



[China and the United States Threaten Tit-for-Tat Political Detentions](#)

Tensions between the United States and China escalated again this week, with both countries criticizing the other for arbitrarily detaining their citizens. China has been incensed since the United States recently arrested several Chinese academics for visa fraud and accused them of carrying out espionage for the Chinese military at various research institutions across the country. It was reported that the Chinese government had contacted American officials and pressed for the charges to be dropped. Then on Saturday evening, the State Department issued an unexpected travel advisory for Americans in China, saying that citizens could be detained without warning in the country for reasons other than unlawfulness. The diplomatic spat is the latest fracture in the Sino-American relationship. In recent months, disagreements on trade, COVID-19, the status of Hong Kong, and the forced detention of ethnic minority Uighur Muslims have exacerbated the contentions between the countries.

The friction between China and the United States on the issue of political detentions began over the summer, when Chinese officials communicated to their American counterparts that the prosecutions against Chinese scholars in the United States should not proceed. The Chinese researchers in question are accused of lying on their visa applications to conceal their connections to the Chinese military. The Department of Justice alleges that up to five scholars were attempting to conduct industrial espionage in research centers across the country. China has denied any link between the scholars and their military, and has accused the United States of detaining them arbitrarily. This is the latest example of the Trump administration taking a firm stance against potential Chinese espionage activities. In the past, measures to deter Chinese spying included restricting visas on Chinese graduate students with links to military institutions.

Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, accused the United States of engaging in "outright political repression" when asked about the scholars' detention at a press conference. Another spokesperson also said in response to the State Department's travel advisory that foreign citizens had nothing to fear while located in China, and that the United States was the only one subjecting foreign citizens to "egregious treatment." However, multiple credible news organizations including the Wall Street Journal and New York Times have obtained information that the Chinese government threatened tit-for-tat political detentions of American citizens if the prosecutions of the Chinese scholars proceeded. Adding credence to this is China's history of detaining foreign citizens arbitrarily to put pressure on other governments. Most notably, China and Canada are currently embroiled in a disagreement after Canada detained Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou for violating sanctions. In an act of revenge, China then subsequently detained two Canadian citizens - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor.

Recent reports have indicated that China is seeking to improve relations with the United States, and is watching the upcoming election very closely. The Trump administration has taken a hard line against China, and the cabinet is populated by several hawks on China policy. In contrast, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has indicated that he does not view China as a greater threat to the United States than other adversaries such as Russia or Iran.