

US secretary of state incites xenophobic hysteria against Chinese students, denounces “anti-American” universities

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On December 9, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaking at Georgia Institute of Technology, denounced “left-leaning” colleges for allowing Chinese espionage on their campuses and called on universities to limit the number of Chinese students they accept. The remarks signal the intention of the Trump administration to escalate its anti-China drive while at the same time cracking down on academic freedom at home.

In his opening remarks, Pompeo invokes the racist trope of the “Yellow Peril,” claiming that China seeks to dominate the world and spread its insidious influence through the universities, saying: “Americans must know how the Chinese Communist Party is poisoning the well of our higher education institutions for its own ends, and how these actions degrade our freedom and American national security.” He went on, “The Chinese Communist Party knows it can never match our innovation...that’s why it sends 400,000 students a year to the United States of America...it is no accident.”

Pompeo went on to denounce US colleges as centers of subversion: “They know that left-leaning college campuses are rife with anti-Americanism and present easy targets for their anti-American messaging. It’s why they planted Confucius Institutes on our campuses.”

Confucius Institutes are public agreements between colleges in China and colleges in other countries, with the stated aim of promoting Chinese culture and language. The institutes were ordered by the US State Department to register as “foreign missions,” similar to embassies, earlier this year. Claiming that many US colleges are “bought by Beijing,” Pompeo called for universities to close down Confucius Institutes and “investigate what student groups backed by CCP money are actually up to.”

Pompeo’s vile remarks, by branding the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students in the US as potential spies of the Chinese state, follow the old playbook of the US ruling class in the whipping up of xenophobic hysteria against

foreigners to divert outward internal social tensions against a perceived outside enemy. Under conditions in which the president is cultivating an openly fascist movement, Pompeo’s singling out of Chinese students was clearly done to stoke up Trump’s fascist base, and raises the danger of discrimination and violence against all Asian Americans.

Pompeo’s tirade against “left-leaning” universities and his depiction of them as nests of foreign espionage, notwithstanding the baseless nature of the latter claims, nevertheless reflect the very real fears of the ruling class that college campuses will emerge as centers of opposition against the capitalist order. In the context of the enormous social crisis in the United States, which has laid the groundwork for an eruption of class struggle, the free exchange of ideas on college campuses is viewed as a threat to be neutralized. Pompeo’s remarks must therefore be taken as a threat directed ultimately against all workers and students.

The Department of Education released a McCarthyite report in October in which it investigated 12 universities, among them Yale, Harvard, and Stanford, for allegedly failing to abide by a 1986 law that obligates them to disclose contracts or donations from foreign sources that exceed \$250,000. The Association of American Universities denounced the report as baseless, telling the Associated Press that the report was “less a serious security assessment than it is a partisan and politically driven attack on America’s leading research universities.” Terry Hartle of the American Council on Education condemned Pompeo’s bigoted remarks, saying in an interview with *Bloomberg News*: “It’s hard to fathom how a secretary of state could make these remarks in good conscience. ... I assume this is political red meat for the Republican base.”

Some 370,000 Chinese students attended US colleges in the 2018–2019 school year. According to the Institute of International Education, they made up more than one third of all international students in the US, contributing some \$15

billion to the American economy in the form of tuition payments. More than half of all overseas Chinese students study in the US. The notion that these students represent a subversive fifth column against the US is a crude effort to whip up a primitive chauvinism and thereby direct rising social tensions behind the drive for war against China.

However, the number of Chinese students studying in the US took a sharp drop in 2020. Between April and September 2019, the US issued 90,410 visas to Chinese students; however, during the same period this year, just 808 visas were issued, a decline of 99 percent. A study conducted in June by the China Institute of College Admission Counseling found that 36 percent of Chinese high school students have abandoned their plans to study in the US. While 85 percent of these students cited the health risks posed by the pandemic in the US as most concerning, almost half also mentioned anti-Asian racism and hostile visa policies as primary concerns.

The survey reflects the fact that while concerns over the coronavirus pandemic undoubtedly had much to do with the decision of Chinese students and their parents to not attend college in the US, the other major factor is the hostile atmosphere that has been stoked up by the American ruling class, reflected in its most vulgar form by the president himself, who has openly used racist slurs directed against Asians by referring to the coronavirus as the “kung-flu” and “Wuhan virus,” and repeatedly alleging the far-right conspiracy theory that the Chinese government deliberately allowed the deadly contagion to spread. In the midst of this noxious stew of chauvinism and scapegoating, there can be no question that many Chinese families feel that their children will not be safe in the US.

The Trump administration has worked over the past several years to block Chinese students from studying in the US. Beginning in 2018, the US began restricting student visas for individuals who studied in tech sectors deemed threatening to US interests, such as robotics and aviation. In May of this year, Trump signed an executive order banning Chinese graduate students and researchers who have supposed ties with the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), and immediately moved to expel thousands of individuals. They were targeted not on any direct evidence of espionage, but on mere suspicions. The supposed ties amounted to the students or researchers having attended one of the many universities in China sponsored by the PLA. In September, the US cancelled the visas of more than 1,000 Chinese nationals on the basis of this order.

The racist and xenophobic slanders against Chinese students ultimately serve as a putrid veneer for the strategic imperatives of US imperialism. The American ruling class views China, which has in the course of a few decades

emerged from a backward peasant nation into a global economic and military power capable of challenging the supremacy of US imperialism, as an existential threat. In an age in which military advantage depends on the mastery of advanced technology, the advances made by China in high-tech sectors are viewed as particularly threatening.

Therein lie the true motivations for the drive to undermine Chinese businesses, as expressed by Pompeo: “It is time for the balance to be struck to both maintain our competitive advantage and protect the American advantage from...the costs they intend to impose upon us.” He also singled out Huawei Technologies Co., claiming without a shred of evidence, “Anyone using Huawei is handing their information over to the Chinese government.”

In the midst of a global pandemic in which international cooperation between scientists and physicians is crucial, the backward chauvinism being promoted by the Trump administration, the barriers being thrown up to divide the world, must be seen as an expression of the reactionary character of the decaying capitalist order.

It should be understood that the Democratic Party in all essential aspects has abetted the Trump administration’s bellicose stance against China. Indeed, it is merely a continuation of the so-called “pivot to Asia” begun under the Obama administration—in which Joe Biden played a leading role—consisting of an enormous military buildup in the Pacific, with the express aim of countering China’s growing economic influence. The president-elect has given every indication of continuing Trump’s aggressive policies. In particular, Biden’s recent nomination of the hawkish anti-China Katherine Tai to the post of US trade representative signals that the drive for war against China will continue to escalate if Biden assumes office.



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