

# Global Engagement in a Time of Geopolitical Tensions: A New Cold War

Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit

Over the past decades, global engagement has been a key priority of higher education and its internationalization. The global knowledge economy increased competition between universities, but also stimulated cooperation and exchange of people and science, although primarily for the benefit of the Global North. While the COVID-19 pandemic brought the mobility of students and staff to a halt, the need for global research cooperation became crucial. And the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations create further need for global engagement and cooperation to solve key social and scientific problems across the world.

But current geopolitical tensions (first, primarily between China on the one hand and the United States, Europe, Australia and other high-income countries on the other, and now, as a result of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, also between Russia and that same group of countries) place momentous challenges on higher education's global engagement. The world is becoming divided again between Russia and China and their allies and what we used to call the "Western" countries—in addition to a large group of non-aligned countries in the Global South. As a result, we seem to be returning to the Cold War period, which ended in the late 1980s. The implications for global engagement in higher education in this "second Cold War" will likely be severe. Building on two recent articles in *University World News* ("[In a new Cold War, academic engagement is still necessary](#)" and "[In the mad rush to disengage, we join in Putin's extremism](#)"), we ask ourselves what lessons we can learn from academic cooperation during the first Cold War and during the academic boycott in South Africa, and how we can avoid returning to the isolated bubbles of engagement of that past.

The debate about academic engagement and academic values is complex. The academic boycott against the apartheid regime in South Africa taught us that such a boycott can be effective as part of a broader social, economic, and cultural struggle, but continued active interaction with individuals in the academic community of South Africa who were critical of the regime was mutually beneficial. Thus, a total boycott was not implemented. A similar argument can be made about an academic boycott of Israel, relating to its Palestinian policies. Blanket boycotts are in nobody's interest.

## Global Engagement and the Russian Invasion

A present, additional harm resulting from Russia's war on Ukraine appears to be the loss of rationality among segments of the academic community in North America and Europe. In their rush to disengage from all things Russian, academics, universities, publishers, scientific organizations, and governments are cutting ties with everything and everyone.

We have argued why engagement with Russian colleagues and knowledge of Russia are essential at this point in time. Within the academic community, colleagues are now advocating against, or even canceling, courses dealing with Russian society, history, and culture. This is precisely what should be avoided. Knowledge of Russia is more crucial than ever—not to mention that it is one of the world's great civilizations, regardless of what Mr. Putin is doing to it today.

While it is difficult to make sense of public opinion in Putin's increasingly authoritarian Russia, much of the Russian academic community opposes the war and values international relationships. According to Maria Yudkevich's history of internationalization of Russian higher education, since the early 1990s, contacts between Russian researchers

## Abstract

Global engagement has been a key priority of higher education and its internationalization, but is currently seriously challenged by geopolitical tensions. We seem to be returning to the political climate of the Cold War, which ended in the late 1980s. What lessons can we learn from academic cooperation during the first Cold War and during the academic boycott in South Africa, and how can we avoid returning to the isolated bubbles of engagement of that past?

*What will now become of academic cooperation and exchange with Russia cannot be foreseen at this stage, and will require constant monitoring.*

*Philip G. Altbach is research professor and distinguished fellow, and Hans de Wit is professor emeritus and distinguished fellow at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. Emails: altbach@bc.edu and dewitje@bc.edu.*

and their foreign colleagues have grown substantially, resulting in joint projects and publications, and in the course of the past decade, the integration of Russian science into the international community has become even stronger. “During various periods in history, higher education and science in Russia have been connected to the international community in different ways. The situation moved from close ties to a policy of almost complete autonomy and isolation, from cooperation and integration to a quest for a national identity of its own place on the global academic market.” (Handbook of International Higher Education, 2022, p. 37). We are entering a new phase of isolation and quest for national identity at political and institutional levels, but for the sake of Russian—and global—higher education, personal academic ties and knowledge development that have taken decades to build should not be completely dismantled.

While it is a necessity to end relationships with Russian institutions linked to the Putin regime—and this includes all of the universities whose rectors have, some under duress, signed a pro-war declaration—similarly boycotting all individuals and some NGOs is not justified, and indeed harms brave individuals who are trying, under the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances, to carry on with their research and maintain international collaborations. Academic freedom is the highest among academic values. It is gone in Putin’s Russia. We should not join in this political extremism.

### The Present and the Future

For now, the global academic community needs to take a step back and carefully consider how to appropriately react to the crisis, as we need to do in relation to increased academic repression in China and other countries. Instead of cutting off Russian academics and distancing ourselves from Russian culture, we should do the exact opposite. Russians who are not involved with the Putin regime or who oppose it, among them the many who left Russia and numerous others who are unable to do so, need our support and continued cooperation, similar to the support currently extended to the higher education system and community in Ukraine.

We agree with the four Ukrainian academics who wrote in [a recent opinion article in \*Times Higher Education\*](#) that “It is wrong to pretend that Russians who publicly condemn Putin’s regime face anywhere near the dangers that Ukrainian academics now encounter daily; they should not be united in one basket. While Russians and Belarusians face domestic repression, Ukrainians are fleeing shelling, bombing, killing and complete destruction of their homes and cities; victims of aggression should be prioritised.” We also agree with them that “the reputations of these [Russian] institutions and individuals [those who signed a letter of support to the invasion] will forever be stained by this failure as public intellectuals and public platforms to defend the universal values of democracy, peace and academic integrity.” But in our opinion, this must not lead to isolation of those—Russian or others—who are in agreement with these universal values.

During the first Cold War, we kept contact with Russian academics open and tested grounds for institutional cooperation in the hope for a better future—which did come, although now it is gone again. Thanks to that engagement, the past decades brought about a much broader foundation of human and academic values in Russia. Keeping that foundation alive is a necessary basis to increase the chances for a more positive future.

What will now become of academic cooperation and exchange with Russia cannot be foreseen at this stage, and will require constant monitoring. The same can be said about China and its allies. But complete academic isolation will be counterproductive in the short and long run. ▲