

EXPERTS TAKE

What Does the CISPA Case Tell Us About Research Security and Cooperation with China?

An Interview with Dr. Alicia Hennig

Introduction

In this expert interview conducted by Melita Phachulia, Executive Assistant at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Dr. Alicia Hennig, Associated Senior Research Fellow at ISDP, examines what the Helmholtz Center for Information Security (CISPA) case reveals about the changing landscape of research security and international scientific cooperation. European institutions face the challenge of preserving openness and collaboration while protecting sensitive knowledge and technologies.

The debate has become particularly prominent regarding cooperation with China. While international research partnerships have contributed significantly to scientific progress, concerns have grown over issues such as technology transfer, state influence within academic institutions, and the strategic use of research cooperation.



The CISA case has become an important example in this wider discussion. It has raised questions about whether European research institutions are sufficiently prepared to identify and manage risks, and how they can adapt traditional approaches to international collaboration in a changing security environment.

In this interview, Dr. Alicia Hennig discusses what the CISA case tells us about current patterns of research cooperation with China, how China's higher education system has evolved under Xi Jinping, and what steps Europe should take to strengthen research security while preserving meaningful scientific exchange.

Melita Phachulia: The CISA case has attracted significant attention across Europe. What does it tell us about the current state of research cooperation with China?

Alicia Hennig: The CISA case is an example of 'science as usual' with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This concept is adapted from 'business as usual', where foreign companies and governments continue to engage in business with controversial PRC companies such as Huawei, or continue to do business in the PRC despite increased political interference.

As the CISA case clearly shows, science organizations either lack awareness of the risks involved in collaborating with the PRC on research, including a lack of understanding of the PRC's higher education system, or are unwilling to address these risks—or both. There also seems to be a certain lethargy in reflecting on these risks, and on geopolitical risk more broadly, particularly in academia, where the "open science" paradigm still prevails.

Phachulia: China's universities are viewed through the lens of national security and

technological competition. How has Xi Jinping's vision for higher education changed the role these institutions play?

Hennig: A number of changes affecting higher education in the PRC were introduced under Xi Jinping. Not least because of cameras installed in every classroom to monitor professors' and students' compliance with the official party line, censorship in the classroom has increased substantially. Marxist courses expanded significantly, becoming more comprehensive and obligatory for all students, regardless of their chosen subject. The higher education system in the PRC is designed to educate 'socialist builders': people who serve and are loyal to the Party. This was further formalized more recently through the Patriotic Education Law. Additionally, technology and knowledge transfer mechanisms have been systematically integrated into the PRC's scientific system, similar to the technology transfer mechanisms employed in joint ventures between Chinese and foreign companies. Under Xi, universities play two essential roles. One is to produce educated but loyal citizens. The other is to extract and transfer technology and knowledge from other higher education and science systems abroad, commercializing this in the PRC through an elaborate innovation ecosystem.

Phachulia: Is a complete decoupling from Chinese research institutions realistic? If not, what principles should guide selective engagement?

Hennig: No, complete decoupling is probably not realistic, but selective engagement that serves our interests is key. However, we should be aware that the PRC is already decoupling its science system from ours through various measures, such as data laws for cross-border data transfer, limited access to Chinese-language journals (CKNI database), and, more recently, constraints on Chinese researcher mobility, particularly in key technology areas.

We could potentially still collaborate with PRC institutions, but not in fields that the Party considers key to maintaining and expanding their power. Any collaboration with PRC defense or defense-related universities, research organizations, or specific departments should definitely be blocked. Ideally, any research related to knowledge and technology transfer should also be blocked. Unfortunately, this does not leave us with too many areas for cooperation.

Phachulia: How should universities balance academic openness with the need to protect sensitive research and technologies?

Hennig: Both formal ways of research collaboration (on the institutional level, for example, through institutional research projects) and informal ways of research collaboration (on the individual level, for example, through joint publications) should be definitely blocked regarding the aforementioned research fields and universities, research organizations, and specific departments. Ideally, this should also apply when there is an element of knowledge and technology transfer, such as incoming PRC researchers supported by specific PRC scholarships, for example, those from the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC).

Phachulia: Who should be responsible for assessing and managing these risks: the individual researcher, universities, funding

bodies, or governments? Has Europe found the right balance yet?

Hennig: Everyone has to take responsibility. This shared responsibility includes every level: macro (national), meso (organizational) and micro (individual). The German government has issued a document outlining the different responsibilities at various organizational levels. Responsibilities differ across these levels, but it is important that everyone understands their part in it.

Personally, I do not think that Europe has found a balance yet. Currently, there is a very fragmented landscape of approaches.

Phachulia: The debate often focuses on individual cases, but are there deeper structural issues in Europe's research ecosystem that the CISPA controversy has brought to light?

Hennig: The CISPA case is not an isolated incident. However, all the cases I have analyzed in Germany so far have different configurations. This means they follow different patterns with regard to knowledge and technology transfer, as well as alleged espionage in academia or in relation to it. Yet many cases are not reported to or identified by the media, particularly if they do not involve espionage, but rather something more related to so-called gray zone operations that are difficult to pin down. Currently, there are no empirical studies that could shed light on the systemic dimension of this phenomenon of knowledge extraction and

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transfer by the PRC through international research collaboration. There are also no studies on the structural conditions of our academic open science system that facilitate this extraction and transfer.

Phachulia: Looking ahead, what practical steps should European governments and universities take to strengthen research security while preserving international scientific collaboration where it remains beneficial?

Hennig: What we need is a unified and structured approach that includes basic measures such as national contact points and clear, consistent and comprehensive guidance documents focusing on knowledge and/or research security issues applicable across the EU. Funding agencies should also ensure that their funding is made available only to research organizations and universities that can prove they have effective security measures in place.

Ideally, EU member states would also agree not to pursue research collaboration with specific PRC universities, organizations and departments in key technological areas. Otherwise, PRC researchers may simply choose the EU member state with the lowest level of protection and security. Furthermore, research security is particularly relevant with regard to specific countries such as China, Russia and Iran. A country-agnostic approach does not sufficiently address the targeted attempts particularly by the PRC to extract and transfer knowledge and technology from our systems through international research collaboration.

Phachulia: Finally, what is the single most important lesson the CISA case should teach European policymakers and research institutions?

Hennig: The CISA case shows that such cases are not necessarily about espionage, but rather something much more ‘mundane’. However, if not dealt

with appropriately, this can be equally dangerous: unauthorized extraction and transfer of knowledge and technology particularly in sensitive areas of research, such as information security. This can take various forms and seamlessly integrates with the open science paradigm of underlying international research collaboration.

The CISA case is a microcosm of potentially extractive approaches, ranging from research groups entirely constituted by PRC nationals and joint publications with problematic PRC universities to, from our perspective, problematic funding of PRC scholars.

Conclusion

The CISA case highlights that research security is an important part of Europe’s broader security and resilience agenda. European institutions need to develop a more strategic understanding of the risks associated with global research partnerships, particularly with the PRC.

At the same time, strengthening research security should not mean completely abandoning openness or international collaboration. Scientific progress depends on exchange, diversity of perspectives, and cooperation across borders. The challenge is to ensure that openness is accompanied by awareness, responsibility, and appropriate safeguards.

A central message from this interview is that research security requires a shared effort. Researchers, universities, funding bodies, and governments all have a role in building a more resilient research ecosystem. Rather than reacting only when individual cases emerge, Europe needs a more proactive and coordinated approach that helps institutions identify risks before they become vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, the CISA case serves as a reminder that protecting research does not mean restricting knowledge exchange but ensuring that international cooperation remains sustainable, balanced, and aligned with Europe’s long-term interests.