

# Geopolitics and Student Mobility

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student mobility in a global pandemic***

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- ❖ Key turbulences
- ❖ Historic view on geopolitics and student mobility
- ❖ International students as political tools
- ❖ China, the US and Australia
- ❖ Implications for rethinking international education

- ❖ Geopolitics, including national protectionism, inward looking nationalism & far-right policies
- ❖ Economics (GFC)
- ❖ Natural disasters (e.g. Bushfire)
- ❖ Pandemic (SARS, COVID-19)
- ❖ Systemic racism/COVID-19 related racism
- ❖ Spread of grassroots social and political movements  
(Tran, 2020a; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2020)

# Colonisation and student mobility: Vietnam-France



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- ❖ French colonisation: 1858 -1954.
- ❖ Colonial geopolitics and student mobility:
  - Sponsored Vietnamese students and scholars to study in France
  - Sponsoring country's aim: help Vietnamese students learn about the **foundations and the superstructures of French civilization**
  - Young Vietnamese scholars **became progressive-minded and actively promoted national independence.**
- ❖ The mobility scheme: destructive to the maintenance of French rule in Indochina
- ❖ After the Vietnam war
  - student mobility to support Vietnam's aspiration of regional and world integration and human capacity building
- ❖ (Pham and Fry, 2002; Tran, Marginson & Nguyen, 2014; Welch, 2010)

- ❖ In 2018, Saudi Arabia’s government instructed all its citizens studying in Canada to return home (Stephenson, 2018): around 12,000 students
- ❖ Reciprocal banning of mainland Chinese students by China and Taiwan
  - China temporarily stopped sending mainland Chinese students to Taiwan in April 2020
  - Taiwan’s announcement of a temporary ban of mainland Chinese students from entering the island (Lo, 2020)
- ❖ Political movements driven by pro-nationalism and anti-immigration fed by fears around COVID-19 create as “new world order”
  - Brexit, the Trump administration’s isolationism and the rise of the far-right parties in Europe (Altbach and de Wit, 2017, Hsieh, 2020).



- ❖ The May 2020 Presidential Proclamation sought to cancel visas of 3,000 Chinese students and researchers with perceived ties with the Chinese military
- ❖ A highly problematic approach generalising anyone with ties to China, likely to trigger anti-Chinese sentiment and Chinese reciprocation
- (Lewis, 2020; Wong and Barnes, 2020)

# COVID-19 has escalated geopolitical tensions



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## ❖ The Australian government's

- calls for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and
- responses to issues related to Hong Kong's security law, Taiwan and South China Sea
- introduction of new visa options for Hong Kong students → surge in applications from HK

## ❖ In response, China has:

- warned their students from travelling to Australia (Kuo and Murphy, 2020)
- threatened to divert thousands of Chinese students to the UK (Bagshaw et al., 2020).
- UK: an increase by 9 percent in the number of non-EU international students (Mittelmeier et al., 2020).

## ❖ South China Sea and the nine-dash line

- Tensions: Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam <> China → multiple reports on China's escalation in the South China Sea amid COVID-19 (Heydarian, 2020; Walden & Choahan, 2020) → potentially affect regional student mobility in East Asia



- ❖ Exert influence through international education
  - (i) partnerships with foreign universities (Yang, 2008),
  - (ii) increasing funding for research conducted in foreign universities and
  - (iii) setting up off-shore campuses eg. in Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Japan (He and Wilkins, 2018).
- ❖ “Bring-in” (qing jilai zhanlue) strategy to attract international students to China, re-position China as a regional education hub (Cheng, 2009): In 2018, 492,185 IS (MOE PRC, 2019)
- ❖ “Go-out” and “Bring-in”: short-term intra-degree mobility
- ❖ Belt & Road, Confucius Institutes (CIs), language schools and scholarships for students (Hall, 2017)
  - By 2017: **516 CIs** and **1,076 Confucius Classrooms** in primary and secondary schools in **142 countries** and regions globally (Haban News, 2017; Luqiu and McCarthy, 2019).
- ❖ In Australia
  - pressure to register **CIs in 13 host universities** under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (Galloway et al., 2020)
  - In August 2020, new laws proposed to increase control over universities’ international relations and collaborative research project arrangements (Fitzgerald, 2020)



- ❖ Aligning outbound mobility more closely with economic and political interests → a shift in targeted destinations (Gribble & Tran, 2016)
- ❖ The Australian government seeks to strengthen Australia's position in the Indo-Pacific, a region critical to its political, cultural and economic development. (Tran, 2020b)
- ❖ Australian students engaged in study abroad in the Indo-Pacific regarded as **agents for humanising foreign policy objectives** (Lowe, 2014, 2015), as **actors of public (soft) diplomacy** (Tran & Vu, 2018) & as **subjects of political agendas** (Tran & Bui, Forthcoming).
- ❖ Other signature outbound motility programs: 'Generation UK-China'; 'Generation UK-India', and USA's '100,000 Strong China'
- ❖ Learning abroad is no longer just about serving individual students' education and institutional partnerships but also about nation states' political, diplomatic and economic agendas



# Concluding Thoughts



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- ❖ Political dimension of IoHE: as a tool to serve colonial imperatives (earlier days) and then foster mutual understanding, cooperation, reduce tensions between nations and create peace.
- ❖ **International education has again been weaponised** in context of escalating political tensions and the disputes of the mishandling of COVID-19
- ❖ “When governments sneeze, then international education catches cold”
- ❖ **Chinese students** in particular are positioned as venues for gov political responses: impacts on their security, wellbeing, study, career plans and future aspirations
- ❖ IE is in crisis because its philosophy based on liberal concepts of “freedom, democracy, trade, peace, development and hospitality” are challenged by “racist, white supremacist, isolationist, and war-mongering national populism and far-right politics” (Peters, 2020, p. 1240)
- ❖ The role of IHE beyond viewing inbound and outbound mobility students as of economic value and objects in political games to **consider values of multilateral relationship building, regional unity and solidarity and inclusiveness.**
- ❖ **People-to-people connections, institution-to-institution connections and country-to-country connections**



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Thank you



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