

Making China-Collaboration Sustainable

Facilitating synergies between science and administration

Recommendations

Abstract

Scientists at German research institutions are often confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to collaborate with partners from China. While on the one hand collaboration is mutually rewarding, on the other geopolitical tensions have come to the foreground of the contested space of science and technology. Institutional administrators might also feel challenged in their tasks to efficiently advise science.

The workshop “Making China-Collaboration Sustainable” of the ASK project (GFZ) emphasised the need for stronger synergies between science and administration to manage these complexities. Recommendations include establishing communication structures, integrating risk assessment tools, enhancing China-competence, and promoting transparency across institutional levels. Administrative frameworks should support researchers, not restrict them or create additional bureaucracy, and both sides must align on goals and expectations. These hands-on recommendations underscore that sustainable China-collaboration hinges on balanced, informed, and secure practices embedded in institutional strategies and supported by ongoing consultation among science, administration and Chinese partners.

Three Take-Home Messages

- 1. Synergies between science and administration are essential:** Early, continuous, and structured communication between scientific and administrative staff contributes to the alignment of goals, improves compliance, and fosters more effective and secure collaborations.
- 2. China-competent scientists and administrators are an asset:** Knowledge on the state of Chinese technological developments and on Chinese research management needs to be channelled into the assessment of potential collaborations.
- 3. China-competence and dual-use awareness must be institutional priorities:** Building institutional knowledge on Chinese research culture and its regulatory environment on the one hand, while developing risk assessment capabilities on the other, are key to managing collaborations responsibly. Thus, management must also support these initiatives and dedicate resources to the development and maintenance of a security architecture.

Navigating Different Interests in China-Collaboration

Collaboration with China offers substantial opportunities, particularly in access to cutting-edge infrastructure, large-scale research programs, and rapidly growing scientific expertise. Chinese partners often show strong commitment and bring significant resources to the table. China has become a science powerhouse, and discontinuing collaboration with Chinese partners would put European competitiveness at risk in a substantial number of fields. Collaboration with China has moved into the spotlight due to the strained geopolitical context, but decoupling in science is not an option, even in the currently tense geopolitical climate. It would also severely affect our collaboration with partners in the Global South, whose physical and digital infrastructure relies heavily on China.

However, challenges arise from differing regulatory frameworks, political sensitivities, and contrasting approaches to transparency, data / sample sharing and intellectual property. In the current geopolitical environment, potential “dual-use” of research in high technology areas has become one of the most serious issues institutions need to tackle. They face a dilemma: on the one hand, it is their interest to build trust with their Chinese partners and increase China-competence, while on the other it is also their interest to introduce security measures into cooperation activities and admission processes. This results in uncertainty and constant navigation and negotiation processes.

Different Positions of Science and Administration

Scientific and administrative staff often operate under different conditions and pressures. Administrative staff are typically under significant pressure to ensure compliance, manage risks, and uphold institutional responsibilities—an often less visible but essential contribution to academic integrity. It is important for administrative colleagues to recognise that they can and should rely on researchers and that their role is vital for enabling successful science. Rather than being a burden, administrative actors should be viewed and understand themselves as service providers who help researchers navigate complexity and achieve their goals more efficiently. Nonetheless, science and administration often see collaboration issues through different lenses, shaped by their respective awareness, available resources, interests, priorities, workflows, and decision-making processes. This includes differing levels of comfort with uncertainty and risk, and divergent attitudes toward failure and learning from it.

Creating Science-Administration Synergies to Facilitate Secure International Collaboration

The recent position paper “Science and security in times of global political upheaval”² of the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat) explicitly articulates, “it is crucial that science and administration work together to develop a prag-

matic, manageable process” (2025, p.38). Backing of the leadership is key, so the management of each institution must organise and supervise strategic discussions on the relevance of cooperation with China for the research institution, as well as on suitable operational measures to secure collaboration.

To foster synergies and ensure secure and successful collaboration with international partners, early and continuous dialogue between science and administration is key. Institutions that feel the need to adapt their guidelines and measures on how to collaborate with China are advised to include scientists and also Chinese colleagues into the decision-making processes as part of their research security architecture. Joint understanding of goals, risks, and boundary conditions should be built from the outset. Transparency, clear communication channels, and mutual respect for each other’s roles can help align workflows and expectations. Establishing shared protocols for data handling, legal compliance, and risk mitigation strengthens the foundation of trust. Where possible, dedicated liaison roles (between science and administration) or integrated project teams can bridge institutional gaps and ensure that scientific creativity and administrative reliability complement each other effectively. Conducting due diligence should not be carried out in “silos”, but should be a joint endeavour and collaborative effort across the institution.

Recommendations to Institutional Decision-Makers

The aims of the following recommendations are to

- ▶ De-silo the work of science and administration, and level the two
- ▶ Facilitate smoother workflows between science and administration, and streamline processes, i.e. optimise them to increase efficiency, and save time and energy
- ▶ Strengthen trust between science and administration (researchers are often seen as risk-oblivious or even risk-negligent, while administration is seen as circumspect and bureaucratic at the expense of science)

²<https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2025/2485-25>

Generally Applicable Solutions

- ▶ Create **communication channels and platforms** between science and administration and integrate this communication framework into the organisational structure – organise immersive dialogues, open day events (science / administration open day), open a “living document” to align perspectives and expectations
- ▶ Set up **teams of experts** with members both from science and administration for regular exchange on risk mitigation, strategy setting, knowledge flow on China, and German-Chinese collaboration – this makes it easier for administration to offer safe spaces for science
- ▶ Once procedural decisions have been made, create full **“radical” transparency** from the top: make sure everybody understands (both in science and in administration) why and how things are done – define responsibilities (Who is to assess what? Who gives advice? Who is to decide?) – scientists need to know whom to ask: a contact person is needed in the institution
- ▶ Articulate your individual interests and your institutional ones, aim for long-term goals, and come up with **strategies** at different levels: individual, institutional, national – be aware that you need to align perspectives of daily scientific work and (science) foreign policy
- ▶ For science and administration: create checklists and/or rely on AI tools to make dual-use assessments in specific research areas fast and transparent – build them into existing processes, and make them available on the intranet – the checklists need regular updates!
- ▶ For funders: allocate human, financial, technical resources for research security in each project – if the call is on a potentially sensitive topic, introduce guidelines to it
- ▶ Make short and practical due diligence / dual-use / export control trainings mandatory both for scientists and for administrators (e.g. DESY’s e-learning tool on dual-use) – but: make sure your awareness-raising events are not a condensation of “evil practices”, i.e. do not deter your colleagues from cooperation and do not demonise or de-humanise groups of people along race or nationality
- ▶ Successful handling requires interplay between legal departments, human resources, export control, technology transfer, and project funding offices, international offices and ethics committees – make sure the processes are synchronised, carried out in a timely manner and transparent for all parties

Recommended Solutions in Three Areas

1) Dual-Use:

- ▶ No need to overkill science – reliance on technology readiness level (TRL) is useful – dual-use technology lists are never complete, as it is hard to assess whether current cutting-edge research might have dual-use in the future – while risk assessment has to become part of good scientific practice, the goal cannot be 100 % security
- ▶ Adjust the in-house project application processes by adding criteria to project data sheets that scientists need to fill in: export control, data security measures can be entered here – “no” answers also need to be explained by the scientists

2) China-Competence:

- ▶ Organise China-competence trainings (e.g. on cultural and communication differences, or more specifically on differences in risk culture, risk management, failure management, legal concepts, research funding, incentives for innovation) – China-competence is not a “nice-to-have”, but a vital part of future research
- ▶ Create a living repository of China-competence resources and open up transfer channels – China-competence is largely a resource issue – bring the enormous amount of knowledge in, also about research culture, as STEM-research also has a strong cultural component – include your Chinese colleagues, they are an asset!

- ▶ Create incentives / positive measures for the protection of collaboration, such as active exchange among all partners (scientists, administrators and their Chinese counterparts) – make sure you stay updated with Chinese regulations and discuss them with your partners (they might need to clarify new conditions for themselves as well) – once collaboration is disrupted, it is hard to restart
- ▶ To bridge the gap in understanding the differences between legal frameworks in Germany and China, organise trainings and set up a contact point at the legal department – create templates for memorandums of understanding and contracts while keeping up-to-date on the latest changes in regulations

3) Loss of Trust in Chinese-German Research Partnerships

- ▶ Create a platform for best collaboration practices to disseminate useful and practical information either at the institutional level or within the German Alliance of Scientific Organisations
- ▶ At the start of a collaboration, draw upon China-competence, be clear and communicate your interests to your partner, also your expectations for reciprocity; build in possible exits from the collaboration, define transparent no-goes for your institute (based on your own strategy or requirements from your funder)
- ▶ Rely on micro-lateralism (institutional, sub-institutional, individual contacts and exchanges) and maintain i.e. incentivise researcher mobility especially to China
- ▶ Inform your funder and / or supervisory board upfront about your planned collaboration to reduce avoidable rejections and to bring everyone on the same page
- ▶ Make your de-risking procedures crystal clear for your international partners, as trust is then easier to uphold

- ▶ Make sure you do not lose the individual in the de-risking process – research security should also include security of researchers against racial discrimination at the workplace

While it is a must in all higher education and research institutions to protect assets and address their vulnerabilities, protection of international collaboration is equally important. A research security architecture that ensures secure and rewarding collaboration with international partners requires fine-tuned practices between science and administration. We hope that with this paper we have contributed to the successful development of such practices.

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