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# Scientific research is collateral damage as US-China relationship hits the rocks

The number of US visas granted to Chinese government-funded students plunged in the first three months of 2019, data from the Chinese government showed. Most were in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) courses. PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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WASHINGTON - A Chinese student didn't find it funny when a lab supervisor in an American university jokingly told her that she may be a spy.

Identified only as Martha, and with the name of the university not disclosed, the student told National Public Radio (NPR) that she felt betrayed - and afraid.

"I feel like the Chinese international students are targeted," she said.

Decoupling from China - the underlying agenda of the United States in [its trade war with Beijing](#) - does not apply just to manufacturing supply chains, but also to scientific and academic collaboration.

And Chinese in American universities and research institutions are beginning to feel the chill from the souring US-China relationship.

In some cases, they are merely collateral damage, but in others, they are indeed being targeted.

The number of US visas granted to Chinese government-funded students plunged in the first three months of this year, data from the Chinese government showed. Most were in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) courses, reports said.

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America's science and technology community, in particular, which thrives on global research collaboration, is concerned.

The conduct of scientific research is like assembling a large jigsaw puzzle when no one person holds all the pieces, Mr Norman R. Augustine, former Princeton professor who was also a former acting secretary of the army as well as chairman and chief executive of Lockheed Martin, said this week in a keynote talk at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

"Science is clearly at its best when it is borderless," Mr Augustine said.

The challenge for the US is to balance the immense benefit of openness in the conduct of research, with the undesirable impact on national security of some aspects of that openness.

About 30 per cent of America's overall science and tech workforce is foreign born, and over half the doctoral degrees awarded by universities are to non US-citizens, he said. "The fact is that America's research and engineering enterprise today could not function were it not for

contributions of foreign-born individuals," he added. "Many of these have come from China."

Dr Richard Lester, associate provost for international activities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the university took seriously the threat to American national security. MIT stopped accepting funding from Chinese telecom giant Huawei a little over a year ago, he said.

"But at the same time, MIT believes the US benefits immeasurably from its open research system, which has enabled US scientists to share findings and attract top students and researchers from around the world," he said. "We also gain when our researchers can take advantage of other nations' expertise, including the growing expertise of China."

For the Trump administration, the issue of immigration is broader than the competition with China. From the start, the focus has reached beyond immigration enforcement. In February 2018, the mission statement of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) was changed to drop the phrase that describes the US as "a nation of immigrants".

"Trump is the first president in modern times to characterise legal immigration as detrimental to the United States," Ms Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst for the US Immigration Policy Programme at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) wrote in a 46-page report in May.

The White House had unilaterally advanced its agenda through hundreds of policy memos, regulatory changes, and more, she wrote. Some had been reversed or limited by courts, but others moved forward untouched.

Only one order specifically targets Chinese nationals, Ms Pierce told The Straits Times. In June 2018, an order was issued to additionally screen Chinese nationals in "sensitive fields".

"The State Department now conducts additional screenings of Chinese nationals who are applying for visas," she wrote. "There is no public guidance on what constitutes a 'sensitive' field."

The State Department on Monday (June 3) countered the narrative, with a spokesman saying: "We're committed to providing the highest quality service to legitimate travellers, who constitute the overwhelming majority of our visa applicants."

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"We welcome Chinese students and scholars to the United States to conduct legitimate academic activities," the spokesman said, adding that most applicants receive full five-year visas.

But Ms Pierce told ST: "Generally, the goal is to increase enforcement in the interior of the country, to harden the borders, and when it comes to legal immigration, to increase vetting and ideally in the end, decrease the number of legal immigrants coming into the country."

Just weeks ago on May 24, USCIS head Francis Cissna resigned. He is widely seen as having been forced out as part of a general purge within the Department of Homeland Security, because he had not taken a hard enough line. Mr Trump reportedly wants him replaced by former Virginia attorney general Ken Cuccinelli, who is notorious for his hardline views on immigration.

"The resignation of Francis Lee Cissna as director of USCIS and the possible appointment of Ken Cuccinelli as his successor spells the end of legal immigration as it currently exists," USCIS employees union

president Danielle Spooner said in a statement. "It has become clear that the goal of this administration is to end immigration all together."

Ms Becki Young, a business immigration attorney and partner in the law firm Grossman Young and Hammond, told ST in an interview that other countries including China, Russia and western Europe would welcome scientists and researchers if they could not get visas for the US.

"We're just shooting ourselves in the foot by making it very challenging for them to come here," she said.

Back in August 2018, when the direction of the administration on immigration and on China was becoming more evident, MIT president L. Rafael Reif wrote in a commentary that rather than reacting to China, the US needed to build a far-sighted national strategy of its own for sustaining American leadership in science and innovation.

"If all we do in response to China's ambition is to try to double-lock all our doors, I believe we will lock ourselves into mediocrity," he wrote.