

Geopolitics: From Closed Openness to Closed Closure

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The US-dominated globalization of the 1990–2015 period is gone, and broad-based support for free research cooperation and cross-border people mobility in higher education (albeit on Anglo-European terms) has gone with it. In a more multipolar global space in which parts of the Global South are rising, research securitization, migration resistance (especially in Anglo-Europe), and an enhanced willingness of governments everywhere to intervene in higher education has become the new normal.

The golden age of neo-imperial globalization was 1990–2015. Global higher education was shaped as a hegemonized space, dominated by Anglo-American language and universities. Cross-border relations were fostered by a normative internationalization defined in the West. In the US and Anglo-Euro world, there was broad support in government, international agencies, and the public sphere for liberal capitalist globalization, economic integration, and convergence. This legitimated every instance of cross-border openness, connection, and passage, including education and science.

The West Was the Best

Pax Americana provided a safe neo-imperial space in which Western countries could focus on economic goals rather than national security, while their electorates tolerated economic globalization and cosmopolitan internationalization in education. It was all of a piece. Cross-border student mobility would foster graduates for international business. Cosmopolitan cultural inclusion in education would optimize the market reach of global companies. Open science would maximize innovation and productivity, with talent flowing to the global centers best able to profit from it, in continuity with colonialism. International student mobility and global scientific cooperation expanded rapidly.

All was expected (at least in Anglo-America) to foster Anglo-American soft and hard power. Western governments were comfortable with openness because it was Western-dominated, predictable, and limited. Academic and scientific networks were technically open but culturally closed, confined to English and the Euro-American episteme, managed by the top Anglo-American universities and reproducing their deeply felt sense of cultural superiority.

Neoliberal marketization was meant to optimize the economic utility of higher education. This suited university leaders. The knowledge economy legitimated them and their status-building projects. They could expand freely in response to social demand

for higher education. They still had institutional autonomy, though refashioned as corporate autonomy. They were more regulated than before—by rankings, research assessment, and comparative graduate salaries—but still determined their own programs. However, the commitment of Western nation-states to liberal internationalization could hold only while global economic openness strengthened US global primacy and was seen to benefit capital accumulation.

Surprised by the South

The first sign that things were not evolving as expected was the growing political autonomy and rapid economic and educational advance of countries outside the West—not only China but also Brazil, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Korea, and others—breaking from neocolonialism. China's economy exceeded the US size in purchasing-power terms in 2016, and, between 1990 and 2015, its gross tertiary enrollment ratio rose from 3 percent to 47 percent. The 2023 enrollment ratio was 78 percent, on par with the US at 79 percent, and the peak Chinese universities in science had passed the US in world-leading science in STEM.

Science systems developed in many middle-income and some low-income countries, though papers in languages other than English were still excluded from the global system. Between 2003 and 2015, the number of global science papers in Scopus with authors from China jumped from 88,585 to 406,734 and, by 2022, was 898,949, double the US level. India is now the third largest producer of science, well ahead of the UK, Germany, and Japan.

From Openness to Closure

The rise of the global East and South was facilitated by the open globalization of 1990–2015, which supported the ebbing of colonialism despite the imperial hubris. That genie is now out of the bottle and cannot be stuffed back in. This is not well understood in the West.

The way forward is through globalization, not against it, into the emerging multipolar world—retaining openness, broadening cultural inclusion, and fostering mutual economic and educational cooperation. Instead we have racist paranoia, deglobalization, and the US–China decoupling designed to thwart the rise of Chinese civilization. It is disaster all around, above all because it is postponing respectful cooperation for ecological survival. The old US geopolitical strategy, to secure inclusive globalization and colonize it, is gone. US-led multilateralism is fading, nation-states are more aggressive, and open doors are no longer the norm.

Fallout in Science

There are multiple forms of educational fallout from geopolitics. Governments display a new willingness to intervene in higher education and science, re-norming global matters as national matters. Few states argue against the principle of a single science network, but many now make decisions that impair communications and research exchange. Soft-power goals recede; hard power is more important. Security concerns, never entirely absent, have become a first-order issue. Spaces shared by Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the West, are vacant. Passage between Taiwan and China is hard. Palestinian universities and lives are decimated. Universities and scholars in Israel are more isolated.

The US–China coauthorship has been the largest cooperation in science. Surveys find that researchers in both countries strongly support continued scientific cooperation. The partial decoupling is a massive blow to open science and academic freedom with clear epistemic costs. The number of collaborative papers is trending downward, driven down by the 2018 China Initiative’s ICE-like persecution of US citizen researchers of Chinese heritage. None were found guilty of espionage or intellectual property theft, but many lost their jobs.

Students have also felt the effects. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of visas granted for Chinese students entering the US

fell from 280,000 to less than 90,000, and border harassment has been common. Between 2015 and 2023, US students in China fell from 15,000 to 350. The US government has pressured other Western states to follow by adopting low trust regulation and protracted risk management in dealings with China. Universities have always combined global cooperation with national agendas, but the national securitization of research decisively politicizes and unbalances science. The test of truth is no longer primary.

Shutting up the Shop

The blockages to cross-border cooperation are underpinned by a nativist revolt against cosmopolitanism and migration in many Western countries. It is impossible to achieve a pure national identity based on race or religion, but patriotic nativism offers a form of agency by exploiting fears of the other among voters who are struggling. This drags into the vortex centrist parties and governments themselves struggling to survive. Few at the white supremacist-led rallies against migration are likely to sympathize with efforts to internationalize higher education or with the academic freedom of researchers.

Migration regimes have been toughened in Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and Trump conducts continuous deportations. Yet most governments cannot stop migration as such. Capitalism needs low-paid labor. When governments want to achieve demonstrable reductions in numbers, the soft target is international students.

Canada has cut its international student intake by over half, and Australia, the UK, and the US have all made student entry more difficult. Denmark has reduced its intake of cross-border students into English-language courses. Norway and Finland have introduced full-cost international student fees. The best antidote to unthinking nativism, and the geopolitics of othering, is the spread of understanding through education. But, until then, it might get worse before it gets better.

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