

GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE SECURITY

Derisking Policies in International Higher Education: Navigating the Geopolitics of Knowledge

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This article examines “derisking” policies in international higher education targeting China–Western research collaborations. While intended to protect national security and intellectual property, these measures erode mutual trust, disrupt academic talent flows, and fragment global knowledge creation. The paper advocates for “knowledge diplomacy” over academic isolation, arguing that addressing global challenges requires balancing security concerns with continued academic collaboration through transparency, mutual respect, and commitment to academic freedom.

International higher education, once characterized by accelerating open collaboration following the Cold War, has recently encountered significant headwinds. Major Western countries, including the United States, the European Union with its 2023 strategy, and nations like Australia and Canada, have introduced policies aimed at safeguarding national research security. These “derisking” measures primarily target research partnerships with China, whose rapid technological advancement and distinct political system have drawn scrutiny. While these policies aim to protect national interests and sensitive technologies, we must ask: what specific risks are we controlling, and what are the implications for global knowledge creation and academic exchange?

The Rationale Behind Derisking

A central concern underpinning derisking policies is the perceived risk of unauthorized technology transfer and intellectual property misappropriation. Research in strategically significant domains—such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology—often has potential dual-use applications in both civilian and military contexts. Collaboration with China is viewed as especially sensitive due to the country’s “military–civil fusion” policy, which blurs lines between academic research and defense applications.

International academic mobility is increasingly seen through a security lens as a potential channel for knowledge leakage. These anxieties are compounded by fears of foreign interference in research agendas or institutional autonomy. China’s historical memory of its “Century of Humiliation” often informs Chinese perceptions of current geopolitical tensions as efforts to curtail its rise, creating a complex backdrop for policy interpretation.

Growing concerns about strategic dependencies—on a single nation for research funding, technological infrastructure, or expertise—have raised fears of vulnerability to geopolitical coercion. Some analysts frame the broader US–China rivalry within the “Thucydides Trap,” where a rising power threatens a ruling power. These concerns reflect a reconceptualization of knowledge production from a global public good to a strategic domain intertwined with national security and global power competition.

In the United States, academic collaboration with China has been increasingly framed through a national security lens. The European Union’s 2023 derisking strategy, while differentiating itself from absolute “decoupling,” still seeks to reduce critical dependencies. These policies signal a shift from open academic exchange toward a more controlled model of international collaboration.

Unintended Consequences for Higher Education

Derisking policies, while intended as protective, pose unintended risks. Foremost is the erosion of mutual trust. The assumption that academic collaboration with certain nations inherently poses security risks fosters suspicion. Recent research involving education professionals from both the European Union and China reveals that many Chinese educators perceive “derisking” as essentially “decoupling,” viewing it as an extension of the United States policy rather than an independent European stance.

Measures like suspending cofunding agreements with the China Scholarship Council in sensitive fields or restricting Chinese government-sponsored PhD students deepen this mistrust.

Inconsistent implementation and vague guidelines on “sensitive knowledge” complicate institutional compliance and can lead to oversecritization and self-censorship. This “collateral damage” of reduced collaboration is a significant concern voiced by education professionals in the European Union.

These policies threaten to disrupt academic pipelines, particularly the flow of Chinese graduate students into STEM fields, vital for research excellence in Europe and North America. Research between 2022 and 2024 indicated a decline in Chinese PhD students in these regions, partly attributed to such policies and visa difficulties. Evidence shows mutual derisking, where China also acts to protect its research, potentially limiting access to its labs and data.

The derisking narrative can create what some scholars term a “moralizing puritanism,” where critiquing certain regimes becomes primary, potentially reducing public interest in nuanced knowledge production. From a broader perspective, derisking, when perceived as containment, reinforces nationalist narratives and undermines the collaborative nature of research, potentially leading to a fragmented global academic landscape.

Charting a Balanced Path Forward

Effectively managing these risks requires universities and governments to resist unduly restricting global mobility based on nationality. Simplistic claims that China’s technological progress hinges solely on intellectual property theft ignore its significant indigenous innovation capacity, as evidenced by studies showing China’s leading position in highly cited scientific papers.

In facing pressing global challenges—climate change, pandemics, refugee crises—academic isolationism is counterproductive. Curtailing engagement with a major scientific player like China weakens our collective ability to

address these transnational problems. This is where “knowledge diplomacy,” as advocated by scholars like Jane Knight, becomes crucial. Unlike “knowledge power,” which focuses on competitive advantage, knowledge diplomacy emphasizes sharing expertise through collaboration to achieve mutual benefits and foster joint solutions.

This approach requires Western governments to promote transparency in research partnerships while avoiding overly restrictive measures that undermine academic freedom. Concurrently, the Chinese government can help by increasing policy transparency, respecting university autonomy, and protecting academic freedom within its institutions. While China has made strides in decentralizing its higher education system since the 1980s, true institutional autonomy remains an area where progress would ease international concerns.

Despite challenges, many educators on both sides remain optimistic about future collaboration, believing in the benefits of cultural exchange, university autonomy to manage risks, and researchers’ desire to collaborate. The consensus is that the best approach to derisking is not reducing collaboration but increasing understanding and engagement, thereby fostering an environment where risks can be managed more effectively through dialogue and mutual respect.

International higher education serves multiple goals: individual development, national interests, and global well-being. Universities, as custodians of global social conscience, must navigate the delicate balance between promoting the global public good, securing national interests, addressing global problems, and protecting academic freedom. The path forward requires not a retreat into suspicion but a renewed commitment to open scholarly inquiry, transparent practices, and robust international collaboration, guided by principles of mutual benefit and shared progress.

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