

## Chinese politics & policy

# US-China ties worst in decades after journalist expulsions

War of words over coronavirus pandemic drives relations to new low



Analysts say relations between China and the US appear to be entering their rockiest period since 1989 © Mark Schiefelbein/AP

**Tom Mitchell** in Singapore and **Xinning Liu** in Beijing AN HOUR AGO

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Diplomatic relations between the world's two largest economies have reached their lowest ebb in more than 30 years, fuelled by a racially tinged war of words over the [coronavirus](#) pandemic and mass expulsions of US and Chinese journalists.

The deterioration comes just two months after a “phase one” trade agreement between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping appeared to have stabilised the world's most important bilateral relationship, at least temporarily.

But in a move reminiscent of the tensest moments of the US-Soviet cold war, in the early hours of Wednesday morning China's foreign ministry announced it would [expel almost all US nationals](#) working in the country for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

Six of eight China reporters for The New York Times are US nationals. The Washington Post, which was in the process of applying to increase the number of its China accreditations to three from two, will have only one reporter left in the country.

The latest expulsion order will also prevent the journalists from working in Hong Kong, the semi-autonomous territory which has traditionally been willing to issue work permits to foreigners expelled from mainland China. Critics say this violates the spirit of the Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution, that affords it a high degree of legal autonomy from Beijing. However, China argues this is a foreign affairs issue and, therefore, comes under its purview.

Wednesday's expulsion of at least a dozen reporters working for US media outlets is the latest in a series of [tit-for-tat actions](#) taken after a headline of an article in The Wall Street Journal's opinion pages referred to the country as the "[Real Sick Man of Asia](#)" — a reference seen by many Chinese people as derogatory.

Beijing [expelled](#) three of the Journal's China staff in response last month. The Trump administration, in turn, retaliated by expelling 60 of about 160 Chinese nationals working for Beijing-controlled media outlets in the US.

**Relations between the two countries have entered a vicious cycle. The two sides are still exchanging fire. It may be irreversible**

Pang Zhongying, Singapore  
Institute of Southeast Asian  
Studies

A senior state department official on Wednesday said the US would not preview its response to the Chinese expulsions. But the official said the US was “resisting” China in the media space as part of a “strategic” competition between the two countries. The official argued US resistance had elicited a “much more shrill narrative” from Beijing.

“Their job isn’t to report facts back to the Chinese people,” the official said of employees of Chinese state media outlets, complaining that US reporters would “lose the ability to observe and report what is happening” in China as a result of the latest expulsions.

Analysts said the two countries’ relations appeared to be entering their rockiest period since 1989, when the [bloody suppression](#) of pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square halted normal diplomatic and cultural exchanges between the US and China.

“It is deeply concerning that [the US and China] have descended into trading blame insults and punitive actions rather than forging a common front to counter a pandemic that is wreaking carnage on the global economy,” said Eswar Prasad, a former head of the IMF’s China division who now teaches at Cornell University. “The open hostility will make it

harder to limit the economic and financial damage and does nothing to bolster consumer and business confidence, which are already in freefall.”

Hours before the latest expulsions were announced, Geng Shuang, a foreign ministry spokesman, had expressed “strong indignation” at Mr Trump’s recent references to the rapidly spreading coronavirus as “the Chinese virus”, saying the US president’s intention was to “stigmatise China”.

Mr Trump and other senior officials in Washington have said the term simply reflected the coronavirus’s origin and is necessary to counter Chinese officials’ recent embrace of [conspiracy theories](#) blaming the US military for the outbreak.

“Rather than having an argument [about the origin of the virus] I have to call it where it came from,” Mr Trump said on Tuesday. On Wednesday morning he posted three [more tweets](#) referring to “the Chinese virus”, while secretary of state Mike Pompeo regularly refers to it as “the Wuhan virus”.

“China did start the fire,” added Bilahari Kausikan, a retired Singapore diplomat and head of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. “People are not stupid. They can see that.”

But Mr Trump’s repeated references to “the Chinese virus” have also been controversial in the US, where some see it as an attempt to deflect attention from his administration’s much-criticised response to the pandemic. One former Trump

administration official called such references “stupid”. “The deep stain of the administration’s mishandling of the outbreak cannot be whitewashed with some geographic indicators,” the former official added.

## Read more about the impact of coronavirus

- [The latest figures as the outbreak spreads](#)
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Experts believe the cycle of punitive action and retaliatory counteraction is likely to continue, with each side seeing itself as the originally aggrieved party and duty-bound to respond in kind.

“Relations between the two countries have entered a vicious cycle,” said Pang Zhongying, a visiting scholar at the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. “The two sides are still exchanging fire. It may be irreversible.”

“The Chinese Communist party’s decision to expel journalists from China and Hong Kong is yet another step towards depriving the Chinese people and the world of access to true information about China,” Mr Trump’s National Security Council said in a statement. “The US calls on China’s leaders to refocus their efforts from expelling journalists and spreading disinformation to joining all nations in stopping the Wuhan coronavirus.”

The NSC's deputy director is Matt Pottinger, a former Wall Street Journal China reporter whose hawkish view of the country was forged by his experiences there, including altercations with what he termed "[government goons](#)".

*Additional reporting by Katrina Manson in Washington*

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