

The Volokh Conspiracy

Mostly law professors | Sometimes contrarian | Often libertarian | Always independent

About The Volokh Conspiracy 

CHINA

US Can do Well by Doing Good in Opening Our Doors to Chinese Immigration

As Washington Post columnist Catherine Rampell explains, doing so will simultaneously strengthen the US and weaken a major geopolitical rival. It can also rescue many Chinese from terrible oppression.

ILYA SOMIN | 7.9.2023 10:30 AM



If there's one thing Republicans and Democrats tend to agree on, it's that China has become America's most dangerous geopolitical adversary. But, as *Washington Post* columnist Catherine Rampell explains in [a recent article](#), we are shooting ourselves in the foot in this competition by severely restricting Chinese immigration to the US. Opening our doors is an easy

way to strengthen the US at Xi Jinping's expense:

My fellow Americans, it's time to set aside our xenophobia. For the good of our country, let's help drain China's brains.

As China has lifted its pandemic lockdowns, many residents have grown more footloose. Maybe high youth unemployment has left younger workers restless.... Or maybe people are just tired of living in an authoritarian country with arbitrary restrictions on freedom of ideas, capital and movement.

Whatever the specific motivations, the number of people leaving China and seeking to make (or invest) their fortunes abroad is rising again, according to data from the U.N. Population Division....

China's loss presents a huge opportunity for the United States....

Immigrants have long been the lifeblood of the U.S. economy and innovation. For more than a century, we have benefited from waves of people leaving difficult conditions in their home countries. In fact, the U.S. government has often worked hard to poach the top talent of our geopolitical adversaries. During the mid-20th century, for instance, we took in scientists from Germany (both those who worked for the Nazis and those persecuted by them); and part of our Cold War policy included siphoning off Soviet superstars.

These and other immigrants turned out to be productive workers, who in turn made our own homegrown workers more productive. This served our interests economically, militarily and geopolitically. It's great marketing for Western democratic values, after all, to be a desirable destination for your rivals' top talent....

Plus, bringing this coveted talent *here* means that same talent is not available *there*.

For all these reasons, I've previously argued for exploiting Russia's brain drain. The same arguments apply to China, too. Perhaps especially to China, given that U.S. political leaders openly fear being surpassed by Chinese innovation or getting locked out of global supply chains that intersect with China....

But however much money we throw at semiconductor or battery manufacturing, we will struggle to achieve our own ambitions if we lack the talent to build and operate those high-tech facilities, as we now clearly do. As Cato Institute scholar Scott Lincicome put it: You can be a China hawk or you can be an immigration hawk, but you can't really be both.

I have made similar arguments with respect to Chinese migration here and [here](#). As Rampell notes, most of the same points [apply to Russian migration](#), as well. In both cases, we can simultaneously bolster our economy, weaken an adversary, and score valuable points in the international war of ideas against dictators like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. The latter can't credibly claim their authoritarian regimes are the wave of the future if millions of their people "vote with their feet" for our system over theirs.

Advertisement

AD

The security risk argument against doing this is overblown (Chinese immigrants actually have [a lower rate of espionage than the US population as a whole](#)), and easily managed by steps like limiting access to classified information.

Sadly, as Rampell points out, the political winds are actually blowing in the wrong direction on this:

Right now, nervous Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs are streaming to [Singapore](#) and other countries. The United States should be encouraging them to bring their talents here instead. Unfortunately, we've mostly done the opposite.

Some U.S. senators, for instance, have [pushed](#) to deny visas to Chinese citizens who want to come to the United States to study science, citing supposedly unmanageable national security risks (even though no one is suggesting visiting foreign nationals, from any country, go unvetted). Scholars of Chinese descent already here are [reportedly choosing to leave](#) tenured jobs at U.S. institutions, citing a hostile political and cultural environment...

Even some state governments are getting in on the red-baiting. Florida recently [passed](#) a law [banning](#) Chinese nationals from buying property, with several other states following suit.

In addition to the economic and national security advantages of opening doors to Chinese immigration, there is also [a great moral benefit](#): freeing large numbers of people from horrific authoritarian oppression. Chinese seeking freedom should not be forcibly confined in an increasingly repressive dictatorship [merely because they were born in the wrong place or to the wrong parents](#).

As in [the case of Russians](#), it is wrong to claim Chinese should be kept out because they have some kind of collective responsibility for the evil perpetrated by their government. The same goes for [claims they have a moral duty to stay home and "fix their own country."](#)

During the Cold War, US policymakers - including many conservative Republicans - [understood the economic, security, and moral benefits of openness to migration](#) from hostile communist nations. Sadly, that common-sense wisdom has faded, especially - though certainly not exclusively - on the political right. It's long past time we rediscover it.

To get the Volokh Conspiracy Daily e-mail, please sign up [here](#).

Email *(Required)*

e.g. jane@example.cor

Submit

NEXT: Today in Supreme Court History: July 9, 1868

Ilya Somin is Professor of Law at George Mason University, and author of *Free to Move: Foot Voting, Migration, and Political Freedom* and *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*.

[CHINA](#) [IMMIGRATION](#) [RUSSIA](#) [NATIONAL SECURITY](#)



[MEDIA CONTACT & REPRINT REQUESTS](#)

Show Comments (148)

RECOMMENDED

Open the Door to Chinese Migrants Fleeing Brutal Covid Lockdowns

The Case for Opening Our Doors to Russians Fleeing Putin - as Well as Ukrainians

Let Hongkongers Immigrate to the West - And other Victims of Chinese Government Oppression, too

The U.S. Should Immediately Grant Visas to Hong Kong Residents Who Want Out

Open Borders in America: A Look Back and Forward

About

Browse Topics

Events

Staff

Jobs

Donate

Advertise

Subscribe

Contact

Media

Shop

Amazon



© 2023 Reason Foundation | [Accessibility](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms Of Use](#)

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.