

The Global Ecosystem of Academe and Research Cooperation: Risks and Geopolitics

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The COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably be seen as a transformational moment in contemporary processes of neoliberal globalization. Either the major powers and the international community will pull together around increasingly cooperative approaches to public health, biomedical research, and the sharing and distribution of new vaccine technologies, and the pandemic and its economic disruptions will subside. Or the international system will pull apart around those same fault lines, and new variants will continue to mutate and spread—with increasingly severe economic and political consequences.

Global Prospects and Scenario Planning for the Aftermath of COVID-19

Every four years, timed to inform the beginning of a new administration, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and the National Intelligence Council engage in scenario planning for US national security policy in the context of anticipated global developments. In March 2021, the latest report was released as [Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World](#) (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). The report analyzed the “expanding uncertainty” caused by the pandemic, as well as the profound demographic, environmental, economic, and technological changes that could lead to global “disequilibrium.” Risks include new pandemics, deteriorating climate impacts, financial and debt crises, mass migration, cyberattacks, and worsening social inequalities.

The 2021 intelligence report laid out a spectrum of five “future scenarios” for the world until 2040 and beyond: from a “renaissance of democracies” (led by a revitalized United

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated “pressure cracks” within national higher educational systems, as well as emerging risks in the larger ecosystem of international higher education and research cooperation. These risks of geopolitical conflict and ethnonationalist politics could interact to generate powerful counter-currents to established student and scholar mobility and “knowledge diplomacy.” Such rising barriers could, in turn, close off any meaningful hope of addressing our increasingly disruptive global emergencies.

States, if it is able to embark upon ambitious domestic renewal, renewed immigration, improved social cohesion, and greater equality); to “a world adrift” (especially without US leadership in international organizations, and marked by the neglect of common crises); to “competitive coexistence” (in which US–China competition, as well as common global challenges, are more or less successfully, if not optimally, managed); “separate silos” (in which the world system fragments into semifunctional, yet autarkic, economic and security blocs, but in which developing nations and the global poor are increasingly left behind); and the most ominous scenario, “tragedy and mobilization” (in which a cascading series of climate and food catastrophes drive desperate global cooperation, especially across Eurasia and Africa). In all of these scenarios, the United States will play an essential role—either through renewal and leadership, or decline and withdrawal.

The Vital Role of International Higher Education and Research Cooperation in Global “Adaptation”

Looking back over the past 20 or 30 years, there have arguably been optimistic premises at the heart of most leading theories of neoliberal globalization in the tertiary sector: That self-interest and the benign pursuit of commercial and “market advantage” would tilt policies toward cooperation and open borders, and that the diversification of providers would expand access, opportunity, and equity. In these hopeful scenarios, all the major powers, in pursuit of their self-interest, would continue to allow ever-greater global academic mobility and the integration of their economies and research systems. Even more critical theories that stressed the hegemonic interests of Anglo-American and corporate “market leaders” assumed that the current global system was essentially stable and functional, at least for its leading institutional actors. Similarly, the literature about internationalization highlighted its intellectual and financial utility, but with perhaps too little attention to geopolitics and systemic risks.

Highlighting the fundamental necessity of adaptation and resilience, the 2021 DNI/NIC report concludes that “The most effective states are likely to be those that can build societal consensus and trust toward collective action on adaptation and harness the relative expertise, capabilities, and relationships of nonstate actors to complement state capacity.” In other words, there is an absolutely vital role to be played in any of the more positive scenarios by the higher education sector as a whole, as well as by institutional leaders, researchers, scientists, and students. Either globally engaged educators and students can help lead and shape these processes of crosscultural integration and renewal through an ethos of social responsibility, principled knowledge diplomacy, and sustainability. Or these political shocks and dislocations could close off global academic mobility, multinational cooperation could be disrupted or obstructed, and nations and blocs could be left to fend for themselves in an increasingly dysfunctional world system, amid collapsing ecosystems and rapidly declining biodiversity.

New Technologies, Geopolitics, and Ethnonationalism: The Risks of Exclusion and Securitization

However, echoing the direr scenarios from the *Global Trends* report, I would argue that there are, in fact, numerous emerging fault-lines and profound systemic risks in contemporary tertiary systems, as well as in the larger ecosystem of international higher education. This multidimensional “world crisis” could disrupt or collapse the neoliberal policy consensus, limit or close off global mobility, and block vitally necessary research cooperation. There are multiple emerging and acute risks to such cooperation and mutually beneficial “knowledge diplomacy.”

First, there has been a conspicuous failure to establish a new global regime for internet governance, which has contributed to the disruptive “weaponization” of social media, the ongoing fragmentation of the internet (in the name of “internet sovereignty”), and scandals around governments’ penetration of digital platforms and the erosion of privacy safeguards.

Second, there has been a similar failure to agree on ethical and other regulatory standards for rapidly emerging “next generation” technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of things, robotics and automation, and synthetic biology. Most ominously, such technologies are also rapidly reshaping defense industries, which in

turn is reinforcing the policy agenda of exclusion and securitization. Global trade regimes and supply chains underneath these “disruptive” technologies have also been destabilized by the pandemic and its aftermath, and will suffer further shocks as AI and automation continue to sweep through the world economy—which will further disrupt labor markets and national electoral politics.

Third, the growth of ethnonationalism and pseudopopulism in the major powers threatens to lead to new restrictions on skilled migration and the flow of international students, along with increased surveillance of multinational research and university partnerships.

And finally, it is undeniable that great power competition has led to instances in which national security and intelligence services have “penetrated,” or at least surveilled, exchanges and scholarship programs, or have expelled some donors and aid organizations. Such interventions threaten academic freedom and the perceived legitimacy and integrity of student visa programs, state-funded scholarships, and cooperative research.

Any one of these issues could generate a powerful “geostrategic countercurrent” to established mobility dynamics, and if they all worsen together and interact, it could trigger an escalating systemic crisis in higher education and research cooperation. Such barriers will, in turn, close off any meaningful hope of addressing the global emergencies that are already spurring exclusion and securitization. ▲

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