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#35 Changing Perspectives Towards Conditions for Sustainable EU-China Academic Collaboration

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Key Takeaways

- A new balance and renewed conditions for sustainable EU-China academic collaboration should be found given geopolitical tensions and the need to address global challenges together.
- Uncertainties due to geopolitical tensions are affecting student and researcher mobility.
- Chinese universities exhibit diversified perceptions and attitudes toward evolving global and domestic conditions for collaboration with EU partners.
- The comparative analysis of EU countries reveals that policy approaches toward academic engagement with China vary widely across Member States, influencing how collaboration opportunities and risks are managed.
- Understanding China's mid-long-term perspective and policies at both governmental and institutional (university) levels is crucial for shaping future academic partnerships.

Recommendations

Considerations: think long-term, embrace complexity, monitor, invest and strengthen capacity in EU context.

Recommendations:

1. **Strengthen** expertise on China, as part of efforts to make the Netherlands geopolitically robust and to recalibrate the Netherlands' commitment to multilateral cooperation.
2. **Differentiate** knowledge security measures with respect to disciplines and types of higher education institutions. Promote the development of *responsible internationalization*.
3. **Invest** in partnerships and **improve** the conditions for Chinese students and researchers to study and work in the Netherlands.
4. Work in **EU context** from **EU** perspective.
5. Universities and other stakeholders: **live up to your values**, home and abroad: be precise, open and transparent.

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Executive Summary

This report examines the evolving dynamics of academic collaboration between Europe and China amid heightened geopolitical tensions. Conducted between April and December 2024 under the China Knowledge Network, it investigates China’s mid- and long-term perspectives at governmental and university levels and identifies conditions for sustainable EU-China collaboration. It emphasizes the need for a new balance between caution and continued cooperation to address global challenges while mitigating strategic risks.

The study tracks international talent and knowledge flows, highlighting that China remains a major source of international students and a growing destination for students from the Global South. Mobility patterns, including PhD and researcher exchanges, now reflect geopolitical uncertainties, visa restrictions, and shifting international partnerships. Knowledge flows continue to expand but face emerging pressures toward selective engagement and strategic decoupling in sensitive areas.

The report analyses China’s policies on international science and higher education cooperation, noting that authorities increasingly integrate long-term strategic priorities with international collaboration. Universities align research agendas with national objectives while navigating geopolitical pressures. Surveys reveal diversified perceptions and attitudes among Chinese universities, reflecting optimism about collaboration opportunities alongside concerns about operational, reputational, and political risks.

Comparative analysis across EU countries shows substantial variation in policy approaches, with differing levels of funding, instruments, and institutional coordination shaping opportunities and challenges. The report stresses that European strategies remain fragmented, often lagging behind China’s integrated, state-supported planning. It underlines the importance of embedding academic collaboration within EU strategic frameworks, including open strategic autonomy.

Overall, the report concludes that sustainable EU-China academic collaboration requires active monitoring, long-term objectives, strengthened institutional support, and strategic engagement with Chinese partners. It recommends aligning policies across EU institutions, fostering transparent cooperation mechanisms, investing in capacity building, and anticipating changes in talent and knowledge flows. By balancing risks and opportunities, Europe can maintain influence in shaping global academic networks while ensuring collaboration contributes to mutual benefit, innovation, and solutions to pressing global challenges.