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Research Security in the Indo-Pacific: Why it Matters to Australia

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The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.

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KEY MESSAGES

1. 'Research security' refers to a set of actions taken by governments or other bodies to manage the risks of undesired technology transfers, interference in or misuse of research and threats to research integrity.
2. In a contested geopolitical environment, safeguarding research institutions from spies, saboteurs and secret agents is of immense importance for Australia and its allies.
3. Australia has no clear research security policy and has not advocated for this agenda among partners in the wider region.
4. To close this gap, Australia should develop a national strategy, build capacity among partners to manage potential threats, and position itself as a hub for regional research collaboration.

Introduction

The AUKUS deal could be something of a poisoned chalice for the university and higher education research sector in Australia and more broadly, the Indo-Pacific. On the one hand, the country has been given a huge opportunity to undertake more research into disruptive and emerging technologies that AUKUS forecasts, like quantum computing and sensing, hyper sonics, cryptography, autonomous weapons – the list is long and attractive. At the same time, engagement with these research fields brings universities into more frequent and closer contact with the government and its intelligence services, military, and law enforcement agencies – often to the discomfort of both sides.

Actions of foreign governments towards critical technologies are drawing worldwide attention, evoking their fair share of scepticism and criticism. China's growing appetite for the chips used in advanced computing (and therefore useful in everything from supercomputers to nuclear missiles) resulted in a crackdown by the Biden Administration under the *CHIPS and Science Act*.[1] Russia continues to be an active intelligence actor, aiming to destabilize existing alliances and spread disinformation.[2] North Korea has subverted the traditional separation between State and study, involving universities in illegality by sending the nation's best hackers to courses at either Moranbong University (operated by their main spy agency, the Reconnaissance General Bureau) or at Mirim College (operated by the Korean People's Army).[3]

Given that research-intensive universities have long benefited from working closely with ground-breaking thought leaders, inventors, scientists, and technical experts, how do they navigate these challenges, constrained relations, and likely conflicts? Better yet, can universities do so without compromising on the values of academic freedom, open intellectual inquiry, and fearless critique in the "marketplace of ideas" that underpins the university tradition?

How research security has emerged in the geopolitical debate

The above questions have given rise to the emergence of the notion of research security – a set of actions taken by governments or other public or funding bodies, usually in collaboration with academia and research institutes, to safeguard against the risk of undesired technology transfers, interference in or misuse of research, and threats to research integrity.

The emergence of this policy agenda is global.

UK universities have been asked to "de-risk" the conduct of research in sensitive science and engineering disciplines.[4] The European Commission issued a recommendation in May 2024 as part of its economic security package to encourage Member States to adopt research security practices.[5] Across the governments of the G7, research security – but with a flavour of "responsible" control of research – continues to develop and evolve.[6]

But more draconian examples of research security measures have dogged the concept, promoting issues of racial bias, chilling university relations and unjustly tainting programs. The dismantling of the ill-fated China Initiative – a joint FBI-Department of Justice taskforce that wrongfully prosecuted numerous academics for the crime of "researching whilst Chinese" – was met with a collective sigh of relief by the international research community.[7]

International collaboration plays an incredibly important role in the pursuit of knowledge, especially in the STEM disciplines. The "Big 5" of collaborative entities are the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan.[8] An analysis of the publications referenced on SciVal, a tool to analyse the research performance of institutions, countries, and individual researchers, shows more than one-third (38.1 per cent) of all papers published in 2021-2024 by members of the Association of American Universities were published with at least one international co-author. For other countries, that number is even higher (Figure 1). Across all Australian universities, nearly 60 per cent of all published works in 2021-2024 were published with an international collaborator.[9] Again, collaborations with China, Germany, Japan were common, as were collaborations with other EU countries like Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Spain. For Indo-Pacific nations other than Australia, international collaboration is also extremely important, with other island nations like New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu all leaning heavily on international scientific and technological collaborations.

FIGURE 1: **International collaboration in scientific publications (2021-2024)**

Country	Scientific papers with at least one international co-author (in per cent)
US (Association of American Universities)	38.1
Germany	52.6
Australia	59.4
UK Russell Group (research-intensive universities)	60.8
New Zealand	61.2
Fiji	73.7
Federated States of Micronesia	91.3
Vanuatu	93.1

Given the importance of these research linkages, some observers have questioned if geopolitics should play any part in the security of the university and higher education research enterprise.

> **In the words of one scholar "just as in competitive sports, when the university tries to referee knowledge debates, it is inevitable that the players will complain about the referee".[10]**

There is no doubt, however, that the conduct of that research will continue to attract the attentions of nation-states that would rather steal the progress of others than invest in the technologies themselves. As strategic competition hardens, therefore, universities are forced to balance wanting to further the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge with protecting that same knowledge from subversion and theft.

The Indo-Pacific experience

Research security has vast implications for the Indo-Pacific: strategic competition is increasingly playing out as a race to secure technological sovereignty and influence norms that will govern emerging technologies in critical areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, biotechnology, and telecommunications.

BOX 1: **Examples of research security threats in the region**

2021 New Zealand academics reported suspicious individuals who "seemed to be gathering intelligence" during lectures in Chinese politics and history,[11] against the backdrop of increasing espionage by China, Russia, and Iran.[12]

2022 Thirteen academics at the Australia India Institute at Melbourne University resigned after allegedly being pressured by the Indian High Commission not to host certain high-profile events discussing ethnic minorities in India.[13]

2024 A Malaysian university student was arrested in Norway and charged with espionage after allegedly attempting to monitor communications between the Norwegian Prime Minister's Office and the Defence Ministry.[14]

2025 A student from China's Army Engineering University of the People's Liberation Army was arrested in the Philippines on charges of espionage for allegedly spying on military facilities in Manila.[15]

Infringements on research security and integrity in the Indo-Pacific take place against a broader expansion of influence in the Indo-Pacific region by countries like China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. China in particular has adopted long-term investment strategies in emerging technologies, becoming an undisputed leader in quantum sensors and computing, advanced materials, biotechnology and robotics.[16] Delivery of the AUKUS capabilities (both nuclear-powered submarines and advanced technologies) will likely upset the strategic balance between the traditional US-China duopoly, leaving spaces for Russia, Iran and North Korea to become stronger players in local geopolitics.[17]

These geopolitical shifts have led to significant efforts to advance sovereign technological capabilities and innovation across the region. The US has adopted a policy of technological deterrence, seeking to promote an "America First" technology strategy to push back on the dominance of China and other subversive powers like Russia and North Korea, who pursue strategic interests in the region.[18]

AUKUS – separated into the Pillar 1 delivery of a nuclear-powered submarine capability for Australia and Pillar 2 collaboration on advanced technologies like cyberwarfare, undersea robotics, cryptography and hypersonics – aims to technologically uplift Australian military capacity in the region.[19] Japan is on course to become the first nation to be 'integrated' into the critical technologies enhanced by AUKUS Pillar 2, with India also utilising the Quad partnership to benefit from US technology without antagonising China or Russia.[20] Likewise, the Indo-Pacific countries are united behind securing the critical minerals and rare earths needed for "bleeding-edge" tech research (technologies, products, or ideas that are so new or advanced that they are ahead of the "cutting edge" and still in the experimental or development phase).[21]

In almost every case, these technologies will be accepted, studied, implemented, and commercialised out of a university or university-industry partnership.

The nuclear-powered submarine capability of AUKUS Pillar 1 is suggested to need more than 200 doctoral-qualified candidates in nuclear physics over the next ten years,[22] with an additional 4,000 positions at Australian universities also identified in the 2022-23 Federal budget.[23] The Group of Eight (Go8) universities – responsible for around 70 per cent of the research conducted in higher education in Australia – have also established dedicated pathways and supports to deliver a workforce for AUKUS Pillar 2 advanced technologies.[24]

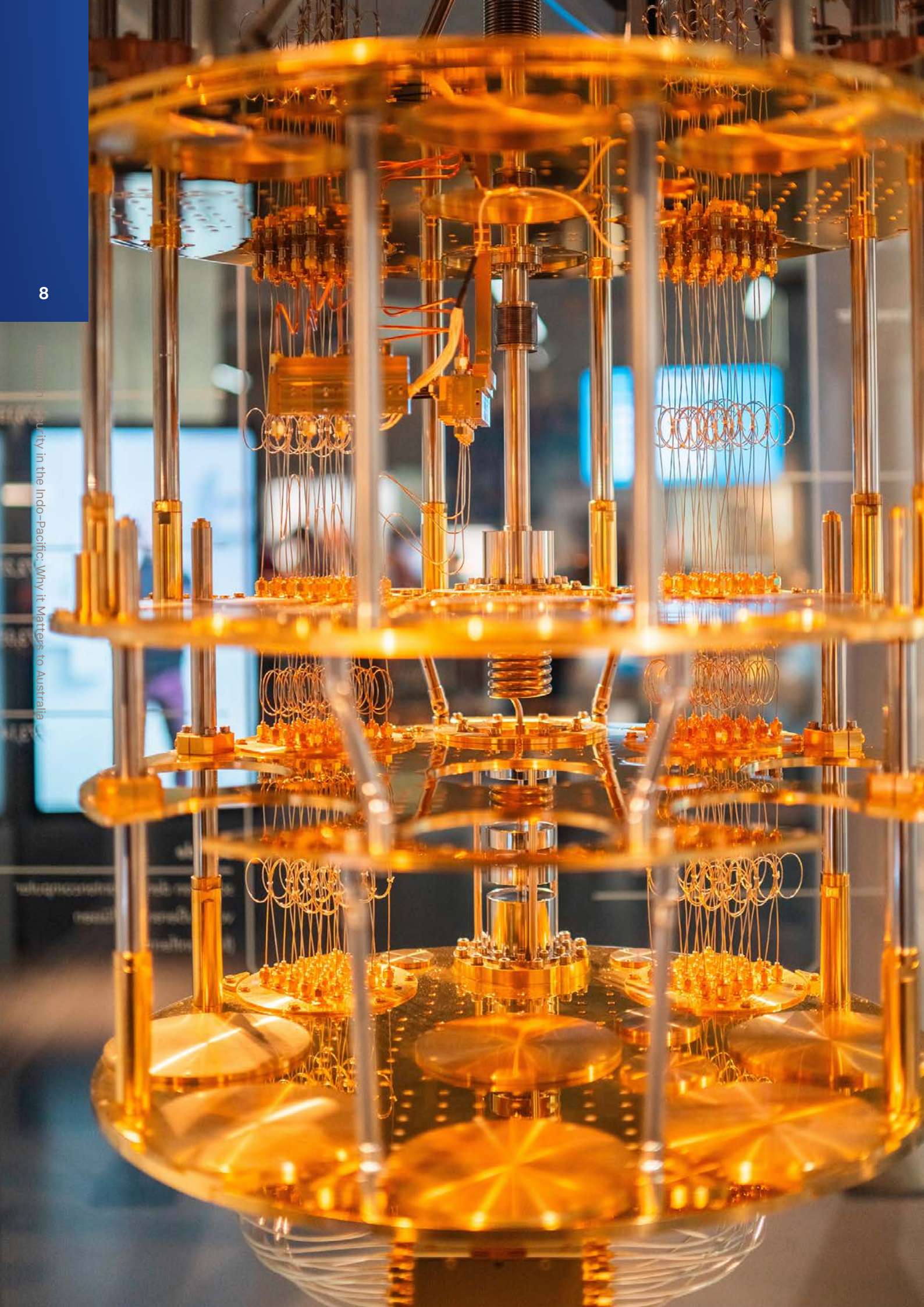
So, if emerging and critical technologies will be the lifeblood of the Indo-Pacific, Australia could be taking a leadership role in both collaborating and protecting the development of those technologies.

Australia has a mature and robust higher education setting that, despite relying on public funding, keeps them independent of government. Academics in Australia are usually able to speak and publish widely, even on controversial topics, protected by the legal concept of "academic freedom".[25] And Australia already seems keenly aware of its emerging role in the Indo-Pacific as a leader in other forms of research and development.[26]

Surprisingly, we aren't prioritising our Indo-Pacific partnerships as well as we could be. The Australian Government controversially doubled student visa fees last year and ministerial directions have slashed international student numbers, putting an Australian education potentially beyond the reach of most of our Indo-Pacific allies.[27]

Then we preference scholarly engagement and student enrolment from China over every other nation, even with institutions that lack the strategic autonomy we take for granted in the West.[28] As one example, Xiaolong Zhu – a PhD student from Queensland University of Technology – was able to finish a PhD in drone technology in Australia despite his previous links to the Chinese university that develops missiles and stealth fighters for the Chinese military.[29]

Add to that the consistent reluctance of Australia's Government to deal with its own research security woes (such as a lack of overarching Commonwealth policy, and fragmented security responses across the higher education sector)[30] and the scene is set for a dramatic showdown in the Indo-Pacific over research security.



BOX 2: **Key threat behaviours in research security, and what they target**

Technological and scientific research

- Intellectual property theft
- Espionage
- "Non-traditional collection", i.e. use of students and visiting professors to collect intelligence information.
- Foreign talent recruitment programs

Digital assets
(personal information, research data)

- Cyber-espionage
- Ransomware
- Data theft incl. sales on the dark web

Sanctions / export control evasion

- Providing access to restricted technologies
- Countries supplying restricted items or tech to China, Russia, Iran, North Korea

Integrity of university research

- Foreign interference by suppressing or altering research results or outcomes
- "Buying" research and intellectual property through funding
- Mis- and disinformation

Human intelligence
(access to university "know-how")

- Access to persons in university authority
- Support to get security clearances / positions

What Australia can do to enhance research security in the Indo-Pacific

In making these recommendations, it is important to remember that Australia is no different to any other country when it comes to research security: we must balance the competing interests in ensuring collaborative international research opportunities and institutions whilst also getting a handle on emerging and evolving security threats.[31] Australia also walks a diplomatic, economic and foreign policy tightrope between the hegemonic interests of the US and China in the region.[32] That said, there are three domains where Australia could be taking the role as a research security leader in the Indo-Pacific without further fragmenting the geopolitical environment.

The first is becoming a policy leader in research security.[33] Universities and higher education research already play a huge role in Australia's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, and that role will only increase under AUKUS.[34] But our current engagement is missing out on the full range of benefits.[35] Through "academic diplomacy", i.e. the strengthening of higher education, research, and educational exchange, Canberra can leverage the strengths of universities and research institutions to foster goodwill while uplifting the sovereign capabilities of our regional allies and supporting its foreign policy interests. This would require more than just money (though undoubtedly that would help), but a cohesive Indo-Pacific engagement strategy that treats our higher education sector as a geostrategic asset.

> **The first step toward this goal is for Australia to get its own house in order and establish a Commonwealth research security policy.**

Notwithstanding its mature higher education setting, the fundamental questions of how Australia will keep this knowledge secure from foreign interference, espionage, knowledge theft and sanctions evasion remains to be demonstrated. Existing controls are already problematic, limiting academic freedoms and leading to potential clashes with privacy, data protection, export control and anti-discrimination laws.[36] Once it has a robust and matured framework on dealing with threats to the research enterprise, Australia can leverage its existing connections and regional goodwill to roll out research security as another lever in countering foreign interference.

The second area for improvement is for the Commonwealth government to incentivise (or at least lower the barriers for) research opportunities between Australian universities and those in the Indo-Pacific. That is not to say that funding opportunities do not exist – they clearly do.[37] It's just that universities have adapted themselves to become corporate businesses, and the amount of money inherent in Chinese student enrolments and research is simply too valuable to pass up.[38] Perhaps Australia needs to move away from our "supplying aid" narrative to one that aims to bring Indo-Pacific countries onboard as "technological allies". Once we do, we can start to ensure our research partners in the region are fully prepared to counter emerging threats. Hopefully, reviews like the Government's *Strategic Examination of Research and Development* will serve as a catalyst to do exactly that.[39]

> **The last area for Australia to lead the Indo-Pacific region is establishing itself as a go-between in research connections between our key research partners in the UK, US, South Korea, India, and Japan (especially as the AUKUS Agreement matures) and other nations in the Indo-Pacific.**

Australia could – to paraphrase the words of Professor Rory Medcalf, Head of the ANU National Security College – be a "research security anchor" in the region, but this requires far greater collaboration with the other Indo-Pacific countries than is currently occurring.[40]

One way of doing this is to embrace "responsible internationalization" and prioritise reciprocal

exchanges with Australia at the heart of research collaborations with our Pacific allies.[41] Another could be to emulate the UK's Research Collaborative Advice Team (RCAT) and create a clearinghouse for information on threats to the university research sector.[42] As an example, the not-for-profit, non-government Critical Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (CI-ISAC) has emerged internationally in the absence of government leadership to create a platform "dedicated to improving global cybersecurity through the principles of equality and trusted information sharing".[43] In effect, a rising tide in research security could lift all the university boats in the Indo-Pacific.

Make no mistake – we are not at a "tipping point" in our Indo-Pacific engagement on research security. In fact, Australia passed that point a number of years ago, and is now having to work hard against other more entrenched and geopolitically active nations. But if Australia can finally recognize the benefits in building on and maturing its Indo-Pacific partnerships, the results could be momentous. Australia could be a powerful voice for safe and secure forms of collaboration in technological research in the region, rather than continuing to play second-fiddle to the US.

For now, our institutions will simply have to work harder on closer relationships and more nuanced conversations and continue to call for the Australian government to prioritise and protect university research as a matter of strategic interest.

Recommendations

THREE WAYS IN WHICH AUSTRALIA CAN CONTRIBUTE TO RESEARCH SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

1

Use research security as a foundation to take a stance of policy leadership in the Indo-Pacific and pull foreign policy levers to encourage our allies to the do the same ("academic diplomacy").

2

Incentivise (or lower the barriers for) research opportunities between Australian universities and those in the wider region, whilst driving strategic uplift in our Indo-Pacific partners capacity to handle research security risk through capacity building, exchanges, and investment.

3

Establish Australia as a go-between in research connections between our closest partners in the United Kingdom, US, South Korea, India, and Japan and other regional countries – especially as the AUKUS Agreement matures.

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