China's Evolving Strategy for International Science and Technology Cooperation

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Executive Summary

China has been increasing its emphasis on science and technology research as a key priority, including by directly integrating the strategy for international scientific engagement into its broader framework for national power and technological self-reliance.

However, even as both China and the United States increase their emphasis on science and technology as central national priorities, the two countries are proceeding in a very different manner from one another. Instead of adopting an intensely securitized approach that hampers international engagement, China is moving toward a more expansive role in global scientific leadership. The United States should meet this approach in kind, safeguarding its global scientific leadership through engagement rather than scientific isolationism.

China is transforming from a passive participant to a leading architect of the global innovation ecosystem. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, regional technology platforms, and new international bodies like the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization, China has become a premier funder, host, and standard setter for science and technology projects, particularly in the Global South.

At the same time, China remains hampered by domestic political controls, ideological oversight, and strict data regulations, which make foreign researchers hesitant to commit fully to Beijing. But if the United States erects its own overly broad, indiscriminate barriers to science and technological cooperation, it will inadvertently mitigate China's problems by driving top global talent directly into Beijing's expanding orbit.

To protect its strategic interests and maintain global technological preeminence, the United States must avoid treating openness and security as a zero-sum choice. Attempting to outcompete China solely by building walls around American science will prove counterproductive. American scientific leadership has never rested on domestic resources alone; it has also relied on the United States' unique capacity to attract the brightest international minds, staff cutting-edge laboratories, and lead global discovery.

If China becomes the world's central hub for global scientific collaboration, American influence will erode and its visibility into emerging scientific and technological frontiers will shrink. Washington can avert this outcome by adopting a policy of "smart openness": establishing precise safeguards around genuinely sensitive dual-use technologies while keeping fundamental research open and welcoming to global scholars. To match the Chinese, the United States will also have to revitalize its scientific diplomacy, actively participate in international standards organizations, and build enduring research partnerships across developing nations.

Introduction: From global integration to strategic instrumentalization

In the late 2010s, China's ambitions in science and technology, or S&T, appeared to follow a familiar trajectory. Like other rising powers before it, Beijing sought deeper integration into global knowledge networks, more extensive cross-border research collaboration, and greater access to advanced technologies, institutions, and talent. The objectives were transparent: International cooperation would accelerate domestic modernization, reduce technological gaps, and help Chinese research organizations learn how the world's strongest innovation systems operate. Emphasizing this focus, China's 13th Five–Year Plan (2016–20) included a dedicated, stand-alone international S&T cooperation program to give this agenda a distinct bureaucratic and policy identity.[1]

However, in the 14th Five–Year Plan (2021–25) and the 15th Five–Year Plan (2026–30), separate sections for international S&T cooperation were not included.[2] That absence is not evidence that international cooperation has become unimportant. It is evidence that it has become too strategically important to remain a discrete, self-contained policy domain.[3] International scientific engagement is now embedded within a broader matrix of technological self-reliance, national security, industrial competitiveness, talent policy, development diplomacy, and global rulemaking.

During China's reform period in the late twentieth century, integration into the world scientific community was often treated as an objective in its own right. Today, cooperation is valued primarily for what it contributes to larger national goals: augmenting domestic capabilities, strengthening international influence, and positioning China closer to the center of global knowledge networks. This does not mean that scientific collaboration has become purely transactional or that Chinese scientists lack genuine professional commitments to international exchange. But at the level of national strategy, cooperation is increasingly evaluated through the lenses of capability, resilience, security, and geopolitical leverage.

This shift matters not only for what it tells us about China's approach to S&T policy but for what it can reveal about our own potential blind spots. Much Western commentary treats self-reliance and openness as opposites and therefore expects China's emphasis on indigenous innovation to produce withdrawal from international science. But China is building greater domestic capacity while also enlarging and reorganizing its international engagement. It seeks to reduce dependence without surrendering access, to protect sensitive capabilities

1 On the transformation of China's international S&T cooperation from a discrete policy domain into a cross-cutting strategic priority, see Denis F. Simon and Caroline S. Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration at a Crossroads: Navigating Strategic Engagement in the Era of Scientific Nationalism," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Nov. 4, 2025, https://quincyinst.org/research/u-s-china-scientific-collaboration-at-a-crossroads-navigating-strategic-engagement-in-the-era-of-scientific-nationalism. On the 13th Five–Year Plan's dedicated stand-alone international S&T cooperation program, see "13th Five–Year Plan on STI International Cooperation Promulgated," People's Republic of China, Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), June 15, 2017, available via the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, https://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/whjy/kjjl/201801/P020210622014062951225.pdf.

2 "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要" [Outline of the 14th Five–Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives through 2035 of the People's Republic of China], People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), March 2021, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/202103/P020210323538797779059.pdf; "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十五个五年规划纲要" [Outline of the 15th Five–Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China], NDRC, 2026, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gjfzgh/202603/U020260317369114704096.pdf.

3 On the long arc of China's pursuit of technological power and the shifting policy paradigms behind it, see Andrew B. Kennedy, *Rebellious Follower: China's Search for Science, Technology, and Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026).

without abandoning global networks, and to create platforms in which Chinese institutions are not peripheral participants but hosts, funders, standard setters, and agenda shapers.[4]

The resulting system is neither a closed nationalism nor conventional liberalism but offers advantages associated with both approaches. It incorporates genuine scientific cooperation and connection to international networks, but it also serves industrial policy, foreign policy, and national security. This hybrid model is already altering the geography and governance of international science. It is especially consequential in the Global South, where China is creating laboratories, training programs, satellite and data services, technology transfer platforms, and new multilateral research networks. The larger question is what kind of international scientific order China is seeking to build — and whether the United States is responding in the right ways.

Historical foundations: Four phases of international scientific engagement

The first phase of China's international S&T engagement, beginning under Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping (1978–89), was restorative. The Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 had damaged universities, research institutes, and professional communities. China urgently needed to rebuild scientific capacity and reconnect with the outside world. The resumption of academic exchanges, dispatch of students and scholars abroad, importation of equipment, and signing of government-to-government agreements were essential components of national reconstruction. The 1979 US–China Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology became emblematic of this period.[5] China embraced international cooperation because the country lacked resources, experience, and access to the frontiers of knowledge.

The second phase, extending through much of the 1990s and early 2000s, was centered on acquisition and absorption. China expanded technology imports, joint ventures, international training, and participation in multinational projects. Ministries and local governments treated foreign technology as an input into industrial modernization. Chinese scientists became increasingly visible in international journals and conferences, but the broader system still depended heavily on international education, imported instruments, licensed technology, and learning from foreign institutions. This was the era in which China became highly skilled at combining markets, administrative guidance, and international linkages to accelerate technological catch-up.

The third phase, associated especially with the Hu Jintao period (2002–12) and the 2006 Medium– and Long–Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology (2006–20), emphasized "indigenous innovation" (*zizhu chuangxin*). This phrase was sometimes interpreted abroad as a

4 On China's drive to build technological capacity at scale while remaining entangled with global networks, see Dan Wang, *Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2025).

5 On China's use of formal bilateral science and technology agreements, of which the 1979 US–China accord was a foundational example, see Caroline S. Wagner and Denis F. Simon, "China's Use of Formal Science and Technology Agreements as a Tool of Diplomacy," *Science and Public Policy* 50, no. 4 (Aug. 2023): 807–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scad022. On the deeper historical roots of Chinese science diplomacy, see Gordon Barrett, *China's Cold War Science Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Xin Li, "Science Diplomacy in China: Past, Present, and Future," *Cultures of Science* 6, no. 2 (June 2023): 170–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/20966083231183473.

turn toward technological nationalism.[6] In practice, however, China continued to depend extensively on global networks, foreign-invested enterprises, returnee scientists, and international collaboration and coauthorship. Indigenous innovation was not explicitly prioritized over international engagement; rather, such innovation was intended to improve China's bargaining power and absorptive capacity within an open system.[7] The country moved from being primarily a recipient of knowledge toward becoming a larger contributor of publications, patents, personnel, funding, and research infrastructure.[8]

The fourth phase emerged under Xi Jinping, starting around 2012, and is ongoing.[9] Its defining feature is not simply the pursuit of indigenous innovation but the fusion of innovation with security and national power.[10] The experiences of the 2008 global financial crisis, trade and technology tensions with the United States, US restrictions imposed on Chinese telecommunications and semiconductor firms, the disruption of supply chains, and the growing use of US export controls all reinforced Beijing's conclusion that technological dependence can be weaponized. Scientific and technological self-reliance consequently moved from a development objective to what Chinese leaders describe as strategic support for national development.[11]

Yet, crucially, this fourth phase is not a return to autarky. China's leaders remember the costs of isolation and the rupture of Sino–Soviet technical cooperation. They also understand that frontier science depends on the cross-border flow of ideas, people, data, instruments, and tacit knowledge. The new strategy therefore seeks a more difficult balance: reducing exposure to coercion while preserving the gains of international engagement.[12] This balance is necessarily unstable. It generates greater screening, political oversight, and differentiation among partners and fields.[13] But it also drives China to diversify its connections, invest in alternative networks, and create institutions that it can influence more directly.

The five-year plans: Self-reliance and openness in the same framework

The 14th and 15th Five–Year Plans make the dual structure of Chinese policy clear. The 14th Plan elevated innovation to the core of modernization and stated that science and technology had assumed strategic importance for national development. Its most frequently cited theme was high-level self-reliance.[14] Official summaries in Chinese state media described self-reliance in science and technology as a "strategic underpinning for national

6 Robert Atkinson, Nigel Cory, and Stephen Ezell, "Stopping China's Mercantilism: A Doctrine of Constructive, Alliance–Backed Confrontation," Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, March 2017, https://www2.itif.org/2017-stopping-china-mercantilism.pdf.

7 Richard P. Appelbaum et al., *Innovation in China: Challenging the Global Science and Technology System* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

8 On China's trajectory from recipient to major contributor within the global science system, see Caroline S. Wagner, "China's Patterns of Cooperation in Science and Technology," National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Feb. 14, 2024, https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27787/Wagner_ITP_Commissioned_Paper.pdf. On the 2006 Medium– and Long–Term Plan and the concept of *zizhu chuangxin*, see Cong Cao, Richard P. Suttmeier, and Denis F. Simon, "China's 15–Year Science and Technology Plan," *Physics Today* 59, no. 12 (Dec. 2006): 38–43, https://doi.org/10.1063/1.2435680.

9 On the strategic logic of Chinese policy under Xi, see Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *China's Global Strategy under Xi Jinping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026).

10 Xi Jinping, "论科技自立自强" [On Self-Reliance and Strengthening in Science and Technology] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2023), https://www.zywxpress.com/c/2023-05-29/1468743.shtml.

11 On the fusion of innovation with national-security and self-reliance imperatives in the Xi era, see Denis F. Simon and Richard P. Appelbaum, "China Science and Technology Relations 2.0: Time for a Reset," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 3, 2025, https://quincyinst.org/research/china-science-and-technology-relations-2-0-time-for-a-reset; Simon and Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration."

12 Xi Jinping, "深入学习习近平关于科技创新的重要论述" [Important Discourse on Scientific and Technological Innovation] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2023).

13 Erik Baark, "Xi Jinping's Discourse on Science, Technology and Innovation: An Analysis of Ideologies and Theoretical Contexts," *Asian Journal of Technology Innovation* (2026): 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/19761597.2026.2638246.

14 "Slogans for Self-Reliance," China Media Project, May 31, 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/05/31/chinas-turns-up-the-volume-on-self-reliance.

development."[15] The plan itself called for stronger national laboratories, strategic science programs, breakthroughs in core technologies, and a 10–year agenda for basic research.[16]

But the same document did not advocate scientific closure. On the contrary, the 14th Plan included a section titled "Actively Promoting Open Cooperation in Science and Technology" (*Jiji cujin keji kaifang hezuo*). The language is striking: China would "implement a more open, inclusive, mutually beneficial, and shared international science and technology cooperation strategy" and "more actively integrate into the global innovation network."[17] It also called for joint research with foreign scientists on climate change, public health, and human health; greater openness of national science programs; scientist exchange programs; and support for international scientific organizations operating in China. This is not the vocabulary of withdrawal. It is the vocabulary of selective integration under strengthened national direction.

The 15th Five–Year Plan deepens both sides of this policy. The plan places "accelerating high-level self-reliance and strength in science and technology" at the center of the development agenda and links it directly to new quality productive forces. It gives greater prominence to original innovation, basic research, strategic frontier fields, and the ability to overcome key technological bottlenecks. At the same time, the adopted outline contains a section devoted to "building a new pattern of high-level open cooperation in science and technology."[18] It calls for a globally competitive, open innovation ecosystem and for cooperation with researchers from other countries on basic scientific questions and shared human challenges.

The operative Chinese concept is not self-reliance in the sense of producing everything domestically or severing foreign relationships. Rather, it is the ability to sustain national development even when access to particular foreign technologies or partners is restricted. Openness remains valuable, but dependence is treated as dangerous. The aim is therefore to maximize the benefits of international engagement while increasing China's ability to choose the conditions, domains, and partners of that engagement.[19]

State media coverage of Xi's public addresses reinforce this interpretation. At a Feb. 2023 speech to the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, the Xinhua News Agency reported that the president "said that strengthening basic research is an urgent requirement for achieving greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology, and it is the only way for building a world leader in science and technology."[20] Three years later, at an April 2026 symposium in Shanghai, Xinhua reported that "[h]e stressed that basic research is the origin of the entire scientific system and the master switch for all technological issues." Yet, the summary of the same speech recalls Xi urging China pursue "actively integrating into the global innovation network, deepening international exchanges and cooperation in basic research, jointly tackling major

15 "China to Uphold Innovation–Driven Development, Create New Development Strengths," Xinhua News Agency, March 5, 2021, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202103/05/content_WS6041e1e2c6d0719374afa1de.html.

16 "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四" [Outline of the 14th Five–Year Plan], NDRC, Part II. The plan frames high-level self-reliance and strength in science and technology as strategic support for national development and calls for national laboratories, strategic S&T programs, and a 10–year action plan for basic research.

17 "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四" [Outline of the 14th Five–Year Plan], NDRC, 19. Author's translation checked against the official Chinese text; an official English rendering is available on the NRDC website at https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/policies/202204/P020220426647660542572.pdf.

18 "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十五" [Outline of the 15th Five–Year Plan], NDRC, Part III, including the provisions on accelerating high-level self-reliance and building a new pattern of high-level open cooperation in science and technology. See also the adopted outline text by the National People's Congress via the State Council website at https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202603/content_7062633.htm.

19 The 2021 revision of the Science and Technology Progress Law codifies this balance, writing both self-reliance and open cooperation into national law. See "中华人民共和国科学技术进步法(2021)年修订" [Science and Technology Progress Law of the People's Republic of China (2021)], National People's Congress Standing Committee, 2021, via the MOST website at https://www.most.gov.cn/xxgk/xinxifenlei/fdzdgknr/fgzc/flfg/202201/t20220118_179043.html.

20 "Xi Stresses Basic Research for Self-Reliance in Science and Technology," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, Feb. 22, 2023, https://english.news.cn/20230222/e8834b5679814537b72d6bb3ce9f2c4b/c.html.

issues such as climate change, energy, and [the] environment, as well as life and health, and actively participating in global [S&T] governance."[21]

This combination is China's emerging strategic doctrine. Strong domestic capabilities are expected to make openness safer and more advantageous; international engagement is expected to accelerate domestic capability and expand China's influence. The last three five-year plans have thus codified a model of secure, state-guided openness: more instrumental than the engagement of the 1980s and 1990s but still recognizably highly international.[22]

From a separate policy domain to a whole-of-state strategy

The disappearance of the stand-alone international cooperation program from the five-year plans represents the next step in China's strategy. International S&T activity now cuts across the responsibilities of the Ministry of Science and Technology, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sectoral ministries, provincial governments, universities, state-owned enterprises, and professional associations. It is much more comprehensive in scope and intention.

This approach has several consequences. First, international cooperation is more tightly connected to national priorities. Joint projects increasingly cluster around areas such as climate; health; agriculture; clean energy; space; artificial intelligence, or AI; advanced materials; and large scientific infrastructure. Second, cooperation is more frequently embedded in wider diplomatic relationships, including the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI; the BRICS organization; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; cooperation with Africa; mechanisms with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN; and bilateral comprehensive strategic partnerships. Third, the distinctions among scientific cooperation, development assistance, commercial technology transfer, standards promotion, and foreign policy are becoming less clear as China's global footprint expands.

Organizations such as the China Association for International Science and Technology Cooperation, or CAISTC, illustrate this hybrid architecture. Formally a national nonprofit organization associated with the Ministry of Science and Technology, it now operates as an intermediary among government agencies, research institutions, universities, enterprises, and foreign partners. The Alliance of International Science Organizations, or ANSO, linked to the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the BRI framework, performs a similar network-building function by supporting joint research, training, scholarships, conferences, and collaboration among academies and universities, particularly in the Global South.[23]

The architecture also includes a specialized diplomatic corps. The most recent detailed official accounting identified 141 S&T diplomats in 69 offices across 46 countries.[24] Not all were minister-counselors; the network included counselors, attachés, secretaries, directors, and staff assigned to embassies, consulates, and permanent missions. Their functions extend beyond protocol. They monitor foreign technology policies, maintain links with laboratories and universities, identify scientific trends and potential partners, support delegations,

21 "Xi Focus: Xi Stresses Advancing Basic Research to Solidify Foundation for Building China's Strength in Science, Technology," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, April 30, 2026, https://english.news.cn/20260430/ea09a528f98b40be88689f72a8f281f7/c.html.

22 This doctrine is consistent across Xi's major science addresses. See "Xi Jinping: Speech at the Nationwide S&T Conference, National Science and Technology Awards Conference, and the Conference of Academicians of CAS and CAE (June 24, 2024)," Georgetown University, Center for Security and Emerging Technology, July 3, 2024, https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/xi-jinping-cas-cae-conference-speech-2024; "Xi Calls for Advancing Chinese Modernization Through Sci-Tech Innovation," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, July 8, 2026, https://english.news.cn/20260708/ae5bf3ddc7c54a4ba9228d54dc69f64e/c.html.

23 ANSO was formally established in Beijing on Nov. 4, 2018. See "About ANSO: Who We Are," ANSO, https://www.anso.org.cn/about/anso. For more information about CAISTC, see its website at www.caistc.com.

24 The figures reported here were drawn from the Department of International S&T Cooperation, Ministry of Science and Technology, Beijing, 2025. On the broader role and functions of China's S&T diplomats as the overseas arm of the Ministry of Science and Technology's international cooperation apparatus, see Ryan Fedasiuk, Emily S. Weinstein, and Anna Puglisi, "China's Foreign Technology Wish List," Georgetown University, Center for Security and Emerging Technology, May 2021, https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/chinas-foreign-technology-wish-list.

facilitate joint programs, report on export controls and research-security requirements, and cultivate relationships with Chinese scientists abroad.

China's expanding international S&T footprint: Blending security and openness

By 2025, Chinese officials reported S&T cooperation relationships with more than 160 countries and regions, 119 intergovernmental cooperation agreements, participation in more than 200 international organizations and mechanisms, involvement in more than 60 international mega-science programs and projects, more than 70 BRI joint laboratories, and 10 regional or international technology-transfer platforms.[25]

These numbers should be interpreted carefully. The 119 agreements are not necessarily identical stand-alone treaties. They include a heterogeneous collection of agreements in which science and technology appear alongside education, economic cooperation, or other subjects. Similarly, participation in more than 200 organizations includes many different types of entities. The figures nevertheless demonstrate cross-border institutional reach and the growing density of China's international connections.[26]

China is moving from cooperation and contribution to leadership in the international scientific community.[27] In earlier periods, China gained knowledge and institutional experience, eventually becoming a major source of personnel, publications, funding, and infrastructure. As it moves into leadership, China increasingly heads research teams, hosts facilities, proposes standards, creates data platforms, and initiates multinational programs. China's launch of the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization, or WAICO, at the World Artificial Intelligence Conference this July highlights the essential features of its current move to international S&T leadership.[28] Through WAICO, Beijing is signaling that it intends to play a leading role in establishing international norms, standards, and mechanisms for cooperation on AI, particularly among developing countries and the broader Global South. President Xi's address at the conference underscored China's view that AI should be developed as a global public good, governed through inclusive multilateral cooperation rather

25 "介绍'十四五'时期科技创新发展成就" [Introducing the Achievements of the Scientific and Technological Innovation Development during the 14th Five–Year Plan Period], MOST, Sept. 18, 2025, https://www.most.gov.cn/xwzx/twzb/fbh2025091801/twzbwzsl/202509/t20250918_194727.html. These aggregate figures combine heterogeneous instruments and should be read as indicators of institutional reach rather than as counts of comparable stand-alone treaties.

26 Wagner and Simon, "China's Use of Formal Science and Technology Agreements." The Ministry of Science and Technology reports ties to some 161 countries and regions, even though not all corresponding agreements can be located, underscoring the need to read such aggregate figures with care.

27 On the shift in China's international S&T relations from self-reliance toward active global engagement and leadership, see Denis F. Simon, "China's International S&T Relations: From Self-Reliance to Active Global Engagement," in *Innovation and China's Global Emergence*, ed. Erik Baark, Bert Hofman, and Jiwei Qian (Singapore: NUS Press, 2021), 113–43.

28 "29 Countries Sign Agreement on Establishing World AI Cooperation Organization," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, July 16, 2026, https://english.news.cn/20260716/2d364f232dd7456c8edf1d67d5125d37/c.html; "Global AI Governance Action Plan," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, July 26, 2025, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202507/t20250729_11679232.htm.

than exclusive technological blocs or unilateral restrictions.[29] China thus seeks to demonstrate that it can provide international public goods in one of the world's most consequential technological domains while positioning itself as a central agenda-setter in the evolution of global S&T governance.[30]

China's promotion of WAICO reflects a broader feature of its evolving S&T strategy: the pursuit of national security and technological self-reliance alongside intensified international engagement. While Beijing has strengthened domestic capabilities in AI and emphasized greater technological resilience in response to an increasingly restrictive external environment, it has not abandoned its long-standing commitment to international scientific cooperation. Instead, Chinese policymakers have sought to reconcile these objectives by advocating what might be described as "secure openness": protecting critical technologies and national security interests while simultaneously expanding international research partnerships, standards cooperation, talent exchanges, and multilateral dialogue.[31] China's willingness to convene a broad international coalition on AI governance suggests that it does not view openness and security as mutually exclusive. Rather, Beijing increasingly argues that sustained international cooperation is itself an essential component of its broader ambition to serve as a leading architect of the global innovation system.

Publication patterns also illustrate the movement. Chinese scientists remain deeply engaged in international coauthorship, even though collaboration with the United States has weakened in some fields, and political scrutiny has increased on both sides.[32] China's leadership of internationally collaborative teams has also risen substantially. While it has not fully displaced the United States or Europe as the preferred center of international science, and leadership adjusted for the size of China's research workforce remains more limited than absolute numbers suggest, the direction of change is unmistakable: China is no longer merely joining networks created elsewhere; it is seeking to influence where networks are centered and who sets their agendas. Certainly, as recent policy directives suggest, China wants to strengthen the quality and international standards of its own domestic S&T journals. Nonetheless, rather than this new domestic publication focus being a sign of withdrawal from international S&T activities, it is much more part of the effort to further fortify the standing of Chinese journals among the world's top scientific publications.[33]

Finally, the geographic distribution of cooperation also is changing. For many years, a large share of China's internationally coauthored publications involved a relatively small group of advanced scientific partners, especially the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Australia, and Canada. Those relationships remain scientifically valuable, but geopolitical tension is encouraging diversification toward continental Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and expanded BRICS groupings.[34] Diversification serves both scientific and strategic purposes. It

29 "Full Text: Keynote Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Opening Ceremony of 2026 World AI Conference," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, July 17, 2026, https://english.news.cn/20260717/893fe11097db460ea31b98f131e34ef0/c.html; "Global AI Governance Initiative," People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oct. 20, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367503.html.

30 Mercy A. Kuo, "China's World AI Cooperation Organization Agenda: Insights from Gloria Chen," *The Diplomat*, Aug. 5, 2026, https://thediplomat.com/2026/08/chinas-world-ai-cooperation-organization-agenda.

31 "International Science and Technology Cooperation Initiative," MOST, Nov. 7, 2023, https://en.most.gov.cn/pressroom/202311/t20231107_188729.html; "中国、巴西、南非、非盟开放科学国际合作倡议" [China, Brazil, South Africa, and the African Union Initiative on International Cooperation in Open Science], MOST, Nov. 21, 2024, https://www.most.gov.cn/kjbgz/202411/t20241121_192516.html.

32 Kensei Kitajima and Keisuke Okamura, "The Altering Landscape of US–China Science Collaboration: From Convergence to Divergence," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 302 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04550-3. On the scale of the bilateral relationship, Wagner found that US–China copublications grew from roughly 2,000 in 2000 to more than 22,000 in 2022; see Wagner, "China's Patterns of Cooperation." See also Simon and Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration."

33 Sun Yu, Michael Peel, and Eleanor Olcott, "China Cools on Overseas Publication of Scientific Research," *Financial Times*, July 5, 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/64a811f1-b132-4211-8a8c-2252cf964039.

34 Benjamin Plackett, "Chinese Research Collaborations Shift to the Belt and Road," *Nature Index*, June 5, 2024, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-01598-0; Wagner, "China's Patterns of Cooperation."

opens new research opportunities while reducing the risk that restrictions imposed by one partner can disrupt China's wider international position.

Mega-science, infrastructure, and the transition to agenda-setting

China's participation in large international scientific projects is one of the clearest indicators of its changing role. In major forthcoming programs like the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, or ITER, in France and the Square Kilometer Array Observatory, SKA, China operates as a significant technical and institutional partner. The construction of ITER is giving Chinese engineers experience in one of the world's most complex fusion projects, integrating Chinese suppliers into demanding international standards, and providing access to research results and intellectual property arrangements. Similarly, participation in the SKA connects Chinese institutions to global radio astronomy, data processing, receiver development, and scientific governance.[35]

China also is increasingly active in international ocean drilling; Earth observation; collaborations linked to the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN; genomics consortia; climate research; and other large-scale scientific enterprises. These activities matter not merely because they provide access to facilities; they socialize Chinese researchers into international project management, create technical interdependence, build reputational capital, and demonstrate that Chinese institutions can deliver components and capabilities on which multinational systems depend.[36]

More consequential is the growing number of programs that China has initiated or placed at the center of international networks. Deep–time Digital Earth, launched in 2019 to integrate geological and paleontological data, links China to global data standards, digital Earth science, paleoclimate analysis, biodiversity research, and machine learning. The Digital Sustainable Development Goals initiative connects Chinese Earth observation, big data, and AI capabilities to the United Nations Development Program agenda. The International Meridian Circle Program seeks to coordinate ground-observation facilities for space weather and geospace research.[37] China also has promoted international programs related to ocean carbon sequestration, deep-sea trenches, brain science, crop genetic resources, proteomics, and carbon-neutral energy systems.[38]

The proposed International Lunar Research Station, or ILRS, illustrates both the potential and limits of this approach. Announced jointly with Russia in 2021 and subsequently opened to additional countries and organizations, the project plans to build multinational lunar research infrastructure in the next decade. A growing number of partners have signed cooperation documents, although commitments range from political endorsement to prospective payloads, ground station participation, or scientific collaboration. The ILRS is not yet equivalent in institutional depth to ITER, but it demonstrates China's willingness to establish parallel or alternative frameworks in domains where existing arrangements are constrained by geopolitical exclusion.[39]

35 On China's participation in and initiation of major international science programs, see Zhong Jianli et al., "Big Science Programs Tackle Shared Challenges Together," *Science and Technology Daily*, June 13, 2025, https://www.stdaily.com/web/English/2025-06/13/content_354426.html.

36 Jianli et al., "Big Science Programs Tackle Shared Challenges Together."

37 On the International Meridian Circle Program, a global initiative launched in June 2025 and led by the National Space Science Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, see its website at https://imcp.ac.cn.

38 "An Overview of Twelve International Big Science Programs," *Science and Technology Daily,* June 18, 2025, https://www.stdaily.com/web/English/2025-06/18/content_356606.html.

39 "Joint Statement Between CNSA and ROSCOSMOS Regarding Cooperation for the Construction of the International Lunar Research Station," China National Space Administration, April 29, 2021, https://www.cnsa.gov.cn/english/n6465668/n6465670/c6811967/content.html; "International Lunar Research Station Attracts More Partners," State Council, Xinhua News Agency, updated April 24, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202504/24/content_WS680976d7c6d0868f4e8f2045.html; Victoria Samson and Ian Christensen, "Lunar Space Cooperation Initiatives," Secure World Foundation, updated July 24, 2025, https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/lunar-space-cooperation-initiatives; Fengna Xu and Jun Ou, "Promoting International Cooperation on the International Lunar Research Station: Inspiration from the ITER," *Acta Astronautica* 203 (Feb. 2023): 341–50, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094576522006774.

The BRI and the Global South

The BRI has become one of the principal vehicles for the playing out of China's international S&T strategy. What began largely as an infrastructure and connectivity program now includes joint laboratories, science parks, agricultural demonstration centers, satellite applications, technology transfer platforms, training programs, scholarships, and cooperation in standards and testing.[40]

By 2025, China reported it had helped establish more than 70 BRI joint laboratories with nearly 50 countries and 10 international technology-transfer platforms serving regions such as ASEAN, Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, the Arab states, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe. Beijing has indicated an ambition to expand this joint laboratory network further. The labs concentrate on fields with immediate relevance to partner countries: tropical agriculture, crop breeding, water management, desertification, public health, infectious disease, renewable energy, disaster prevention, biodiversity, marine science, remote sensing, traditional medicine, and digital technology.[41]

These programs provide enduring, tangible benefits. Many developing countries lack sustained access to expensive research infrastructure, advanced equipment, specialized technical training, or large-scale scientific networks. Chinese cooperation can fill real gaps, help train researchers, strengthen local institutions, and support participation in international projects. In Africa, China has signed S&T cooperation agreements with the African Union and a growing number of states. It has also committed to training programs, joint laboratories, and research centers under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation.[42]

These types of programs are not politically neutral. They can facilitate adoption of Chinese equipment, platforms, technical standards and protocols, and data systems. A good example is the so-called "Digital Silk Road" project among the BRI economies, which is intended to enhance the connectivity of BRI partner countries through the deployment of 5G networks and satellite communications, among other efforts. Such programs create relationships between Chinese ministries, universities, firms, and partner country elites.[43] They also may generate long-term dependence where local maintenance capacity, financing, interoperability, or alternative suppliers are limited. For partner countries, the appropriate response is neither rejection nor uncritical embrace. Chinese cooperation can be highly valuable, particularly when it supports locally defined priorities and genuine capacity building, but partners must negotiate appropriate rights and protections. They also benefit from diversifying relationships so that engagement with China expands national choices rather than replacing one form of dependency with another.

The wider geopolitical significance is clear. By providing scientific infrastructure and training where Western countries have often been episodic or under-resourced, China is building durable networks of professional and institutional affiliation. These networks may not automatically translate into political alignment, but they do increase China's centrality in the scientific and technological development of large parts of the world.

40 Plackett, "Chinese Research Collaborations Shift"; Wagner, "China's Patterns of Cooperation."

41 "介绍'十四五'时期" [Introducing … the 14th Five–Year Plan], MOST; Plackett, "Chinese Research Collaborations Shift."

42 "China and the African Union Commission Sign Cooperative Framework on Science and Technology," African Union, Sept. 26, 2025, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pressreleases/45443-pr-Press_Release_-_China_and_the_African_Union_Commission_Sign_Cooperative_Framework_on_Science_and_Technology.pdf; "China and South Africa Sci-Tech Exchanges," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa, accessed Aug. 9, 2026, https://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/kjcx/SciTechInnovation_ChinaSouthAfricaSciTechExchanges.

43 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Assessing China's Digital Silk Road: A Transformative Approach to Technology Financing or a Danger to Freedoms?" Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 18, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/blog/assessing-chinas-digital-silk-road-transformative-approach-technology-financing-or-danger.

Five strategic objectives behind the new model

China's international S&T activity now serves five interlocking strategic objectives. These objectives are discussed below.

The first is **capability augmentation.** Despite major advances, China continues to seek foreign knowledge, talent, instruments, and research partnerships, especially in frontier fields and areas where domestic capability is uneven. Cooperation remains a valuable avenue for learning, but it is more targeted than in the past. The objective is not indiscriminate technology acquisition, but the selective strengthening of gaps that constrain national priorities.

The second is **network centrality**. A country's scientific power depends not only on the volume of domestic research but also on its position in international networks. States that host facilities, conferences, databases, journals, secretariats, and leading research teams gain informational and reputational advantages. China increasingly seeks to become indispensable to the circulation of knowledge rather than merely a large national node connected to Western centers.

The third is **rule- and standard-setting**. Technical standards can shape markets, lock in platforms, and influence the direction of innovation. Participation in international organizations and technical committees enables Chinese experts to affect emerging rules in AI, telecommunications, data governance, climate technology, biotechnology, and digital infrastructure. Standards activity is partly defensive, aimed at preventing exclusion from Western–defined systems, and partly offensive, aimed at converting technological scale into institutional influence. By having a seat at the table, China hopes to shape the direction of the rule-making apparatus across the spectrum of international S&T affairs.

The fourth is **development diplomacy**. Science and technology have become instruments of China's foreign relations, especially in the Global South. Training, laboratories, remote sensing, health programs, agricultural technology, and digital infrastructure allow China to present itself as a development partner and provider of global public goods. One of China's preferred agencies for asserting its influence is the United Nations system. UN engagement enhances China's international standing and can create relationships that support broader diplomatic and commercial objectives.

The fifth is **strategic insulation**. By diversifying partnerships and developing alternative institutions, China reduces its exposure to disruption in relations with the United States and other advanced economies. The goal is not complete separation, which would be costly and unrealistic, but resilience. A wider portfolio of collaborators, suppliers, markets, data sources, and research platforms makes it harder for any single state to isolate China scientifically.

These objectives explain why international cooperation is now more instrumental without being less extensive. It is expected to produce multiple returns simultaneously: scientific knowledge, domestic capability, international influence, market access, and strategic resilience. The policy challenge for Beijing is that these objectives do not always align. Security controls can reduce the attractiveness of Chinese institutions, political oversight can undermine trust, restrictions on data or academic freedom can weaken collaboration, and overt geopolitical framing can make partners wary. China's strategy is therefore ambitious but not without certain potential costs.

Limits and contradictions in China's strategy

China's growing international role should not be overstated, and its future leadership should not be assumed. Several structural constraints will shape China's ability to become a preferred center of global science.

The first is the **domestic political environment.** International science thrives on open debate, access to information, predictable rules, and freedom to pursue unexpected questions. Political controls, restrictions on data, censorship, and uncertainty about permissible topics can reduce the attractiveness of Chinese institutions. Foreign researchers may collaborate on clearly defined technical projects while hesitating to build long-term careers or place sensitive data in China–based systems.

The second is **reciprocity and access.** Chinese researchers have benefited greatly from access to foreign universities, laboratories, databases, and funding systems. Foreign institutions often encounter more limited access in China, particularly in social science, health data, geospatial information, and areas connected to national security. Unless China addresses asymmetries in access, intellectual property, and institutional autonomy, its appeals to openness will continue to face skepticism.[44]

The third is the **securitization of science** inside China. Beijing criticizes other governments for overstretching national security, but China's own security laws, data regulations, counterespionage provisions, and controls on technology transfer can complicate international cooperation. A strategy designed to combine security with openness may tilt toward excessive caution when bureaucratic incentives reward risk avoidance.

The fourth is **reputational differentiation.** China is highly attractive in fields where it offers unique infrastructure, large datasets, engineering scale, talent, substantial funding, or any combination thereof. Currently, it is less consistently attractive as a general destination for overall international scientific mobility. Building truly global innovation hubs requires not only facilities and salaries but also professional autonomy, transparent governance, social openness, and confidence that international researchers will be treated as enduring members of the scientific community rather than temporary sources of expertise.

These constraints do not negate China's progress or fundamentally diminish its attractiveness. They clarify the distinction between becoming scientifically indispensable and becoming universally trusted. In all likelihood, China will achieve substantial network centrality without replicating the openness of American or European research environments. Its model is likely to remain strongest where partners value infrastructure, funding, market access, and development outcomes more than institutional liberalism. That said, the net addition of more "returnees" who have been trained abroad as well as the arrival of more foreign scientific and technical talent seeking opportunities in China could help facilitate further reform of the Chinese research environment in positive directions.

Critically, as discussed below, the disadvantages China faces in becoming a global scientific leader may be reduced if the United States continues its move toward a more closed and politicized scientific system.

The future of global science

For decades, the globalization of science has rested on a relatively simple proposition: The circulation of people and ideas accelerates discovery, and the gains from knowledge can exceed the benefits of national restriction. That proposition remains valid, but it is now constrained by security competition, industrial policy, and concern over the distribution of benefits.

China's strategy embodies the new complexity. It is not retreating from globalization; it is attempting to redesign globalization so that international engagement advances its national resilience and gives Chinese institutions greater influence over the rules, infrastructure, and direction of research. This is a much more mature strategy than simple technology importation. It combines domestic investment with external network building and treats scientific diplomacy as an element of national power.

The future system may be organized around overlapping networks rather than a single universal order. The United States and its allies will maintain strong links in many frontier technologies. China will

44 On asymmetries of access, intellectual property, and institutional autonomy in US–China scientific relations, see Simon and Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration"; Simon and Appelbaum, "China Science and Technology Relations 2.0."

deepen networks with the Global South, BRI partners, BRICS states, and countries seeking alternatives to Western platforms. Contrary to the hopes of many who believe traditional US allies and middle powers such as Europe, Japan, South Korea, Canada, and India can be persuaded to decouple from China, it is likely that many of these countries will try to preserve access to multiple systems.

The danger is that risk management will become overly extensive and possibly indiscriminate. When governments classify broad areas of research as security-sensitive, institutions may avoid collaboration even where benefits are high and risks manageable. Reduced mobility and declining trust can weaken the informal relationships through which scientists identify errors, share methods, and respond to crises. Fragmentation also raises costs by duplicating infrastructure, standards, databases, and supply chains.

A complete bifurcation of global science would be suboptimal for both China and the United States. It would slow discovery, reduce the diversity of research teams, and make it more difficult to address climate change, pandemics, food security, energy transition, and other transnational challenges. The policy objective should not be a return to naive openness; it should be the construction of safeguards precise enough to protect genuinely sensitive capabilities without destroying the wider networks that scientific progress depends on.

Conclusion: Implications for the United States

The implications for the United States are both strategic and ironic. China's international S&T policy has become more instrumental, more state-directed, and more attentive to security. Yet, unlike those in the United States who call for a more securitized science, China has not reduced its commitment to international engagement. It is expanding bilateral relationships, increasing participation in multilateral organizations, building laboratories and technology-transfer platforms, initiating international science programs, and encouraging Chinese institutions to occupy more central positions in global networks. Beijing's objective is not to withdraw from world science but to enter it on stronger terms.

The United States, meanwhile, is attempting to preserve scientific and technological primacy while narrowing the type of key international connections that helped create that primacy. This is understandable in part. Concerns about intellectual property appropriation, military-civil fusion, coercive technology transfer, undisclosed affiliations, and dual-use research are real. The United States government has a legitimate responsibility to protect sensitive technologies, ensure transparency in federal funding, and prevent collaboration from directly enhancing Chinese military or surveillance capabilities.[45]

The problem is one of calibration. American scientific leadership has never rested solely on domestic expenditure or the excellence of individual universities.[46] It has depended on network centrality: the ability to attract the world's most talented students and researchers, convene international teams, host leading laboratories and journals, and make the United States the preferred location for ambitious scientific careers. Foreign-born scientists

45 "Amendment and Extension of the US–PRC Science and Technology Agreement," US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, Dec. 13, 2024, https://2021-2025.state.gov/amendment-and-extension-of-the-u-s-prc-science-and-technology-agreement-sta. For an assessment of this amendment, see Mu-ming Poo, "US–China Cooperation and Competition in Science and Technology," *National Science Review* 12, no. 1 (Jan. 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/nsr/nwaf001.

46 On the centrality of talent to US scientific leadership, see Simon and Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration"; Simon and Appelbaum, "China Science and Technology Relations 2.0."

have contributed disproportionately to American research, entrepreneurship, and technological industries. International students have strengthened US–based graduate programs and supplied critical talent to universities and firms.[47] Open professional networks have allowed the United States to identify emerging ideas early and to shape global norms from a position of confidence.[48]

Broad disengagement risks weakening these advantages. Excessively restrictive visa policies can redirect talent elsewhere. Vague or duplicative research security requirements can discourage universities from pursuing legitimate international work. Rules that treat national origin as a proxy for risk can damage trust, produce discrimination, and make the United States less attractive to the very scientists it hopes to recruit. Funding restrictions that sever institutional relationships without assessing project-level risk can eliminate beneficial collaboration while doing little to protect genuinely sensitive capabilities.

The comparison with China is revealing. China's leadership repeatedly links self-reliance to deeper participation in international networks. The 14th Five–Year Plan called for a more open and mutually beneficial cooperation strategy and more active integration into the global innovation network. The 15th Five–Year Plan maintains an explicit commitment to high-level open cooperation. Xi's aforementioned April 2026 speech paired a forceful call for original innovation with an equally explicit instruction to integrate into the global innovation network and jointly address major scientific problems.[49] Beijing appears to understand that self-reliance and network centrality are complements rather than substitutes.

Washington often behaves as though international openness and national security must be traded against one another in a zero-sum manner. That framing is strategically dangerous. The United States cannot protect its S&T leadership by making itself a less welcoming place to conduct science. Nor can it outcompete China by vacating international institutions, reducing scientific diplomacy, or allowing collaboration with the world's second-largest research system to atrophy across entire fields.

A better strategy for the United States would be one of *smart openness*.[50] This would define narrow categories of genuinely sensitive research, require transparent disclosure of funding and affiliations, strengthen cybersecurity and intellectual property management, improve due process in enforcement, and create clear pathways for low-risk collaboration. It would invest in the capacity of federal agencies and universities to assess risk rather than imposing blanket prohibitions. It also would distinguish among fundamental research, precompetitive research, proprietary commercial technology, and classified or export-controlled work.

Smart openness would include a renewed commitment to scientific diplomacy. The United States should revitalize bilateral and multilateral channels on climate, health, agriculture, biodiversity, nuclear safety, ocean science, and basic research. It should compete more seriously in the Global South by offering sustained institutional partnerships rather than episodic projects. It should support international research infrastructure, data platforms, and training programs that embody high standards of transparency, reciprocity, and research integrity. And it should remain active in standards organizations and global scientific bodies rather than treating participation itself as a concession to China.

47 On the contribution of foreign-born scientists and international students to US research and the risks of restrictive talent policies, see "International Talent: Essential to America's Innovation Economy and National Security," Association of American Universities (AAU), Jan. 5, 2026, https://www.aau.edu/key-issues/international-talent-essential-americas-innovation-economy-and-national-security. According to National Science Board data, in 2024, foreign-born individuals accounted for 22 percent of the US workforce in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. See Kritika Agarwal, "America's STEM Talent Pipelines Are Under Strain," AAU, May 29, 2026, https://www.aau.edu/newsroom/leading-research-universities-report/americas-stem-talent-pipelines-are-under-strain. See also Simon and Appelbaum, "China Science and Technology Relations 2.0"; Simon and Wagner, "US—China Scientific Collaboration."

48 Denis F. Simon, "Competition for US–China Talent Advantage and US National Interest," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, March 12, 2026, https://quincyinst.org/research/competition-for-us-china-talent-advantage-and-the-us-national-interest.

49 "Xi Focus," State Council, Xinhua News Agency.

50 Simon and Wagner, "US–China Scientific Collaboration."

The United States should also recognize that allies and partners do not want a scientific order defined solely by exclusion. Many countries seek access to American universities, Chinese infrastructure, European funding, and regional networks at the same time. A strategy that demands rigid alignment as a form of political loyalty may push these countries toward alternatives. A strategy that offers attractive, principled, and durable cooperation is more likely to preserve and even enhance American influence.

The ultimate competition between the United States and China is not simply over who invents particular technologies first; it is over which country becomes the most important node in the global production and circulation of new knowledge. China is attempting to increase its centrality through infrastructure, funding, diplomacy, and institution building. It has committed itself to enhance spending and related investment in basic research.[51] The United States still possesses extraordinary advantages — world-leading universities, deep capital markets, a strong culture of scientific inquiry, innovative firms, and a long record of attracting talent — but they are not self-sustaining.

The central irony is therefore stark. China's S&T policy has become more instrumental but is moving toward wider engagement, while the United States seeks to retain dominance but is moving toward narrower engagement. On the present trajectory, China may not reproduce all the openness that made the American system exceptional, yet it can still gain a great deal of influence if the United States voluntarily reduces its own network reach.

The correct American response is neither complacent engagement nor indiscriminate separation. It is disciplined, confident internationalism: Protect what must be protected, cooperate where cooperation advances shared interests, and preserve the openness that makes the United States the world's most attractive scientific partner. Scientific leadership is not maintained by standing apart from global networks. It is maintained by remaining at their center.

51 On China's commitment to expand basic-research investment, see "Xi Focus," State Council, Xinhua News Agency; "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十五" [Outline of the 15th Five–Year Plan], NDRC, Part III.

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