses actually in those areas or were important contributors to the success of major leading companies.

I think at one point Donald Trump even said this and if he did, it might be one of the few things I agree with him about. I believe that every student who completes, especially an advanced degree in engineering or one of the STEM fields should get their diploma with a green card stapled to it. This is one of the greatest attractive soft power, not just soft power, but you think about building the economy for the 21st century. This is one of the greatest strengths that the United States had to really become great.

And yet Donald Trump has decided instead that to appeal to his base, he's in fact going to destroy this one thing that really has been a beacon of light, even though America's own image has gone, has taken hits in many parts of the world. So when I hear "America, America First," when I hear "make America great," I don't think I'm being an extremist when I start hearing in the back of my mind, it isn't about making America great. If that's just simply as it was in Germany, a code for we're all about protecting whiteness.

This is about going after the one great power that exists outside of the United States that is a threat to the United States. And unlike Russia happens to be run by people who don't look like us. So there are so many different threads here that you can start pulling on and none of them lead to a particularly good place.

The Contradiction of Trump's Policies

David (10:49)

Yeah, I mean it's good that you remind us about Trump actually floating the idea of giving everyone who graduates with a STEM doctorate, give them a green card. But that just goes to show that these projects he has are not principled, they're not strategic. They're transactional and they have to do with the moment.

Carolyn Levitt, the White House press secretary, I think what she said was, this country needs more electricians and whatever, plumbers and less LGBTQ graduate majors from Harvard University. So I mean, the impression there you know, they're stressing is that they're elitist, they're, you know, out of touch, they're all DEI and all these things, you know, it's all about the politics.

But yes, absolutely, I really resonate, and I think it's very important that people have lost track of, and of course Trump's not going to mention it. You're right, these people from other countries, China, they stay in the US very often, they start up companies, they create wealth, they create meaning. And I think that's something that the ordinary person doesn't even know, that they don't have any idea.

You know, every year I go to the AAS convention in the United States, Association of Asian Studies and there I meet old friends and new friends, Chinese students who came to the U.S., got a degree there and are now teaching at various universities. And they're amazing people. They're wonderful. Of course, they're incredibly bright. They're incredibly smart. And they're contributing. They're raising the level of the department that they're in. They're doing valuable research that really only a bilingual or someone from China could actually produce.

And now these very people that are there and where most people aren't aware of that are actually contributing to making America great and better. Now those people are being terrorized basically by Trump. I had a conversation at a Starbucks yesterday with a Chinese PhD student at American University that I was on a panel on the last time I was at AAS and she was telling me some really scary—I mean she said her advisors are telling her things like keep your green card and passport with you at all times. Stay off social media if you can. And please, and make some emergency plans in advance about how to leave the country as soon as possible. And these are, yeah.

Jeremiah Jenne (13:13)

And this is the stuff we would use to tell people who are going to do research trips to China.

David (13:17)

Exactly. That's great. You hit it. But the irony is just absolutely dripping. It's just incredible.

So, Jeremiah, what do you think? Beijing is celebrating all this? Or is it a sort of, you know, when your enemy is struggling, don't do anything, just let them dig their hole, right? Do you think that the US is shooting themselves in the foot and China is happy about that? Or do they also see a downside to this?

China's Perspective: Sitting Back and Watching

Jeremiah Jenne (13:40)

I think they just are willing to sit back and let this shit show go on. I don't think there's any upside to making statements to inflame the situation because of course, if your own opponent to use a soccer or sorry, international folks football reference. If your opponent is insisting upon

taking penalty kicks against their own goal repeatedly, you really don't have to do much but crack a beer, sit there and watch them. And that's what's going on.

And The greatest threat to the Chinese Communist Party in China is alternatives outside of China. If people realize that there are alternatives to this system, then that's what the party is most afraid of or better alternatives to this system. That's what the party's always been afraid of. They're always worried about comparison. And as long as the U.S. and some of the Western countries could hold up values of freedom of speech, of inclusiveness, of openness, of the kind of things that the Chinese Communist Party is anathema to their whole being, then that was perceived as at least a propaganda, if not actually an existential threat.

But now of course, for various reasons, I mean, the West has faded in the eyes of many of China's elite. There's a lot of reasons for that, but in the last six months, the United States particularly has taken a tumble. It's very easy now for the propaganda apparatus in China to see, "U.S. isn't so great. They're just like us, all this stuff about democracy, all these things about how their system was superior, all that American exceptionalist bullshit. Look at them. At the end of the day, they're a transactional one-party state that's run on the premise of making their own country great at the expense of everybody else. Why would you ever have wanted to idealize them?"

And then as if that's not bad enough, the people who are left in China who do in fact still have some idealistic notion of what the US is about. For example, the kind of people who would want to send their kids to school in the United States, the kind of people who would want to study in the United States. These are people who if you are in fact some kind of arch conservative believer in regime change in China, you would be wanting to bring them over. But now you can't because in order to protect "America First," "make America great," "keep America white," whatever the slogan is this week, those students, those people, they're natural allies are the ones that are going to be, you know, looking for looking to Canada, looking to Australia, looking to the UK are most likely refreshing their tutorials on the Gaokao and staying home.

Winners and Losers

David (16:25)

Yeah, yeah. Well, maybe I should say, do you think that Oxford and Cambridge are popping corks? Maybe it's not China, it's the other elite universities who are going to get a flood of Chinese—277,000 Chinese students in America. If even a small proportion of those people go to some other place, it's a gain for them.

The Complexity of CCP Membership

Jeremiah Jenne (16:48)

A question for you, David. You're still based in Beijing. And one of the talking points that we're hearing quite a bit is, well, how do you determine if someone is affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party? I think a lot of people who aren't familiar with China or who haven't lived

there aren't really quite aware of just how different the system is in China. This isn't a matter of you're a Republican or a Democrat.

The extent to which the party and the state are intertwined in a Leninist system is so intricate and hard to unravel. How do you think this affects these students? I mean, what are some of the ways that a student, even one who is very much pro-west, you will, or just someone who has always dreamed of going to school at Harvard or Columbia or the University of Tennessee, or wherever it is, what are some of the ways that a typical student, not even a member of the elite or Xi Jinping's kid, might be somehow affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party in a way that could affect their student visa application?

David (17:52)

Yeah, they don't understand that in China, although the Communist Party members are not a majority, I think there's only 90 million. That in a way it's sort of like in terms of the workforce and the highly educated, it's something like just having a social security card or something. It's just something you need to have if you're going to work in government or if you're going to work at university, for example. I don't know how many people that I've worked with. In fact, the conversation I had yesterday with the Chinese PhD student, you know, might be a Communist Party member.

A lot of people, as soon as they graduate, very early on, try to become a party member because it's a road to employment and to high status and so forth. And very often getting this card, this red card, entails a lot of test taking and examinations and surface level salutes to the party to get there. It has very little to do with the ideology or the opinion that they might have about the West or Western countries. It has very little to do with it. Of course, there are many, lots of people who are really, really true believers and you can't really know. I mean, there isn't a very clear line between people who are just opportunistic or people that are actually idealistic.

But I'm sure Trump doesn't know about this. Marco Rubio has no idea about this. They haven't bothered to look into it. They have no idea what they're talking about. They think, in fact, they just think anybody who is at the United States studying there automatically has been sort of trained or has been exhorted to be a spy, to collect information and report back to the government. That's just totally absurd. This is totally ridiculous. Now there are some people that are engaged in that. Probably we would not know who they are and what they're doing. But yeah, absolutely. They don't understand that this is not an obvious, you know, like a red on their forehead. It's a very, very subtle and very, very variegated situation.

What's ironic about this is that at the same time the US is closing itself off, China for the last decade really welcomes foreigners with open arms, especially people with PhDs, especially people who are rich, people who are high ranking professors and so forth, because there is a brain drain. There was a huge brain drain in the early 90s when any Chinese student went abroad and never came back. Nowadays, the *haigui*, the people who come back, is pretty high. Because China is a pretty good place to live and develop. So there's not as much of a problem as a brain drain. But they're really trying to recruit foreign talent, they've even done things like open a new category requirement for the Chinese green card that all you need to have is a PhD and you can get a permanent residence card, green card in China.

So I think that's to answer whether the Chinese government might be happy about this. I think that's in one sense this is something they're probably optimistic about because it sort of goes in favor of what their agenda is at the moment.

The Mirror Effect

Jeremiah Jenne (21:00)

To go back to the irony thing, my own experience and that of you and other people who have made their lives as academics in China will tell you the Chinese government does actually, or I should say many parts of the Chinese government apparatus do have this belief, just like Marco Rubio and Donald Trump do, that every and any foreign student or foreign academic in the country is a potential spy. And they treat them like that in terms of the amount of surveillance and the kind of, as you know, if you work for a Chinese institution, they're going to be very interested in what you're doing, what kind of things you're working on, even the kind of people you speak with.

And so it's, of course, as we talked about before, this is the great irony, right? That Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, all of these people, they profess to be opposed to China. They want to stand up to China and their way to do this is to become China. If you explain that to somebody who is MAGA, they don't believe it because of course, very few of them have any kind of working knowledge or any knowledge really whatsoever of China, the history of Leninist party systems or anything.

I don't know at this point, it's just the whole thing has become in fact profoundly depressing. I'm hoping, the courts step in, although we're starting to see some fairly intense pressure being put on the courts by extra legal means. Is it orchestrated from the top? Who knows? But of course, all you need to do is point at a judge and go, "he's working for China. He's working for George Soros. He's working for the Bidens." And then just let your base do the work for you. I'm hoping things get better, but I feel like we're in for yet another period where the bottom has dropped out.

Any final thoughts, David, on this emergency pod?

The Damage Is Already Done

David (22:44)

Yeah, this is one chapter or maybe one piece of the puzzle of this collapse of American democracy. What's sad for me, what you were just saying, we hope that the courts and that our constitution and maybe even some common sense will prevent Trump from completing his seemingly enormous project here.

But there's this question that even if the courts score some victories and Trump is frustrated in what he wants to do, I think the damage has already been done, don't you? I think we've already gone down many, many notches in terms of, The golden—

Jeremiah Jenne (23:20)

Shining city on the hill.

David (23:27)

Shining City on the Hill, we're no longer that. Once you've shown that you can't be trusted as a nation, then it's very, very hard to earn that trust back. And I think Trump, whatever he does, already done so much damage that I don't think we can regain what America used to be when we were kids.

Closing Thoughts

Jeremiah Jenne (23:40)

Well, he still has three and a half years at a minimum to do more damage. We shall see. If you're a fan of American exceptionalism, not particularly, but if you're a fan of American exceptionalism, just know that universities were one of the things that many people around the world would agree on were the exceptional aspects of the United States.

Thank you for joining us on what I know was something of a downer edition of Barbarians at the Gate. These are somewhat down times, but you can find us wherever fine podcasts are given away for free. You can follow me on substack. You can follow David on blue sky, right? Yeah. On blue sky. And you can send us your thoughts. You can commiserate. We can form a little club, get jackets made, whatever happens.

David (24:18)

Yes, Twitter, blue sky.

Jeremiah Jenne (24:27)

Alright, thank you all very, very much.

End of transcript