Patterns of research collaboration in the derisking era: East and Southeast Asian cases

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Preface

This report analyses evolving research collaboration in East and Southeast Asia amid a period marked by geopolitical tensions, research securitisation, and growing fragmentation of global science. While international scientific cooperation expanded considerably after the Cold War, driven by openness and mobility, today's environment is influenced by national security concerns, export controls, and frameworks for "trusted research." These trends are especially evident in the Asia-Pacific region, where the US–China strategic rivalry significantly impacts collaboration patterns.

Using Web of Science data from 2001 to 2023, the study examines co-authorship trends and disciplinary profiles across eight economies. Developed research systems – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore – mainly maintain stronger ties with the United States, reflecting longstanding institutional links and, in the cases of Japan and South Korea, formal security alliances. However, collaborations with China have steadily increased, especially in basic sciences and materials engineering, indicating a pragmatic balancing approach.

Developing economies – Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam – exhibit more varied patterns. Thailand and Indonesia have increased collaboration with both major powers, although US ties remain the strongest. Malaysia shifted noticeably toward Chinese cooperation after 2014, fueled by political influences, expanded trade connections, and a growing Chinese student population. Vietnam stands out as a strategic exception: despite rapid growth in research output, it remains relatively independent from both the US and China, reflecting its cautious geopolitical stance and expanding domestic research capacity.

For Sweden, these trends present both risks and opportunities. The region's growing significance in global research, along with emerging EU research-security frameworks, demands a deeper understanding of the area and increased analytical capacity. Simultaneously, strong partnerships with Japan and South Korea, together with prospects in Southeast Asia, position the region as a vital hub for Sweden's initiatives in responsible internationalisation. Sweden's ability to balance openness with strategic foresight will be crucial in navigating an increasingly complex global research environment.

The study was conducted by Dr Kenneth Fung, Universiti Malaya, and Dr Tommy Shih, KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Lund University. Dr Erik

Forsberg, STINT representative in China and ASEAN, and STINT's review panel for publications, consisting of Prof. Mats Benner and Prof. Sylvia Schwaag Serger, Lund University, reviewed the report and provided valuable feedback

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1. Introduction

The post-Cold War era has seen an unprecedented surge in international scientific collaboration. Policies promoting openness, researcher mobility, and the cross-border exchange of ideas enabled landmark initiatives such as the Human Genome Project, where scientific communities operated across borders with little geopolitical interference. Today, this global system is undergoing profound transformation. International collaboration is progressively constrained by national and economic security imperatives (OECD, 2025). Governments have lately increasingly framed science as a strategic asset, central to technological sovereignty and geopolitical influence (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025). Policy instruments such as export controls, foreign investment screening, and research security guidelines have gained greater emphasis. Moreover, frameworks for "trusted partnerships" have aimed to inform stakeholders of risks in cross-border cooperation (NPSA, 2022). These developments have contributed to a gradual decline in international research collaboration as a share of total publications in recent years. Considerable attention has thus focused on the intensifying rivalry among major scientific regions: the United States (USA), China, and the European Union. Yet comparatively less analysis has examined how other countries navigate these shifting dynamics. While national interests, strategic competition, and zero-sum perceptions dominate among great powers, the current multipolar configuration of global innovation suggests that value creation is not confined to traditional research hubs but may include small states with strategic agility (Kuik, 2021).

The East and Southeast Asian region, beyond China, offers a compelling lens for exploring these changes. Home to diverse economies, emerging innovation hubs, and complex geopolitical alignments, the region illustrates both opportunities and tensions in contemporary scientific collaboration. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are recalibrating research strategies to balance openness with national and economic security, while regional initiatives strive to sustain collaboration amid growing strategic competition. Understanding these developments is essential for assessing how global science governance is evolving beyond Western-centric frameworks.

The Asia-Pacific region has been a focal point of scientific and technological advancement for over four decades and hosts 21 institutions ranked among the QS Top 100 universities. Advanced economies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have successfully leveraged international collaboration while cultivating robust domestic capabilities in higher education and innovation. Although Western attitudes toward China have become increasingly cautious (Shih & Forsberg, 2023), this

perspective is not uniformly shared across the broader Asian region, underscoring the complexity of global science diplomacy in an era of strategic uncertainty. In Southeast Asia, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), chaired by Malaysia in July 2025, reaffirmed the region's commitment to maintaining strategic linkages with both China and the USA. This approach, commonly referred to as "strategic hedging", reflects ASEAN's pragmatic effort to navigate the growing bifurcation between the two major powers while safeguarding its own developmental interests and strategic autonomy (Kuik, 2021).

This report offers an overview of the state of research collaboration in selected countries in the East and Southeast Asian region particularly within the context of growing geopolitical tensions as well as collaboration with the USA and China.

2. Bibliometric data as a means for visualisation

The report utilises bibliometric data as its key resource, supplemented by qualitative data mainly from policy papers, observations and other materials to provide contextual support. Records for bibliometric exploration were sourced from Web of Science, mainly because its more organised consolidation of key indicators (e.g. addresses, funding agencies, and categories) (Pranckutė, 2021). Moreover, strict criteria for indexing enable identification of high-quality scientific output and reduce the noise of more routine scientific papers that would be less meaningful for the purposes of the discussion on the effects of research securitisation. This study focused on two criteria denoting research collaboration:

1. Joint publications – records that include both the case study country and either the USA or China; and
2. Field of research – Research discipline as defined by Web of Science categories.

The study was confined to the period 2001–2023. 2023 was deemed a suitable cut-off point as records have been fully consolidated at time of writing and are therefore not susceptible to additions. The start of the period was determined based on China's entry into the World Trade Organization, signifying the opening of the Chinese market. This marker is seen as a key milestone not just in gaining access to trade markets but also as impetus for sweeping domestic reforms that spurred the development of state-owned enterprises and the science and technology machinery that China now boasts (Tan, 2021). The study considers several case studies within the East Asia region (Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia), with an inclusion criterion of a minimum of 10,000 records. The cases examined are Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

The results of the bibliometric investigation are presented in two sections: developed Asia-Pacific economies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) and developing Asia-Pacific economies (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam). The analysis begins by looking at co-authorship patterns and comparing collaborations between the case study and either the USA or China followed by the research fields involved in these collaborations.

2.1 Developed Asia-Pacific economies

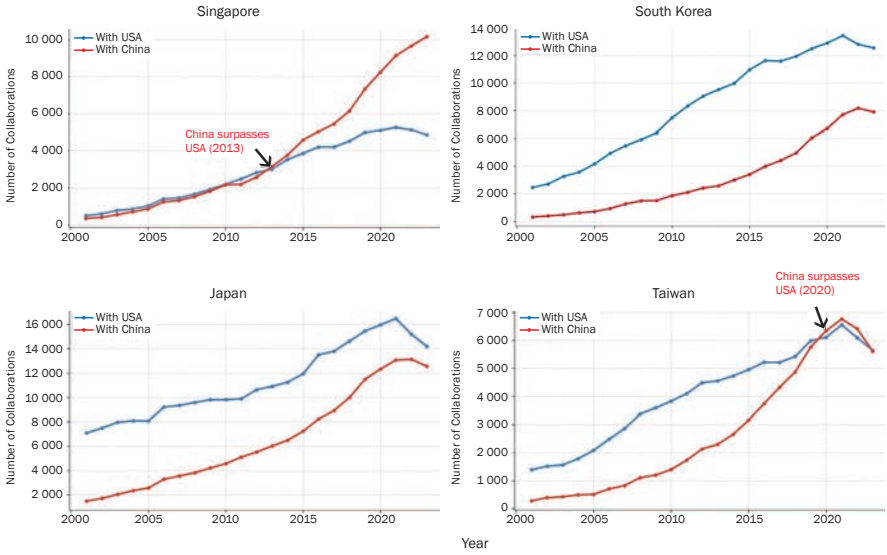
The developed Asia-Pacific economies were identified based on geographic location according to Web of Science classifications. These economies were classified as such partly because of the maturity of their scientific institutions, as well as their proximity to both China and the USA, in terms of historical interactions as well as geopolitical trajectories.

The cases of South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan showed distinct dominance of collaboration with the USA over that with China; however, in the cases of Taiwan and Japan trends show that China is catching up with the USA in this regard. In Singapore there was parity between collaboration with the USA and China, but in more recent years the number of Chinese collaborations has surpassed that of US collaborations. South Korea has maintained its volume of collaboration with the USA, presumably due to their military alliance and longstanding research collaboration with the USA. However, South Korean collaboration with the USA has to some degree plateaued in the last three to five years while collaboration with China has grown. The situation is similar in Japan, although the gap between China and the USA is closer here than in South Korea. Research students traveling from Taiwan to mainland China and their subsequent return have sparked the ongoing collaboration between these economies. However, cross-strait dynamics have not yet been evident in curtailed collaborative research. This may become more apparent in future data.

Similarly, Singapore has also experienced an influx of Chinese students in the early 2010s which points to them either returning to mainland universities or linking their research teams to Chinese research collaborators to extend their research during their postdoctoral studies. Singapore is an interesting case considering that the island nation has always looked regionally for resources and expansion, with mainland China a prime target given the large overseas Chinese population in Singapore, lack of communication barrier and, in comparison to the rest of northeast Asia, none of the geopolitical tensions and history with mainland China.

Both developed and developing Asia-Pacific economies showed a dip in co-publications after 2022. This recurring pattern is largely attributable to the pandemic, since there is typically about a 12–24-month lag between conducting research and publication. Due to restrictions on researcher mobility, reduced access to laboratories due to movement controls, and disruption of fieldwork, this drop in research output is not confined to international collaborative research but is reflected in all research outputs more generally.

Figure 1: **Co-authorship between the developed Asia-Pacific cases studied and the USA and China, respectively (2001–2023)**



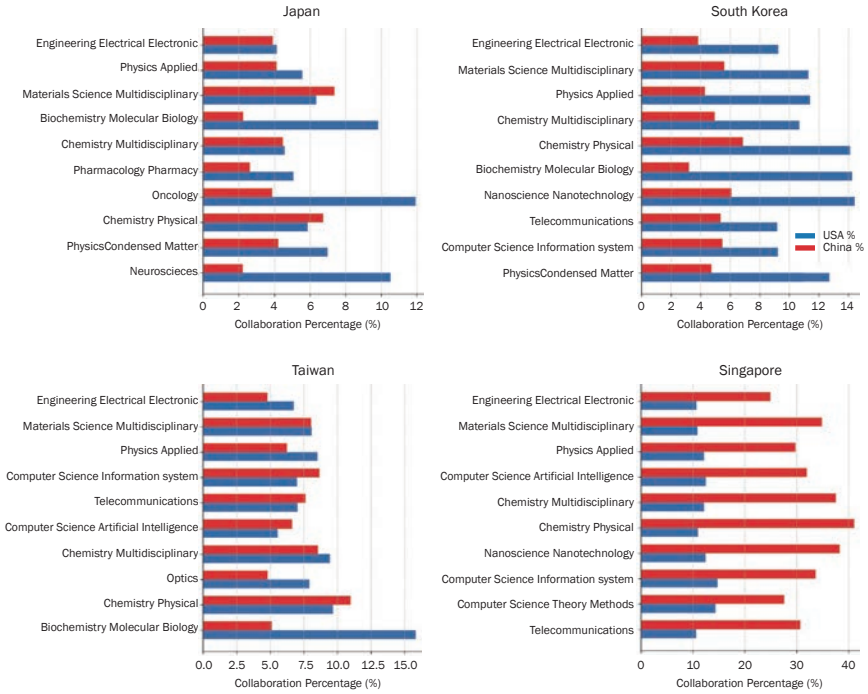
Source: Web of Science

To determine the areas of collaboration, the top ten areas of research for publications from each of the cases studied are considered. Next the volume of research being done with either the USA or China is determined as well as the degree to which that volume encompasses the total research for the specific case study in that area (represented by the percentage data).

The composition of categories seems to suggest that the areas of research for these countries typically lie in the semiconductor sector, as well as the biomedical/pharmaceutical sectors. Further, the results suggest that there tends to be more US influence in areas related to healthcare for Japan and Taiwan. Research collaboration between Taiwan and China seems to be more focused on basic rather than applied sciences. For both South Korea and Japan the amount of research with China typically does not exceed 7% except in particular areas.

On the other hand, Singapore shows a willingness to collaborate extensively with the Chinese and to a lesser degree with the USA. This makes the Singaporean case unique in a sense, considering that the country has long been recruiting foreign experts from both the West and China to realise their science and technology ambitions.

Figure 2: **Web of Science categories for Developed Asia Pacific economies in collaboration with US or China (2001-2023)**



Source: Web of Science

2.2 Developing Asia-Pacific economies

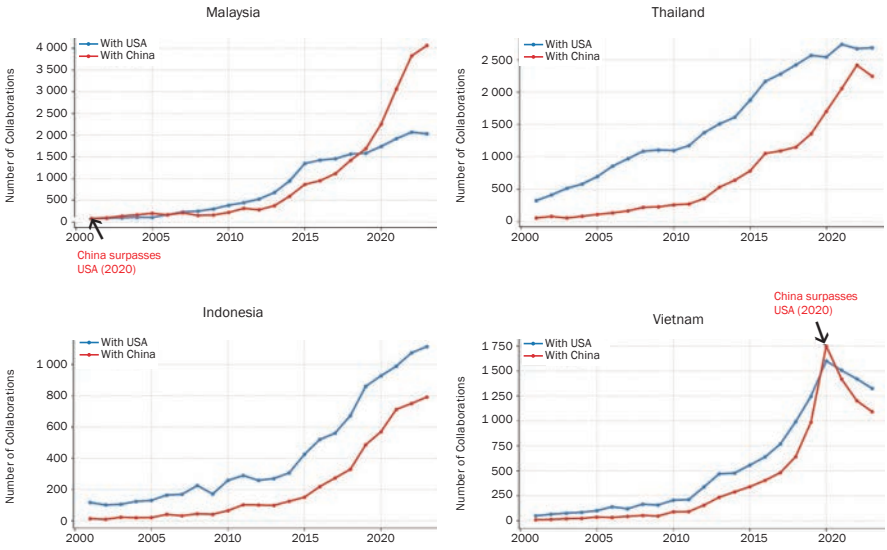
For the purpose of this study, the developing Asia-Pacific region includes economies that had made progress in their research volume in the past two decades and are considered to be the ASEAN countries that will follow the emergence of the nations discussed in the previous section. The later emergence of these countries may be attributed to their reliance on natural resources and primary industries such as agriculture, mining, and other commodities. Nonetheless, the selected economies of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam have demonstrated significant growth in their research output in recent years, particularly as their universities have prioritised quality enhancement to achieve international competitiveness.

A major point to note in the past 20 years is the emphasis on publishing in indexed journals to boost the rankings of regional universities, particularly in international English-language journals that have good reputations in their

respective fields. As such, academics in these four countries have been resourced and required to publish extensively to drive the research agendas of their universities and economies.

Co-authorship in the selected economies primarily skews towards the USA but China had a growing influence towards parity or even exceeding the USA. This is apparent in the cases of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Thailand and Indonesia have seen a steadily steep increase in US collaboration for the 20-year period under consideration, but these two countries also had increasing Chinese collaboration from 2010 onwards. Malaysia, on the other hand, saw US collaboration begin to flatten after 2014, while Chinese collaboration increased dramatically during the same period.

Figure 3: **Co-authorship between the developing Asia-Pacific cases studied and the USA and China, respectively (2001–2023)**



Source: Web of Science

Notably, Malaysian politics has much to do with the decline in US collaboration. Malaysian politics habitually sympathise with Palestine, and the cost of sustaining research with the USA meant that there was a decline in US–Malaysian collaboration. Further, Malaysia's trade relationship with China and the sizable Malaysian Chinese minority in the country meant that collaboration with China has increased during this period. This can also be seen as a spillover effect from

the Singaporean situation as the Chinese student population in Malaysia has especially increased after the pandemic. This increase may be attributed to the tightening of student visa allocations for Chinese to typical destinations in the West. Combined with the more favourable cost of living in Malaysia, the country has become one of the more affordable, yet reputable destinations for education, research, and innovation in the region.

The Vietnam case on the other hand has been very interesting in the context of this study. The growth of one of the most rapidly growing economies in the research and development space has typically been driven endogenously, without relying on either the USA or China. Nonetheless, it is notable that several international universities have set up branches in Vietnam to tap into the growing Vietnamese middle class. The geopolitical history of Vietnam and its tensions with both the USA and China meant that Vietnam seems to prefer to carve out its own path in science and technology.

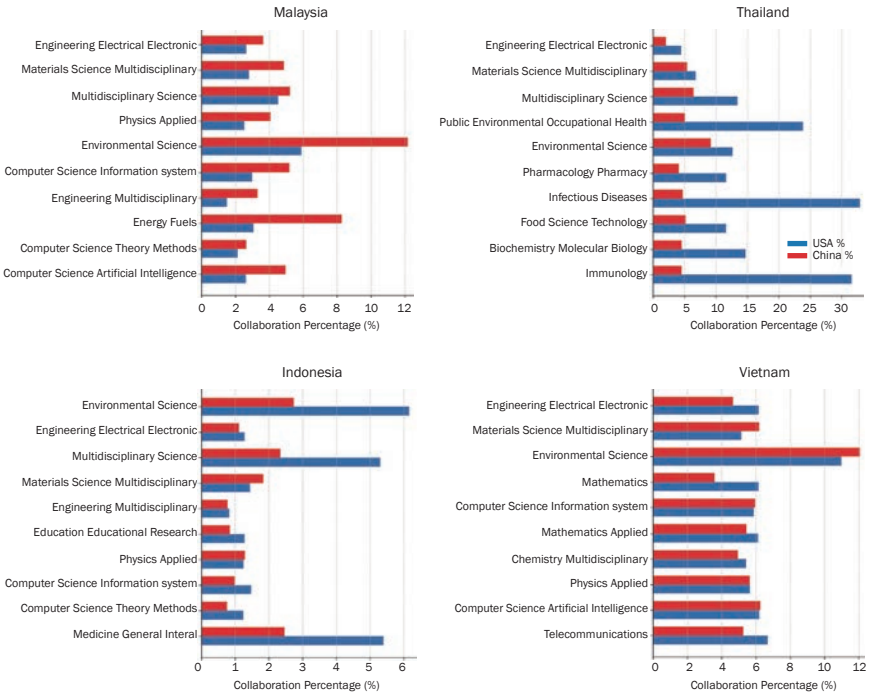
Notably, there is limited collaboration between the USA or China with these countries in the areas in which they publish the most. Figure 4 shows the areas of research in which each country has published the most within the 20-year period, with the volumes of research done in collaboration with both the USA and China and their percentages. Thailand shows the most collaboration with the USA, particularly in areas relating to health, medicine and food security. This is closely related to their focus areas in research as well as to plugging particular gaps in their research ecosystem. Thailand has been observed to have a long-standing tradition of sending their students for further study in the USA and other developed countries. However, the difference is that a large proportion of these students still return and work in their universities and laboratories to serve the bond of their scholarship. Other cases studied have similar programmes but also higher rates of attrition, which warrant further investigation.

Malaysia and Vietnam have similarly low percentages of collaboration across their major areas of research with the exception of environmental sciences. This area has seen a major uptick in recent years, particularly relating to international projects that have been spurred by the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the desire to track environmental indicators within a region that has been developing quickly but with sparse data on environmental indicators as required by international guidelines.

A general observation on the low percentages of collaborative research point to the trend that the majority of the research done in this region tends to be routine adaptation of existing literature to a localised context. This approach tends to

extend published literature and does not require hands-on collaboration with international partners. Another reason would be the lack of bilateral ties that foster such collaboration. Chinese collaboration tends to require research to be conducted within the Chinese mainland, in which case resources and human capital are mobilised within the Chinese ecosystem ensuring that learning and intellectual capital remain within the system. Another observed situation is that, aside from Thailand, limited resources is being made available for researchers to build significant research linkages with other countries. Although programmes such as Horizon and Fulbright have been present, they are limited to the relatively few who have the opportunity to spend a full sabbatical in these countries.

Figure 4: **Web of Science categories for research conducted in the developing Asia-Pacific cases studied in collaboration with the USA or China (2001–2023)**



Source: Web of Science

3. Observations

In this section, we interpret the bibliometric patterns observed in the Asia-Pacific case studies through the increased pressures for research security and responsible internationalisation. We argue that the dynamics of co-authorship, disciplinary focus, and funding flows cannot be fully understood without reference to the policy environments that increasingly condition international collaboration.

3.1 Revealed patterns in East Asia: Alignment, openness, and strategic positioning

The developed Asia-Pacific economies studied here – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – demonstrate patterns consistent with strategic alignment and continue to display a greater volume of collaboration with the USA. This is rooted in long-standing institutional ties and, for South Korea and Japan, formal security alliances. However, this alignment is not monolithic, as these nations also exhibit increased collaboration with Chinese institutions. For South Korea and Japan, US co-authorship remains dominant, which is consistent with their military alliances and historical research collaboration, although the US volume has plateaued in recent years while collaboration with China has grown. Collaboration with China is typically concentrated in basic science and materials engineering, often not exceeding 7% of the total research volume in major areas, suggesting a cautious approach to maintain US-facing alignment while leveraging Chinese research growth. The US influence is particularly noticeable in healthcare-related areas for Japan.

Historically, research collaboration with the USA has dominated in Taiwan, but in recent years it has been surpassed by collaboration with China. Collaboration between Taiwan and China appears to be more focused on basic than applied sciences. Notably, cross-strait dynamics have not yet overtly curtailed collaborative research volume, although this may be visible with rising tensions between China and Taiwan and as more data become available in coming years.

Singapore stands as a distinctive case of strategic ambidexterity, illustrating a deliberate policy of diversification as a national resilience strategy. The city-state reached near parity in co-authorship with China and the USA, with Chinese collaborations even surpassing US collaborations in more recent years. This is partly attributed to an influx of Chinese students in the early 2010s who subsequently linked to Chinese research teams. Singapore demonstrates a unique willingness to collaborate extensively with China. This openness extends significantly into

strategic domains, with Chinese collaboration accounting for high percentages in key Web of Science categories, such as 35% in multidisciplinary materials science and 32% in computer science and artificial intelligence. Singapore's capacity to attract top-tier talent from both major powers reflects its geopolitical neutrality and infrastructural readiness to execute a policy of controlled openness.

The developing Asia-Pacific economies – Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia – present more volatile and varied patterns of engagement. Malaysia exhibits a sharp increase in post-2014 collaboration with China, with Chinese co-authorship dramatically increasing while US collaboration flattened. This shift is attributed to Malaysian political sympathy towards Palestine leading to a decrease in US collaboration, combined with strengthened trade ties with China, a sizeable Malaysian Chinese minority, and the influx of Chinese students. The collaborations are unevenly distributed, with a greater Chinese presence in engineering and computing, while collaboration with the USA remains stronger in biomedical and environmental sciences.

Thailand and Indonesia have seen a steadily steep increase in US collaboration throughout the 2001–2023 period, with increasing Chinese collaboration beginning around 2010. Thailand shows the most US collaboration, particularly in areas related to health, medicine, and food security. A notable trend across these developing economies is the limited percentage of collaboration with either the USA or China across their major research areas. This observation suggests that much of the research conducted in this region might be routine adaptation of existing literature to local contexts that therefore do not require much in terms of hands-on international partnerships, or that research is limited by resources available for significant linkages. Collaboration is most significant in Environmental Sciences, often spurred by international projects related to the SDGs.

Vietnam emerges as a critical outlier in the study. Despite being one of the most rapidly growing economies in the research and development (R&D) space, its growth has been largely driven endogenously, without significant reliance on either the USA or China for high-volume co-authorship. This is evidenced by the total volume of publications not typically relying on the USA or China. This pattern suggests a cautious and growing investment in science as a tool of sovereign development, likely shaped by historical tensions with both major powers and a preference to avoid entanglement, allowing the country to build its own path in science and technology. This approach is consistent with the strategic objective of maximising benefits from collaboration while avoiding great-power rivalries.

3.2 Sweden's research engagement in East and Southeast Asia: Challenges, opportunities, and strategic pathways

East and Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving research regions globally. The area is characterised by substantial investments in science and technology, ambitious innovation agendas, and expanding international collaborations. At the same time, the region has become a focal point of geopolitical competition, particularly between the USA and China. This rivalry is reshaping global research networks and introducing new complexities for countries such as Sweden, which have long championed openness, academic freedom, and sustainability in international cooperation.

Bibliometric evidence indicates that the Asian countries examined in this report maintain strong collaborative ties with both China and the USA. This dual alignment underscores the region's strategic significance but also presents challenges for Swedish universities and researchers seeking partnerships. In an environment where science and international tensions are increasingly entangled, collaboration can no longer be assumed to be politically neutral. Swedish institutions must navigate a landscape in which scientific cooperation is influenced by competing geopolitical and economic interests, and where the principles of open science are under growing pressure.

The intensifying technological rivalry between the USA and China has placed research security high up on the Swedish science policy agenda. Sensitive domains such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, advanced materials, and biotechnology are now subject to heightened scrutiny and tighter restrictions. These developments have profound implications for Swedish universities, which must evaluate how their partnerships intersect with risk related to dual-use, and intellectual property theft, as well as economic and national security concerns. A potential fragmentation of global research networks further complicates this picture, as research ecosystems increasingly align along geopolitical fault lines. For Sweden, operating within the EU's policy frameworks, the challenge lies in upholding values of openness while engaging responsibly with partners across the East and Southeast Asian region. This necessitates a proactive approach that combines robust due diligence, systematic risk assessments, and clear governance structures to ensure compliance with emerging EU ethical and security standards (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2024).

Despite these challenges, East and Southeast Asia offers significant opportunities for Swedish research engagement. Countries such as Japan and South Korea pos-

sess advanced research systems and have high levels of academic freedom, making partnerships with them particularly attractive. Strengthening ties with actors in these countries can help Swedish universities maintain high-quality collaborations. At the same time, emerging research systems in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand are actively seeking international partnerships to strengthen capacity and enhance their global presence. Engaging with these countries provides Sweden with an opportunity to find pockets of research excellence, foster equitable partnerships, support capacity building, and contribute to more inclusive global science. Such collaborations can reinforce Sweden's reputation for promoting multilateral cooperation. In this context, responsible internationalisation (Shih et al., 2020; Shih & Garvi, 2022) is not only about creating partnerships with immediate value but also about resilience and foresight. Swedish universities must prepare for potential disruptions in mobility, funding, and supply chains that could arise from geopolitical tensions or global crises.

Swedish research institutions should leverage their reputation for openness and high-quality research to position themselves as facilitators of multilateral cooperation. Contingency planning and scenario analysis will be essential tools for anticipating and managing opportunities and risks (see Gaunt & Shih, 2025). At the same time, achieving these objectives will require a comprehensive and integrated strategy. Swedish universities must strengthen risk management and governance for international partnerships and establish frameworks aligned with the EU's emphasis on ethics, economic security, and academic freedom (Council of the European Union, 2024). Diversification of partnerships is critical: institutions should engage in areas where mutual scientific advancement can be achieved, remain vigilant about security issues, and expand ties with emerging science nations to promote equitable partnerships and capacity building. Responsible internationalisation must be supported by clearer frameworks that balance openness with security, transparency in research agreements, and training for researchers on geopolitical risk awareness, compliance requirements, and ethics in an international setting. Building resilience and foresight at the university level will involve preparing for disruptions through contingency planning and scenario analysis, ensuring that Swedish universities remain agile and adaptable in a volatile global environment.

Finally, emerging EU frameworks, such as the forthcoming European Research Area (ERA) Act, will likely require Swedish policies to align more explicitly with research security at the European level. In an era of geopolitical uncertainty, Sweden's ability to combine openness with strategic foresight will be decisive for the

ability of its universities in navigating the complexities of global research engagement.

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