



Research security as part of the EU's economic security strategy

- A new proposal from the European Commission urges Member States to update their policies to mitigate risk in international research collaborations, as well as harmonization of research security measures across Member States.
- The proposal is not aimed at a particular country or countries but commentators highlight that an increased awareness of risk linked to research collaborations with China is a major factor contributing to the initiative.
- The new recommendation is more clearly aimed at national governments than previous policy documents from the Commission and frames research security measures as part of economic security.
- The move towards increased involvement by national governments echoes a development that has already taken place in Sweden in recent years, and is therefore not set to change policy direction.

The European Commission published its [Proposal for a Council recommendation on enhancing research security](#) on 24 January 2024. The proposal makes recommendations to European Union (EU) Member States on how they should support higher education institutions (HEIs) and research organizations to enhance research security, and offers tools and guidance for HEIs and research funding organizations on assessing risks and improving research security. The proposal comprises a policy document and two “factsheets” with specific advice on [how to implement research security](#) and engage in [risk appraisal](#).

On research security, the proposal discusses the management of risk in international research collaborations with third countries that take place within the EU, [most notably](#) “the undesirable transfer of critical knowledge, know-how and technology that may affect the security of the EU and its Member States”. The document does not highlight particular countries but [commentators](#) have identified China as the most significant third country at which the proposal is aimed, and that the strongest concern for the EU is that dual-use technology might fall into the hands of the Chinese military.

More specifically, the [recommendations](#) encourage EU Member States to develop a “coherent set of policy actions to enhance research security”. Member States are encouraged to draft their own national guidelines and to support researchers and universities by establishing “national hubs”. The proposal also discusses an intention to establish a European Centre for Research Security within the EU. The document is not a binding instrument but makes recommendations on how Member States can enhance research security. By proposing a recommendation for adoption by the European Council, the Commission hopes to ensure the [political commitment](#) of Member States.

The new recommendation can be seen as an attempt to harmonize developments within the EU in terms of research security. Indeed, whereas the policy document points out that several Member States are already in the process of developing national guidelines or action plans on strengthening research security, it also [emphasizes](#) that “uncoordinated multiplication of national measures would result in a patchwork of national policies, disparities among Member States, and thereby fragmentation of the European Research Area”.

The risks associated with research collaborations with third countries and foreign interference in research have been high on the EU agenda in recent years, in response to the increasingly complex and multinational research environment. Most significantly, research and innovation (R&I) collaborations with non-democratic states have increased exponentially in past decade, mainly as a result of China's rise as a [science nation](#). China has already reached or is approaching global leadership in a significant number of research areas, most notably in [critical technologies](#) such as artificial intelligence and quantum technologies. Military-civil fusion has also been raised to the level of [a national strategy](#) under the leadership of Xi Jinping (习近平), seeking a more thorough integration of the military and civil sectors. This has raised concerns in many EU Member States that dual-use technology is being transferred to the Chinese military. In recent years, multiple reports have [pointed to](#) research collaborations between European academics and Chinese researchers at universities linked to the military. Responding to such concerns, the Commission released a document, Tackling R&I Foreign Interference, in January 2022, which has been discussed in a [previous brief](#) by the Swedish National China Centre.

What is new about the current recommendation?

There are two major differences between the new proposal and the Commission's 2022 document, Tackling Foreign R&I.

First, while the 2022 document was a staff working paper from the Commission mainly aimed at HEIs and research institutes, the newly published proposal is directed at Member States and set to be adopted by their representatives in the Council. The [explicit aim](#) of the Commission through this choice of instrument is to ensure that all Member States are “actively involved and committed” at the political level. The new proposal emphasizes the agency of Member States and urges them to develop infrastructure to strengthen research security. This is a clear signal to individual Member States that the management of risk in international research can no longer be regarded as merely the concern of HEIs and individual researchers. In fact, the use of “research security” rather than other related terms such as “responsible internationalization” can be seen as emphasizing the role of the national governments in the Member States, as arguably research security differs from

[responsible internationalization](#) in its emphasis on the national interest, and highlights the agency of national governments and authorities rather than individual researchers.

Second, the new recommendation is part of [a larger package](#) aimed at increasing “economic security” within the EU. The fact that research security is included within economic security is a signal to Member States that the research community is also part of a wider aim within the EU to achieve “open strategic autonomy”, which is [defined as](#) “the ambition for the EU to assume greater responsibility for its own security, reduce one-sided dependencies in critical areas and strengthen its capacity to set and implement its own priorities”. The package is a continuation of the [European Economic Security Strategy](#) initially presented in June 2023. Significantly, the recommendation on strengthening research security was accompanied by a [White Paper](#) that contained suggestions on opening up funding for dual-use technology within Horizon Europe’s successor, Framework Programme 10.

The recent move to a focus on research security can be viewed in the light of an ongoing process within the EU and its Member States to strike a somewhat new balance between national security and core academic principles of openness and academic freedom. Hence, the new proposal was accompanied by [concerns](#) among universities and researchers that such a focus risks impinging on those principles. If asked about their China collaborations, very few [researchers and HEIs](#) mention challenges related to economic security. Instead, they tend to emphasize issues such as infringements of academic freedom or political influencing efforts.

Nonetheless, the League of Research Universities [responded](#) to the proposal by complimenting the document for “put[ting] universities at the heart of their own decision-making, thus engendering institutional autonomy in this area”. This more positive response can perhaps be explained by the fact that the proposal contained no binding regulations but merely recommendations, and that the recommendations were first and foremost aimed at Member States and not HEIs. In other words, although an increased focus on research security might be seen as a threat to university autonomy in the long run, the new recommendations do not currently represent a direct threat to institutional autonomy and it will be up to the individual Member States to decide how to implement them in cooperation with HEIs. In contrast, the recent EU directive on [Transparency in Interest Representation](#), which aims to increase transparency in foreign funded research projects, has faced criticism from HEIs, which are concerned that the directive risks increasing their administrative burden and stigmatizing foreign funded projects, thereby limiting academic freedom.

Implications for Sweden

Much of the process described above, in terms of a shift in emphasis towards the agency of national governments, can be regarded as mirroring the process of “responsible internationalization” that has been ongoing in Sweden for several years. In 2020, the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT), a non-governmental research funding organization, published [general guidelines](#) for Swedish HEIs on assessing risk in international research collaborations. Until recently, however, the national government [had not been much involved in the process](#), and implementation of responsible internationalization had been left to HEIs and individual

researchers, a division of responsibilities that was also explicitly stated in the 2019 government White Paper [“Approach to matters related to China”](#).

After several reports in the Swedish media exposed risks with research collaborations, including researchers with connections to the Chinese military having collaborated with Swedish HEIs, the government asked the Swedish Council for Higher Education, the Swedish Research Council and Vinnova to develop [national guidelines on responsible internationalization in 2024](#).

In other words, Sweden has moved from leaving the task of defining and implementing guidelines on managing risk in international collaborations to the HEIs and the wider research community to getting the national government more involved in the process. Nonetheless, for Sweden to really adopt the “whole-of-government approach” to research security touted by the Commission would require improved coordination between government agencies, and between the research sector and government. In Sweden, where not only HEIs but also government agencies typically [enjoy a large degree of independence](#), this has proved very difficult. The debate on how research security will be implemented in practice, including how best to strike a balance between national security and openness, is likely to continue both [in Sweden](#) and elsewhere in the EU.



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