

Decoupling from the West Will Be Hard on China's Higher Education

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Academic relations between China and the Western world are deteriorating. While China is criticizing its Western partners for imposing their values, governments and universities in those countries are becoming more skeptical about the way the Chinese government is controlling academic cooperation and critical thinking and its one-sided use of cooperation for its own interests. What might be the negative implications of these increasing tensions for China's higher education?

China's internal realities and geopolitical posture have significantly changed in recent years. Since Xi Jinping rose to power in 2013, China's foreign relations have become more assertive in the Asian region and globally, and its internal governance more controlling. Most recently, the perennial "Taiwan problem" has been exacerbated by the visits of congressional leader Nancy Pelosi and other US officials. Additionally, China's posture relating to its immediate neighbors (Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others) has changed the views of many countries from a willingness to accept China's commercial—and political—leadership to significant skepticism and growing opposition.

Of great importance is the mainland's "takeover" of Hong Kong in violation of the "one country, two systems" commitment. The reaction in Taiwan, where support for collaboration with the mainland has largely disappeared and has been replaced by fear and opposition, was conspicuous in this respect. Repression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang is widely criticized and sanctions, which have significance, have been imposed by several countries. Many now consider China's multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative as a kind of neocolonialism, linking partner countries to China through huge debt and questionable infrastructure projects. China's draconian, and in the long-run unsustainable, COVID-19 policies have created problems for the economy, the global supply chain, and China's population—and have decimated China's international student population.

Mainland Chinese public opinion, if one can gauge this by social media, has moved in a nationalist direction—with many demanding an invasion of Taiwan. Even the government's ever-efficient censors have had to tamp down the internet. A surprising opinion article in August 2022 in the *New York Times*, "[Why China's people no longer look up to America](#)," by Wang Wen, formerly an editor of the nationalist Communist Party's *Global Times*, is indeed a sign of the times. On Chinese campuses, students regularly report professors who seem too "liberal." Anti-Asian incidents that have taken place in Western countries are widely reported in Chinese media. Universities have been significantly affected, with increased surveillance, limitations on access to information from abroad, and tighter control by Communist Party authorities.

China Skepticism

"China skepticism" has been significant for some time in the United States and increasingly in other Western countries, and it is growing dramatically. Most of China's Confucius Institutes, once 118 in the United States at their peak and now only 14 as of June 2021, have disappeared from much of the United States and Europe—in the United States more for reasons of geopolitics and assumed espionage, and elsewhere more for concerns about academic freedom.

Government restrictions and legal actions relating to intellectual property theft are increasingly evident. A few prominent researchers with ties to China (both ethnic Chinese and others) have been put on trial. The [CHIPS Act](#), recently passed by the US Congress, which provides USD 280 billion to strengthen the US technology industry, has

Abstract

China is engaged in a geopolitical conflict with the West, especially with the United States, and this has a significant impact on Chinese higher education. Collaborative research will decrease. China-funded Confucius Institutes have been closed. Within China itself, there are more restrictions on universities. Is a new "academic cold war" looming between China and the West?

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an openly anti-Chinese focus (see also [Steven Brint, “The US “CHIPS and Science” Act Launches Industrial Policy as Counter to China,”](#) in this issue). Collaboration with China will be banned from the USD 52 billion allocation to research, much of which will go to US universities, making them even more cautious about working with Chinese partners.

In Europe and Australia, governments and higher education institutions are increasingly concerned about connections with China. In the Netherlands, for instance, the minister of education, culture and science has declared that national security stands above academic freedom and that the country will impose strict regulations on how higher education institutions guarantee and carefully monitor compliance. In March 2022, in Australia, a parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security published a report titled [Report of the Inquiry into National Security Risks Affecting the Australian Higher Education and Research Sector](#), with recommendations for more control and oversight. Other countries and the European Commission have followed suit. Knowledge security has become a key issue for the United States, Australia, the European Commission and its member states, and their universities.

The Academic Impact

Universities, perhaps especially in the United States, but increasingly in the Anglosphere and in Europe as well, will be significantly affected. Without question, current geopolitical realities, which will only deteriorate in the immediate future, create unprecedented problems. Fundamentally, there is already a decoupling of the deep links forged over a half-century between Chinese science and higher education and the Western system, and particularly the United States.

The future of student mobility from China to the West is somewhat hard to predict, but it is quite likely that numbers will decline (see Qiang Zha, [“Will China Remain a Top Player in the International Education Market?”](#) in *IHE* #112). Even prior to the current crisis, it was clear that the boom of recent decades was coming to an end. The decline will be gradual and the impact will be different by country and by (type of) institution. This will have related positive effects by making countries and institutions less dependent on the income from Chinese students and creating more diversity. The negative impact will be felt at the graduate and in particular at the doctoral level, where Chinese students have been present in large numbers and excelled in almost all disciplines, and within research collaboration and innovation. There will be less university-to-university collaboration and a reduction of research work with Chinese colleagues. As noted, surveillance by government authorities will be ubiquitous.

Some analysts have argued that the current geopolitical tensions between the West, in particular the United States, and China result from an arrogant dominance by the West. We do not deny that this is indeed an important factor, but in these kinds of tensions, both sides share the blame and will be affected.

The Impact on China

For China, the impact will be significant. China’s academic progress has been impressive and the quality of its top universities is world class. Yet research, and especially the culture of innovation, still lags behind Western institutions. A decrease of academic contacts will be detrimental. Chinese students will have fewer opportunities for overseas study. The future of the many Western branch campuses operating in China will be called into question, and the number of Western scholars and researchers willing to work in China will decrease.

Chinese universities have spent much effort to foster critical thinking skills, establishing some liberal arts programs and in general stressing innovation. With an increased emphasis on courses on political orthodoxy and greatly expanded external control, the atmosphere in Chinese academe will inevitably change.

Certainties and Questions

We are in the midst of a sea-change in China’s relationship with the rest of the world. China’s internal policies are increasingly nationalistic and its foreign relations increasingly assertive. These realities will have an impact on both China’s higher education relations and on the quality of its education and research.

China has benefited enormously from its opening to the world, its research collaboration with Western partners, and the education that many of its students did abroad. In the years ahead, R&D will suffer a critical setback as a result of isolation and restrictions on academic freedom.

Some things remain unclear. Will there be a full-scale “academic cold war” between the West and China, harking back to the years of minimal scientific and intellectual contacts between the West and the Soviet Union in the post-World War II period? Will Russia join a China-led scientific system? How will the Global South react? Will the world’s second largest higher education system, India, step in to play a role? Will the situation improve after Xi Jinping starts on his third term as China’s leader in November 2022?

There are many questions, but it is clear that China’s role in the world is at an inflection point, and higher education and science will be significantly affected, globally, and without doubt in China itself. ▲

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