

Statement by Members of the International Advisory Board of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

We agreed to join the International Advisory Board (IAB) of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation because of our great admiration for its decades-long contributions to the internationalisation of scientific and scholarly research in Germany at the highest levels of excellence. Germany benefits from the Foundation's network of excellent researchers, which strengthens the country's science and technology, expands the connections of national academia to leading scientists and scholars from around the world and increases many of these foreign experts' affinity with German people and culture.

The current geopolitical environment with increased tensions, conflicts, and economic competition between countries has heightened political leaders' concerns about protecting national security in international scientific collaborations. Proprietary research and development work by private companies and to some degree governmental agencies has always been restricted to a significant extent. The norm that has existed for several decades for fundamental research conducted by scholars at universities, however, has been the greatest possible openness combined with open access publication.

Instances of – sometimes obviously systematic – exploitation of scientific collaboration for unfair appropriation of knowledge (spying) have raised the question of where to strike the appropriate balance between research openness and security to protect national interests. The current concern of government research funders, including those in Germany, is with China. It is greatest in rapidly advancing scientific fields, where fundamental research is close to emerging technologies with potential “dual uses” which could generate beneficial or harmful applications.

The question that is relevant for the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German government is how best to protect national interests when scientists are involved in collaborations with foreign partners in basic research. For a nation to be at the forefront of science and technology, its scientists must engage with the best scientists from around the world, which is what the Humboldt Foundation supports through its programmes and emphasis on excellence. The exchange with the best foreign scientists enables German scientists to learn about discoveries and advances happening elsewhere that can be used to the benefit of Germany – this also includes knowledge about potential new risks. Such overall benefit to Germany is certainly true for many areas of cooperation with Chinese scientists, especially in the fields where they are amongst the best in the world. Of course, international collaboration ultimately benefits all the countries whose scientists are cooperating. Scientists have the freedom to choose the scientists they want to collaborate with based on their own interests, but with that freedom comes the obligation to maintain the highest standards of scientific integrity and transparency, which also include publishing results and data in scientific journals to make them available to the worldwide scientific community.

Our view of what is needed to protect the national interest of a country like Germany is a commitment to a continuous form of dialogue and engagement between the nation's scientists, research institutions, research funders, government institutions, and elected officials. A research funder, such as the Humboldt Foundation, can decide better whether or not to grant a fellowship or support a research collaboration if it has access to information the government might have about foreign research institutions or individuals who have violated the norms of scientific engagement in the past. At the same time, the German government should listen to its scientific community and funders like the Humboldt Foundation when it comes to how a collaboration can benefit German science and technology and is in Germany's interest. That is certainly true in research areas relevant to dealing with the challenges of climate change and new pandemics, but also in many areas of research relating to emerging technologies. What is required is trust that can only be gained by a commitment to continuous engagement between the scientists, the science funders, and the government. All parties can then be confident that their decisions ensure that international scientific collaborations benefit the nation.

The German government made a far-sighted decision when it created the Humboldt Foundation and thus a global network that contributes significantly to the advancement of German science, technology, and scholarship. The Humboldt community puts scientific excellence and cooperation first and seeks to inspire others in their endeavour. This understanding of the benefits of openness accompanied by high standards of excellence and accountability can radiate into other areas of life. In addition, and beyond the positive impact of these values on science, one should also emphasize the important role of science diplomacy in helping to resolve political and other differences between countries.

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