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Strategically Managed Internationalization under Geopolitical Change: Institutional Responses by Research-Intensive Universities in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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Abstract

Geopolitical competition, research security concerns, and growing government intervention are reshaping the internationalization of higher education. This study examines how research-intensive universities are adapting their internationalization strategies under these changing conditions. Drawing on a comparative documentary analysis of 19 universities and their policy environments in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the study develops the concept of **Strategically Managed Internationalization (SMI)** as a framework for understanding institutional governance under geopolitical uncertainty. The analysis identifies five interrelated dimensions of SMI: **Strategic Integration, Partnership Portfolio Management, Institutional Coordination, Risk Governance, and Adaptive Capability**. While universities across the six higher education systems increasingly converge around these governance functions, they pursue distinctive institutional pathways shaped by national policy environments, governance traditions, funding structures, and organizational priorities. Rather than signalling a retreat from internationalization, the findings suggest that geopolitical uncertainty is transforming how universities organize and govern international engagement. By conceptualizing internationalization as an institutional governance capability, SMI provides a new comparative framework for understanding how universities balance academic openness, institutional resilience, research security, and global collaboration in an increasingly fragmented international environment.

Keywords

Strategically Managed Internationalization; Internationalization of Higher Education; Geopolitics; University Governance; Research-Intensive Universities; Research Security

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Strategically Managed Internationalization under Geopolitical Change: Institutional Responses by Research-Intensive Universities in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States

1. Introduction

Internationalization has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education and an increasingly important dimension of university strategy. Over the past three decades, research-intensive universities have expanded international student recruitment, faculty mobility, cross-border research collaboration, transnational education, and institutional partnerships to strengthen research excellence, innovation, and international competitiveness (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As universities have become more globally interconnected, international engagement has evolved from a peripheral activity into a core institutional function.

However, this period of expansion has entered a more uncertain phase since the early 2000s. Intensifying geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, research security concerns, economic nationalism, and growing government intervention are reshaping the environment in which universities pursue internationalization (Lee, 2021; Marginson, 2025). International collaboration is increasingly influenced by concerns relating to national security, technological sovereignty, industrial policy, and strategic competition among states. Universities are therefore expected not only to sustain global engagement and scientific collaboration but also to protect sensitive research, manage institutional risks, and respond to increasingly complex regulatory requirements.

These developments create a significant challenge for universities. International engagement remains essential for scientific discovery, talent development,

institutional reputation, and global knowledge exchange, yet universities must simultaneously preserve academic openness while responding to political, technological, and regulatory uncertainty. The central question is therefore no longer simply whether universities should internationalize, but how they can sustain international engagement when globalization is increasingly conditioned by geopolitical considerations (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that geopolitical change is reshaping higher education internationalization and encouraging more selective, responsible, and risk-aware forms of international engagement (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Huang, 2026a). However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the organizational governance of these changes. Existing studies have generated important insights into national policy responses, research security, responsible collaboration, and differentiated partnership strategies, but provide more limited explanation of how universities coordinate these multiple pressures and priorities within institution-wide governance arrangements.

This study addresses this gap by shifting analytical attention from national policy responses and individual international activities towards institutional governance. It examines how research-intensive universities reorganize governance arrangements to sustain international engagement under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty. Drawing on comparative documentary analysis of universities and policy environments in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the study investigates how universities integrate internationalization into institutional strategy, manage changing partnership environments, coordinate organizational functions, govern emerging risks, and adapt to changing external conditions.

To explain these developments, the study develops the concept of Strategically Managed Internationalization (SMI). The concept directs attention to internationalization as an institutional governance capability rather than primarily as a collection of international activities. It provides a common analytical framework for examining both emerging similarities in governance functions and continuing differences in institutional responses across diverse higher education systems.

The analysis is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. How are research-intensive universities redesigning internationalization strategies under conditions of geopolitical change?

RQ2. What common governance functions and nationally distinctive institutional pathways emerge across Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States?

RQ3. What do these institutional responses reveal about the evolution of internationalization as an institutional governance strategy?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews scholarship on internationalization under geopolitical change and identifies the theoretical gap addressed by the study. Section 3 develops SMI as the conceptual framework. Section 4 explains the research design and methodology. Section 5 presents the six country cases, and Section 6 develops the cross-national comparative analysis. Section 7 discusses the theoretical and policy implications, and Section 8 concludes the paper by summarizing its contribution and identifying directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internationalization under Geopolitical Change: From Expansion to Strategic Adaptation

The changing geopolitical environment has challenged many of the assumptions underpinning earlier approaches to higher education internationalization. Whereas internationalization was long understood primarily in terms of expanding global engagement through student mobility, academic exchange, research collaboration, and transnational education (Knight, 2004), contemporary universities increasingly operate in an environment shaped by geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, research security concerns, and growing state intervention (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Rizvi, 2022). Internationalization must therefore be examined not only as the expansion of cross-border activities but also as a process of institutional adaptation to changing political, technological, and regulatory conditions.

A growing body of scholarship has sought to explain this transformation. Although these studies differ in theoretical orientation and empirical focus, they broadly suggest a movement from expansion-oriented internationalization towards more strategic forms of global engagement. Four perspectives are particularly relevant to understanding this development.

The first emphasizes responsible internationalization, arguing that international engagement should be guided not only by competitiveness but also by reciprocity, ethical collaboration, sustainability, and the public good (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). This perspective questions the assumption that more internationalization is necessarily better and encourages universities to evaluate international engagement according to its academic quality, social value, and ethical implications. Its primary contribution is normative: it clarifies the principles that should guide internationalization. However, it pays less attention to the organizational mechanisms through which universities translate these principles into institutional strategies and governance arrangements.

A second body of literature focuses on research security and Trusted Research (Searle et al., 2025). Concerns about foreign interference, intellectual property protection, dual-use technologies, data security, and export controls have led governments in several countries to introduce frameworks requiring greater institutional oversight of international research collaboration (Rüffin et al., 2026). Universities have responded through due diligence procedures, research-security functions, compliance systems, disclosure requirements, and institutional risk assessment. This literature has significantly advanced understanding of how universities seek to balance scientific openness with legitimate security concerns. Its analytical scope, however, remains primarily centred on research governance and offers a more limited account of how security considerations interact with the broader governance of internationalization.

A third perspective examines the relationship between geopolitics and higher education. This literature situates universities within wider processes of geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, and national innovation strategy (Lee, 2021; Marginson, 2025; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). Universities are increasingly expected to contribute simultaneously to scientific excellence, economic competitiveness, and national strategic priorities while navigating

complex international environments. This scholarship has greatly improved understanding of the external political conditions shaping internationalization. However, its primary analytical emphasis is generally on geopolitical change and national policy, with less attention to variation in how universities interpret and organizationally respond to these pressures.

A fourth and more institutionally oriented perspective examines the strategic differentiation of international engagement. Strategic regionalism highlights the geographical reconfiguration of international cooperation through regional partnerships (Robertson et al., 2016), while selective internationalisation emphasizes how universities increasingly differentiate among countries, institutions, disciplines, technologies, and research fields according to strategic priorities and geopolitical risks (Huang, 2026a). Recent empirical research on Chinese research-intensive universities similarly demonstrates how institutions recalibrate internationalisation across regions, thematic domains, and partnership formats in response to changing geopolitical conditions (Jing et al., 2026). These studies show that universities do not necessarily retreat from global engagement but may reorganize it through more selective, diversified, and risk-sensitive forms of cooperation. Their principal contribution is to restore institutional agency to the analysis of geopolitical change. However, they focus primarily on the differentiation and reconfiguration of international activities rather than the broader governance arrangements through which multiple institutional responses are coordinated.

Overall, these four perspectives demonstrate that internationalization under geopolitical uncertainty involves normative choices, risk management, changing state–university relations, and more differentiated patterns of international engagement. Their combined insights provide an important foundation for understanding contemporary institutional adaptation. At the same time, they point towards a broader question concerning how universities coordinate these different responses within institution-wide governance arrangements.

2.2 Theoretical Gap: Towards an Institutional Governance Perspective

The literature reviewed above demonstrates a significant shift in the study of higher education internationalization. Internationalization is no longer understood solely as the expansion of cross-border activities. Universities are increasingly

expected to balance academic openness with research security, global engagement with national and institutional priorities, and international collaboration with organizational resilience.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship provides only a partial account of how these objectives are coordinated within universities. Responsible internationalization identifies normative principles for engagement; research-security scholarship explains the governance of particular risks; geopolitical approaches illuminate changing external pressures; and selective internationalisation explains the differentiation of international engagement. These perspectives are complementary, but their analytical separation makes it difficult to explain how universities address multiple strategic objectives simultaneously.

The central theoretical gap therefore concerns the organizational governance of internationalization: how universities interpret external pressures, establish institutional priorities, coordinate organizational actors and functions, manage international partnerships and risks, and adjust governance arrangements over time. Addressing this gap requires greater attention to the university as a strategic organization rather than primarily as an object of government policy or a setting in which separate international activities take place.

This shift in analytical focus is supported by emerging comparative evidence. Cross-national research demonstrates substantial variation in governmental responses to geopolitical change (Huang et al., 2026), while institutional studies indicate that universities increasingly pursue differentiated and selective forms of international engagement (Huang, 2026a). These findings suggest that external geopolitical pressures do not translate directly into uniform institutional responses. Universities interpret and mediate these pressures through their own missions, governance structures, organizational capacities, disciplinary profiles, and international networks.

An institutional governance perspective is therefore needed to connect external geopolitical change with organizational adaptation. Such a perspective should explain how universities coordinate different dimensions of internationalization within broader institutional strategies and how similar governance challenges may generate both common organizational functions and contextually distinctive

responses. The following section develops Strategically Managed Internationalization (SMI) as a framework for addressing this analytical problem.

3. Conceptual Framework: Strategically Managed Internationalization

3.1 Why Strategically Managed Internationalization?

The preceding review shows that internationalization under geopolitical uncertainty cannot be adequately explained through activity-based or policy-centred perspectives alone. Existing scholarship has clarified important dimensions of contemporary adaptation, including responsible engagement, research security, geopolitical change, and selective internationalisation. However, a further conceptual step is needed to explain how universities coordinate these concerns within institutional governance.

This paper proposes Strategically Managed Internationalization (SMI) as such a framework. SMI places the university itself at the centre of analysis and treats internationalization as an institutional governance capability. Rather than asking only what international activities universities pursue, SMI asks how universities organize, coordinate, and adapt international engagement under changing political, technological, and regulatory conditions.

Accordingly, SMI seeks to explain how universities sustain internationalization in a more fragmented global environment. It does not replace existing concepts such as responsible internationalization, research security, or selective internationalisation. Instead, it provides an overarching governance framework for understanding how these concerns become connected within institutional strategy, organizational coordination, partnership management, risk governance, and adaptive learning.

3.2 Defining Strategically Managed Internationalization

Strategically Managed Internationalization is defined in this paper as an institutional governance capability through which universities strategically coordinate international engagement under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty.

Rather than conceptualizing internationalization primarily as a set of cross-border activities—such as student mobility, faculty exchange, international research collaboration, or transnational education—SMI emphasizes the organizational processes through which universities align international engagement with institutional missions, governance arrangements, research priorities, and changing external environments.

Conceptually, SMI is situated at the meso level of analysis, linking macro-level geopolitical change with micro-level institutional practices. At the macro level, governments reshape the external environment through research security policies, technological competition, immigration regulations, science funding, export controls, and national innovation strategies. At the micro level, academics, students, and administrators engage in international teaching, research, and collaboration. Between these levels lies the university as a strategic organization. Universities interpret external pressures, allocate institutional resources, redesign governance structures, establish internal rules, and coordinate organizational responses. SMI therefore explains how geopolitical pressures are translated into institutional governance.

This perspective differs from activity-based understandings of internationalization in several important respects. Earlier approaches often emphasized visible international activities and outputs, including international student mobility, research collaboration, institutional partnerships, and transnational education (Knight, 2004). Subsequent approaches, particularly comprehensive internationalization, broadened this perspective by emphasizing institution-wide commitment, leadership, and the integration of internationalization across organizational functions (Hudzik & Stohl, 2012). SMI builds on these organizational approaches but shifts attention towards the governance capabilities through which universities coordinate and adapt international engagement under sustained geopolitical uncertainty.

SMI also extends recent perspectives on internationalization under geopolitical change. Responsible internationalization explains the values that guide international engagement; research security explains how institutional risks are managed; and selective internationalisation explains how international activities become differentiated. SMI focuses on how universities coordinate these concerns through integrated governance. It therefore provides a framework for

explaining both institutional diversity and functional convergence across higher education systems.

3.3 Core Dimensions and Analytical Propositions

The concept of SMI comprises five interrelated governance dimensions. Rather than representing independent institutional practices, these dimensions function as complementary organizational capabilities through which universities sustain international engagement while adapting to geopolitical uncertainty. Conceptually, the framework builds on institutional perspectives emphasizing organizational interpretation and strategic responses to external pressures (Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2013), while extending internationalization scholarship that has emphasized institution-wide integration and organizational coordination (Hudzik, 2014; Knight, 2004). The five dimensions were developed through an iterative process combining insights from the literature reviewed in Section 2 with comparative analysis of documentary evidence from research-intensive universities in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Strategic Integration refers to the extent to which internationalization is embedded within institutional missions, long-term strategic planning, and executive decision-making. Rather than functioning as the responsibility of international offices alone, internationalization increasingly shapes institution-wide decisions concerning research, education, innovation, finance, organizational resilience, and institutional development. This dimension explains how internationalization becomes embedded within university-wide governance.

Partnership Portfolio Management refers to universities' capability to evaluate, diversify, and adjust international partnerships according to academic quality, institutional complementarity, geopolitical risk, funding opportunities, and long-term strategic priorities. Rather than assuming that expanding the number of international collaborations is inherently beneficial, universities increasingly manage partnerships as dynamic institutional portfolios requiring review and strategic adjustment. This dimension explains how universities sustain international engagement while reducing excessive dependence on particular countries, partners, or funding sources.

Institutional Coordination refers to the organizational mechanisms through which universities align multiple governance functions in support of internationalization. Contemporary international engagement increasingly involves university leadership, research administration, international offices, legal advisers, ethics committees, finance divisions, digital governance units, and academic departments. This dimension explains how universities reconcile academic openness, regulatory compliance, research excellence, and organizational resilience within coherent governance systems.

Risk Governance refers to universities' capability to identify, assess, and manage the diverse risks associated with international engagement while preserving the core academic values of openness, collaboration, and academic freedom. Extending existing research security literature, this dimension incorporates regulatory, technological, reputational, financial, and partnership-related risks within a broader governance framework. It explains how universities balance scientific openness with institutional resilience under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty.

Adaptive Capability refers to universities' capacity for organizational learning, institutional reflexivity, and strategic adjustment. As geopolitical conditions evolve, universities must reassess governance arrangements, partnership strategies, organizational structures, and international priorities. This dimension explains how universities sustain internationalization through continuous organizational learning and long-term strategic adaptation.

Together, these five dimensions suggest that contemporary internationalization should be understood not primarily as the expansion of international activities but as the development of institutional governance capabilities. They provide the analytical basis for examining how universities sustain international engagement under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty.

Building upon this framework, the study advances three analytical propositions.

Proposition 1. Governance transformation rather than international retreat
Research-intensive universities facing geopolitical uncertainty are more likely to redesign institutional governance than to reduce international engagement.

Internationalization therefore evolves primarily through organizational adaptation rather than through simple expansion or contraction.

Proposition 2. Functional convergence despite institutional diversity

Although governments adopt different internationalization policies and universities operate within diverse political and governance environments, research-intensive universities increasingly converge around common governance functions while continuing to differ in the organizational pathways through which these functions are implemented.

Proposition 3. Organizational capability underpins sustainable internationalization

The long-term sustainability of internationalization increasingly depends upon universities' capability to coordinate multiple governance functions rather than upon the scale of international activities alone. Universities possessing stronger governance capabilities are better positioned to balance academic openness with research security, organizational resilience, and changing geopolitical conditions.

These propositions establish the analytical bridge between the conceptual framework and the empirical analysis. Rather than evaluating universities according to traditional indicators of internationalization, such as student mobility or the number of international partnerships, the following sections examine how universities develop governance capabilities that enable them to sustain international engagement under geopolitical uncertainty.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative comparative multiple-case study design to examine how research-intensive universities manage internationalization under conditions of geopolitical change. A comparative qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explain organizational adaptation across diverse institutional and national contexts rather than test causal relationships or pursue statistical generalization. The objective is to develop analytical explanations of institutional governance and identify both recurring patterns and

contextually distinctive forms of organizational adaptation (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018).

The study uses national higher education systems as the principal comparative cases while focusing empirically on selected research-intensive universities within each system. This nested comparative design enables analysis of the relationship between national policy environments and institutional governance responses. National contexts are examined to identify the political, regulatory, funding, and strategic conditions shaping internationalization, while university-level evidence is used to analyse how institutions interpret and translate these conditions into governance arrangements.

The study examines Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These systems were selected through purposive theoretical sampling (Patton, 2015) because they combine strong commitments to international research collaboration and global engagement with substantial variation in geopolitical position, higher education governance, state–university relationships, funding structures, demographic conditions, and dependence on international education.

Case selection was guided by four considerations. First, each system contains internationally connected research-intensive universities that participate extensively in global research collaboration, talent mobility, and international partnerships. Second, all six systems have experienced significant changes in the external environment for internationalization, including research-security concerns, technological competition, immigration and mobility reforms, demographic pressures, or changing international partnership priorities. Third, they represent contrasting governance arrangements, ranging from strongly state-shaped systems to decentralized and market-oriented environments. Fourth, they differ substantially in their patterns of international dependence, funding, demographic conditions, and global engagement. This variation provides a basis for examining whether common governance functions emerge across different contexts and how those functions are configured through nationally and institutionally distinctive pathways.

The purpose of case selection is therefore analytical rather than representative. The six systems and the universities examined within them provide theoretically

informative cases for analysing how research-intensive universities sustain and reorganize international engagement under geopolitical uncertainty.

Table 1 summarizes the composition of the comparative cases. The study examines 19 research-intensive universities across six national systems. The number of institutions varies across cases because the sampling strategy was purposive and theoretically driven rather than designed to achieve numerical symmetry. The selected cases provide variation in higher education governance, state–university relationships, dependence on international education, demographic conditions, and exposure to changing geopolitical and regulatory environments.

Table 1. Comparative case composition and analytical context

National system	Number of universities examined	Key contextual characteristics	Dominant SMI pathway identified
Australia	2	High dependence on international education; market exposure; diversification pressures; formalized foreign-interference and research-security governance	Market-oriented
China	4	Strong state strategic role; national innovation and talent priorities; geographical diversification; increasingly formalized governance of international engagement	State-embedded
Japan	3	Demographic decline; gradual institutional reform; continued commitment to international openness;	Adaptive

		emerging research-security requirements	
South Korea	4	Strong emphasis on global competitiveness, talent attraction, research capacity, and qualitative upgrading of internationalization	Competitiveness-oriented
United Kingdom	3	Strong global engagement; post-Brexit adjustment; growing Trusted Research, due-diligence, and regulatory requirements	Risk-governance-oriented
United States	3	High institutional autonomy; decentralized governance; increasingly consequential federal research-security and compliance requirements	Autonomy-mediated
Total	19	Comparative variation across governance systems and geopolitical contexts	Six differentiated institutional pathways

Note. National systems constitute the principal comparative cases, while selected research-intensive universities provide the institutional-level evidence. The cases were selected purposively for analytical variation rather than statistical representativeness.

4.2 Data Collection

The study draws primarily on documentary evidence produced between 2018 and 2026. Documentary analysis is particularly appropriate for examining institutional governance because universities increasingly articulate strategic priorities, organizational responsibilities, partnership approaches, compliance

requirements, and research-security arrangements through formal institutional documents. Such materials provide evidence of officially articulated priorities and governance arrangements and enable systematic comparison across institutions and national contexts.

The primary sources consist of institutional documents produced by selected research-intensive universities in the six systems. These include university strategic plans, internationalization and global engagement strategies, annual reports, partnership frameworks, research-security and research-integrity policies, governance documents, compliance guidance, and official university webpages. The selection of institutional materials focused on documents that provided evidence relevant to one or more areas of internationalization strategy, partnership governance, organizational coordination, risk management, and institutional adaptation.

National policy documents were also analysed to establish the external environments within which institutional responses developed. These materials include legislation, national higher education and research strategies, research-security frameworks, government guidance, funding-agency requirements, and official reports issued by bodies responsible for higher education, science, innovation, and national security. These documents were used primarily to contextualize institutional responses rather than to treat national policy as the principal object of analysis.

Recent scholarly publications, international organization reports, policy analyses, and official statistical sources were used as supplementary materials. These sources supported interpretation of national developments and cross-national comparison but were distinguished analytically from the primary institutional documentary evidence.

The resulting evidence base therefore combines three types of material: institutional documents for analysing university strategies and governance arrangements; national policy documents for establishing the external policy and regulatory context; and secondary sources for supporting contextual interpretation and comparative analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed an abductive research strategy combining theoretically informed interpretation with the identification of patterns emerging from documentary evidence (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The analytical process involved continuous movement between existing scholarship, the developing SMI framework, and comparative empirical evidence. This approach allowed the conceptual framework to guide attention towards questions of institutional governance without treating the five SMI dimensions as fixed categories imposed deductively on the evidence from the outset.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, institutional and national policy documents were reviewed and coded for recurring themes concerning internationalization strategy, partnership management, organizational coordination, research security and risk, leadership, organizational change, and institutional adaptation. At this stage, coding remained sufficiently open to identify themes that did not correspond directly to the initial conceptual categories.

Second, within-case analyses were conducted for each national system. Institutional documents were interpreted in relation to relevant national policy and regulatory environments to examine how research-intensive universities translated external conditions into institutional priorities and governance arrangements. This stage generated country-specific analytical narratives while preserving variation among institutions within the same national context.

Third, cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify recurring governance functions and differences in their relative importance and organizational expression. The comparison focused on broader institutional capabilities rather than individual policy instruments or isolated international activities. Particular attention was given to similarities and differences in strategic integration, partnership management, organizational coordination, risk governance, and institutional adaptation across the six systems.

Fourth, the comparative findings were interpreted through continued dialogue with the developing SMI framework. The five dimensions presented in Section 3 were refined through iterative comparison between theoretical expectations and documentary evidence. The analytical process therefore combined conceptual guidance with empirical refinement: the framework informed the comparative

analysis, while cross-case evidence clarified the boundaries, relationships, and comparative significance of its dimensions.

Throughout the analysis, attention was directed towards institutional governance capabilities rather than the frequency of particular international activities. The aim was not to rank universities or national systems according to their level of internationalization, but to explain how different institutional arrangements enable universities to organize and sustain international engagement under changing geopolitical conditions.

4.4 Analytical Rigor and Scope

Several procedures were used to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the comparative analysis. First, institutional claims were examined across multiple types of documentary evidence where available, including strategic plans, governance documents, policy frameworks, and official institutional guidance. Second, institutional documents were interpreted in relation to national policy contexts rather than treated as isolated organizational statements. Third, the use of a common analytical framework supported systematic comparison across the six systems while allowing country-specific and institution-specific patterns to remain visible. Finally, the iterative movement between within-case analysis and cross-case comparison enabled emerging interpretations to be examined against evidence from different institutional and national contexts.

The study nevertheless recognizes the limitations of documentary evidence. Official documents primarily represent formally articulated strategies, policies, and governance arrangements and do not necessarily reveal how policies are interpreted or implemented in everyday organizational practice. Public documentation also varies across institutions and national systems in its availability, detail, and terminology. The study therefore does not claim that formally stated strategies are identical to institutional practice. Rather, it analyses how universities publicly articulate and formally organize their responses to geopolitical change and uses comparative triangulation across institutional, national, and secondary sources to strengthen interpretation.

These methodological boundaries are consistent with the analytical purpose of the study. The research seeks to develop a comparative explanation of emerging

governance patterns and institutional pathways rather than measure implementation outcomes or establish causal effects. The broader limitations of the study and directions for future research are discussed in Section 7.4.

5. Institutional Responses to Geopolitical Change

This section examines how research-intensive universities in Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States are reorganizing internationalization under changing geopolitical conditions. Drawing on documentary evidence, the six country analyses apply the SMI framework to examine the configuration of Strategic Integration, Partnership Portfolio Management, Institutional Coordination, Risk Governance, and Adaptive Capability within different national and institutional contexts.

The purpose of the country analyses is not to provide comprehensive descriptions of national higher education systems or to assume that all universities within each system respond uniformly. Rather, each case identifies the dominant governance patterns evident among the research-intensive universities examined and interprets these patterns in relation to their broader policy and institutional environments. The cases therefore provide the empirical foundation for the cross-national comparison developed in Section 6.

5.1 Australia: Market-Oriented Strategically Managed Internationalization

Australia illustrates a market-oriented pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which universities seek to sustain extensive global engagement while responding to market concentration, geopolitical uncertainty, and growing research-security expectations. Australian universities have long depended heavily on international student recruitment and global research collaboration as important sources of institutional development and financial sustainability (Marginson, 2006; Welch, 2022). The documentary evidence indicates that these established commitments to internationalization continue, but are increasingly accompanied by greater attention to strategic alignment, partnership diversification, institutional coordination, and organizational resilience.

Strategic Integration is evident in the closer connection between internationalization and broader institutional priorities. Across the two universities examined, institutional strategies and governance documents position international engagement within wider agendas concerning research excellence, innovation, education, financial sustainability, and long-term institutional development. International partnerships, international student recruitment, global research collaboration, and regional engagement are therefore framed as interconnected components of institutional strategy rather than as activities managed primarily through international offices. This integration reflects the continuing economic and academic importance of internationalization while placing it within a broader framework of institutional sustainability and resilience.

Partnership Portfolio Management is particularly significant in the Australian case. The universities examined continue to maintain substantial engagement with established partners, including institutions in China, while also broadening cooperation with India, Southeast Asia, Europe, and other parts of the Indo-Pacific. This pattern broadly reflects wider Australian policy debates concerning diversification and regional engagement (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2024). The documentary evidence suggests that diversification should not be interpreted simply as disengagement from established partners. Rather, institutions are broadening the geographical and institutional scope of collaboration while placing greater emphasis on research quality, disciplinary complementarity, institutional reputation, strategic relevance, and long-term sustainability. In the Australian context, portfolio diversification therefore serves both academic objectives and the reduction of excessive institutional dependence.

Institutional Coordination has also become more important as international engagement increasingly intersects with research management, legal compliance, information security, research integrity, intellectual property, and institutional planning. Governance arrangements involve senior leadership, research offices, international offices, legal and compliance functions, ethics structures, and information-security expertise. The University Foreign Interference Taskforce guidelines reinforced this development by encouraging universities to integrate due diligence, cybersecurity, research integrity, and foreign-interference risk management into institution-wide governance arrangements (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). The significance of this development lies not simply in the

addition of new compliance procedures but in the broader distribution of responsibility for international engagement across institutional functions.

Risk Governance is consequently a prominent feature of the Australian pathway. Institutional policies and governance documents indicate more systematic attention to international research collaboration, foreign-interference risks, cybersecurity, sensitive technologies, due diligence, and responsible international engagement (The University of Melbourne, 2020; The University of Sydney, 2024). These arrangements indicate a movement from largely activity-oriented internationalization towards governance systems in which international collaboration is increasingly subject to differentiated forms of institutional oversight. At the same time, institutional frameworks continue to emphasize the importance of international research and global collaboration. Risk governance therefore operates primarily as a mechanism for governing continued engagement rather than as evidence of a general retreat from internationalization.

Adaptive Capability is visible in the capacity of universities to adjust international strategies, partnership priorities, and governance arrangements as external conditions change. The broadening of geographical engagement, stronger integration of due diligence into institutional processes, and periodic reassessment of partnership and risk-management practices indicate an increasingly adaptive approach. In a system strongly exposed to changes in international student flows, geopolitical relations, and regulatory expectations, adaptation is closely connected with reducing concentration, maintaining institutional flexibility, and protecting the sustainability of international engagement.

Overall, Australia represents a market-oriented pathway of SMI. Its distinctive feature is the interaction between continuing dependence on international engagement and growing efforts to strengthen diversification, institutional coordination, and risk governance. Internationalization remains central to university development, but its sustainability increasingly depends on governance arrangements capable of balancing global engagement with financial resilience, partnership diversification, and proportionate risk management.

5.2 China: State-Embedded Strategically Managed Internationalization

China represents a state-embedded pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which university internationalization is closely connected with national innovation, talent development, and long-term institutional upgrading. Despite intensifying geopolitical competition, technological restrictions, and growing concerns over research security, the documentary evidence does not suggest a broad retreat from international engagement. Rather, the four universities examined continue to pursue global academic collaboration while reorganizing internationalization through stronger institutional coordination, more diversified partnership strategies, and increasingly formalized governance of risk and compliance (Huang, 2025a, 2026a; Zha & Wang, 2025).

Strategic Integration is evident in the way internationalization is embedded in university-wide development strategies. Across the four research-intensive universities examined, internationalization remains a central institutional priority, but its objectives are increasingly connected with research excellence, interdisciplinary innovation, talent cultivation, graduate education, global competence, and institutional development. International engagement is therefore not framed only in terms of rankings, mobility, or the number of cooperation agreements. It is increasingly positioned as a means of strengthening research capacity, cultivating globally competent talent, and supporting long-term university development within a changing national and international environment.

Institutional Coordination is a particularly important feature of the Chinese pathway. Documentary evidence indicates that responsibility for internationalization extends beyond international offices to include university leadership, research management divisions, graduate schools, legal and administrative units, and, in some cases, Party organizations and confidentiality offices. International research collaboration, overseas partnerships, academic mobility, international conferences, intellectual property, confidentiality, and data governance are increasingly managed through formal approval chains, filing systems, and cross-functional procedures. This pattern reflects a highly organized form of internationalization in which global engagement is sustained through closer internal coordination and administrative integration.

Partnership Portfolio Management is also becoming more selective and geographically differentiated. Collaboration with leading universities in North

America and Europe remains important, but the institutions examined also demonstrate efforts to broaden cooperation across Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and countries associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. This does not indicate a simple replacement of established partners. Rather, universities appear to be expanding their cooperation portfolios through regional platforms, strategic partnerships, joint laboratories, overseas centres, and multilateral university alliances (Wen, 2026). Partnership decisions increasingly emphasize disciplinary complementarity, scientific quality, institutional reputation, strategic relevance, and long-term sustainability.

Risk Governance further illustrates the state-embedded character of the Chinese pathway. Institutional documents indicate more formalized procedures for managing international research collaboration, academic mobility, international conferences, cooperation agreements, confidentiality, data management, and sensitive research activities. These procedures do not necessarily amount to a rejection of international openness. Rather, they point to a model of governed openness in which global engagement continues through authorization, due diligence, filing, confidentiality review, and risk-control mechanisms (Huang, 2026a). In this model, research security and risk management are incorporated into the routine governance of internationalization.

Adaptive Capability is visible in institutional efforts to maintain global academic cooperation under changing external conditions. The universities examined have responded through geographical diversification, regional academic networks, overseas research platforms, multilateral alliances, and digital or hybrid forms of collaboration. Institutional strategies and governance arrangements also show adjustment to evolving policy and regulatory conditions. Adaptation in the Chinese case is therefore not primarily a move away from internationalization, but a process of reorganizing international engagement so that it remains compatible with national strategic priorities, institutional development goals, and more formalized governance requirements.

Overall, China illustrates a state-embedded pathway of SMI. National policy strongly shapes the strategic and regulatory environment for university internationalization, but institutions retain agency in interpreting these priorities and translating them into differentiated organizational arrangements. The Chinese pathway is characterized by the continued pursuit of global academic

engagement under more coordinated, diversified, and risk-governed conditions. It therefore represents not de-internationalization, but the reorganization of internationalization through governed openness and state-embedded institutional strategy.

5.3 Japan: Adaptive Strategically Managed Internationalization

Japan illustrates an adaptive pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which universities respond to geopolitical uncertainty through incremental institutional adjustment rather than abrupt strategic reorientation. Japanese research-intensive universities continue to pursue internationalization as a long-term objective supporting research excellence, educational quality, talent development, and global competitiveness. At the same time, demographic decline, international competition, digital transformation, and emerging economic and research-security concerns have encouraged universities to strengthen governance arrangements while preserving a broad commitment to international academic cooperation (Ota, 2018; Yonezawa, 2023).

Strategic Integration is evident across the three research-intensive universities examined, although it takes differentiated institutional forms. University documents increasingly connect international engagement with research competitiveness, talent development, interdisciplinary collaboration, global knowledge production, and institutional development. However, the strategic expression of internationalization varies according to institutional mission and position. Some institutions emphasize high-level global partnerships and research excellence, while others connect internationalization more closely with disciplinary strengths, early-career researcher development, regional engagement, or broader social missions. Internationalization is therefore increasingly embedded in university-wide strategy, but not through a single national or organizational model.

Partnership Portfolio Management in the Japanese case is characterized by gradual adjustment rather than abrupt realignment. Japanese research-intensive universities maintain broad international networks across North America, Europe, and Asia, while developing more selective and strategically organized partnerships. Institutions strengthen cooperation through strategic partnership frameworks, priority regions, and collaborations linked to their research strengths

and missions. This pattern is consistent with Japan's broader tradition of regional engagement and intra-Asian connectivity (Kuroda et al., 2018). Partnership management therefore emphasizes academic quality, disciplinary complementarity, institutional mission, and long-term relationships rather than a rapid geographical shift away from established partners.

Adaptive Capability is central to the Japanese pathway. Universities face geopolitical uncertainty alongside demographic pressures, financial constraints, digital transformation, and intensifying international competition. Rather than responding through large-scale restructuring, the institutions examined adapt existing strategies and governance arrangements to changing policy and external conditions. Institutional documents indicate continuing efforts to strengthen global education, international research networks, strategic partnerships, international talent development, and internal environments supporting internationalization. At the same time, new requirements relating to research integrity and research security are being incorporated into existing institutional systems. Adaptation therefore occurs through the gradual modification and extension of established organizational arrangements.

Institutional Coordination has also become more important as international engagement intersects with research management, student and researcher mobility, data governance, technology transfer, research integrity, and compliance. Responsibility for internationalization increasingly extends across university leadership, international offices, research administration, graduate education, academic departments, and specialized units responsible for research integrity and related procedures. Rather than creating entirely separate governance systems for geopolitical risk, the institutions examined generally incorporate new responsibilities into existing organizational arrangements through designated offices, consultation mechanisms, approval procedures, training, and periodic review. This reflects an evolutionary approach to institutional coordination.

Risk Governance has become more visible, but it remains embedded within a wider commitment to international openness. Since 2021, Japanese government policy has increasingly linked research openness and international collaboration with research integrity, export control, technology management, and research security (MEXT, 2024). At the institutional level, these concerns are translated

into routine governance processes involving partner assessment, contract review, data management, access conditions, technology transfer, training, and documentation. Research security is therefore becoming a condition for sustaining international collaboration rather than a rationale for reducing it. The Japanese approach combines continued openness with increasingly formalized and risk-sensitive governance.

Overall, Japan represents an adaptive pathway of SMI. Its distinctive feature is not a fundamental redefinition of internationalization, but the gradual incorporation of strategic integration, partnership selectivity, institutional coordination, and risk governance into existing university systems. Within a shared national policy environment, institutions pursue differentiated responses reflecting their missions, research profiles, locations, and organizational capacities. The Japanese pathway is therefore characterized by managed continuity: international openness is preserved, but increasingly supported by more coordinated, selective, and risk-sensitive governance arrangements.

5.4 South Korea: Competitiveness-Oriented Strategically Managed Internationalization

South Korea represents a competitiveness-oriented pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which universities strengthen internationalization as a means of enhancing research capacity, attracting global talent, and improving institutional standing. Unlike Australia, where market diversification and resilience are major concerns, or Japan, where geopolitical pressures are increasingly incorporated into research-security governance, South Korean internationalization remains primarily oriented towards global competitiveness, talent attraction, and qualitative upgrading. Rather than reducing international engagement, the universities examined seek to broaden and improve international activities through integrated strategies, diversified networks, and stronger institutional support systems (Jeon et al., 2023; Jon & Yoo, 2021).

Strategic Integration is evident in the growing connection between internationalization and broader institutional priorities. Across the four universities examined, international engagement is linked to research excellence, talent development, interdisciplinary innovation, global learning, and institutional competitiveness. The documentary evidence shows that internationalization is

not confined to international affairs offices or mobility programmes, but is increasingly connected with research collaboration, graduate education, student development, institutional partnerships, and university mission. However, priorities differ across institutions. Seoul National University combines global engagement with social contribution and support for students from developing countries, while the private universities examined place stronger emphasis on global competitiveness, international student and faculty services, and research networks. Strategic Integration therefore reflects both shared competitive pressures and differentiated institutional missions.

Partnership Portfolio Management in the Korean case is driven primarily by research opportunity, talent development, and network diversification rather than explicit geopolitical realignment. Long-established collaboration with leading universities in North America, Europe, and East Asia remains important, while institutions have broadened cooperation across a more diverse range of countries and regions. This broadening is visible in multilateral university networks, partnerships with developing countries, regional engagement, and increasingly diverse mobility programmes (Kim & Song, 2025). The documentary evidence does not indicate systematic withdrawal from particular countries. Instead, universities seek to expand the geographical and institutional scope of cooperation while increasing its academic and strategic value.

Institutional Coordination is central to the Korean pathway because internationalization is increasingly linked to educational quality, research development, student and faculty support, and institutional competitiveness. Institutional arrangements such as comprehensive support services for international students and faculty, international education programmes, interdisciplinary research platforms, and governance mechanisms for collaborative research indicate more integrated forms of internationalization. This development is consistent with a broader shift from quantitative expansion towards qualitative improvement, including diversified mobility opportunities and stronger support systems for international students and faculty (Jon & Yoo, 2021). Coordination therefore functions primarily as a mechanism for upgrading the quality and strategic value of international engagement.

Risk Governance remains less prominent in the public internationalization strategies of the four universities examined than in several other national cases.

The documentary evidence does not indicate that geopolitical risk or research security has become a dominant organizing principle of university internationalization in South Korea. Nevertheless, developments in the wider research and higher education sector suggest growing attention to these issues. For example, KAIST (n.d.) has established a Research Security Affairs Team to oversee nationally protected technologies, research-security education, and related procedures. This suggests that risk governance is emerging particularly in STEM-intensive research environments, although it has not yet become central to the publicly articulated internationalization strategies of the four case universities.

Adaptive Capability is expressed primarily through qualitative upgrading and diversification rather than direct organizational responses to geopolitical pressure. The universities examined have expanded international education and mobility opportunities, strengthened support for international students and faculty, developed interdisciplinary research platforms, and broadened international networks. At the national level, the Study Korea 300K Project links international student recruitment with academic planning, local industry, municipal cooperation, and career development, while quality-assurance mechanisms seek to strengthen recruitment, academic support, and campus integration (Ministry of Education, 2023). These developments indicate adaptive capacity centred on talent attraction, competitiveness, and improvement in the quality of internationalization.

Overall, South Korea illustrates a competitiveness-oriented pathway of SMI. Its distinctive feature is competitive upgrading: internationalization remains central to university strategy, but its development is increasingly characterized by closer integration with institutional missions, broader partnership networks, stronger support systems, and qualitative improvement. Compared with several other cases, geopolitical uncertainty remains a less explicit driver of institutional strategy. Korean research-intensive universities appear to interpret changing international conditions primarily as a context in which global competitiveness, talent attraction, and network diversification must be strengthened.

5.5 United Kingdom: Risk-Governance-Oriented Strategically Managed Internationalization

The United Kingdom represents a risk-governance-oriented pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which universities seek to preserve international openness while responding to a more demanding security and regulatory environment. UK universities remain strongly engaged in global research collaboration, international academic mobility, overseas student recruitment, and transnational education. However, following Brexit and growing geopolitical concerns, internationalization increasingly operates within a national environment that combines continued market incentives with expanding expectations concerning research security, due diligence, export control, and responsible international collaboration (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Zhang, 2025).

Strategic Integration is evident across the three universities examined, but it takes differentiated institutional forms. Internationalization is closely connected with research excellence, talent attraction, global reputation, societal contribution, and institutional sustainability. Cambridge connects international engagement with academic excellence, global research leadership, and public contribution; UCL combines a global civic mission with geographically differentiated engagement; and Warwick emphasizes transformational partnerships, industrial collaboration, and translational impact. Strategic Integration therefore reflects a shared commitment to global engagement while remaining strongly shaped by institutional mission and organizational priority (Lomer et al., 2023).

Risk Governance is the most distinctive feature of the UK pathway. Since 2021, the National Security and Investment Act, the expansion of the Academic Technology Approval Scheme, and the consolidation of Trusted Research guidance have increased institutional responsibilities for assessing international collaboration, protecting sensitive technologies, managing export controls, and strengthening due diligence. The three universities examined have incorporated these pressures through different combinations of research offices, risk committees, research-security functions, information-security arrangements, export-control procedures, and partnership review mechanisms. Rather than imposing uniform restrictions on international collaboration, the UK approach places considerable responsibility on universities to interpret national frameworks and develop proportionate institutional responses. Risk governance therefore operates as a mechanism of managed openness: it is designed to sustain

international collaboration while responding to more complex security and regulatory expectations.

Partnership Portfolio Management has also become more differentiated. Established relationships with European, North American, and Asian partners remain important, while institutions increasingly distinguish among regions, partnership forms, and strategic objectives. UCL adopts an explicitly geographically differentiated approach, Cambridge combines broad global engagement with selective strategic relationships, and Warwick emphasizes a smaller number of deep transformational partnerships. These approaches suggest a shift from partnership expansion alone towards greater attention to partnership quality, institutional complementarity, geographical balance, and long-term strategic value. Diversification therefore complements rather than replaces established international relationships.

Institutional Coordination has become increasingly important because international collaboration now intersects with research security, export control, data governance, partnership due diligence, funding requirements, and institutional reputation. Responsibility for internationalization and international research collaboration extends across senior leadership, research offices, international and global engagement units, legal and compliance functions, information-security teams, and academic units. The documentary evidence also indicates variation in organizational form: some institutions have developed formal and visible research-security structures, while others integrate these responsibilities within existing research, impact, and partnership arrangements. The UK case therefore combines common governance functions with differentiated institutional implementation.

Adaptive Capability is visible in universities' responses to post-Brexit changes in European research relationships, heightened scrutiny of international collaboration, evolving regulatory expectations, and continuing financial dependence on international recruitment. Institutional strategies show efforts to rebuild and sustain European partnerships, diversify international engagement, deepen selected strategic partnerships, and strengthen governance arrangements in response to changing external conditions (Highman et al., 2023). Adaptation is therefore shaped by the need to sustain global research networks

and international recruitment while responding to an increasingly complex risk environment.

Overall, the United Kingdom illustrates a pathway of autonomy-mediated risk governance. The three universities examined remain strongly committed to global engagement, but internationalization increasingly operates through governance arrangements that combine institutional discretion with state-shaped security and regulatory expectations. The distinctive feature of the UK case is that effective governance is not simply a constraint on internationalization; it is becoming a condition for sustaining openness under geopolitical uncertainty.

5.6 United States: Autonomy-Mediated Strategically Managed Internationalization

The United States represents an autonomy-mediated pathway of Strategically Managed Internationalization in which universities sustain global engagement through decentralized institutional governance while responding to increasingly consequential federal research-security requirements. As a leading higher education and research system, the United States remains deeply embedded in global scientific collaboration and international talent mobility. At the same time, federal attention to research security, foreign influence, technology protection, and strategic competition has encouraged universities to strengthen governance arrangements while preserving academic openness and institutional discretion (Huang et al., 2025).

Strategic Integration in the US case is shaped by institutional autonomy. Across the three universities examined, international engagement remains closely connected with research excellence, innovation, global knowledge production, and talent attraction. Institutional documents continue to frame international collaboration as essential to scientific advancement and global problem-solving. However, geopolitical and regulatory considerations are increasingly incorporated into decisions concerning international research, foreign engagement, sensitive technologies, and researcher responsibilities. Internationalization is therefore less often articulated through comprehensive institutional internationalization strategies than embedded within broader research, compliance, and global-engagement frameworks.

Partnership Portfolio Management has become more selective and risk-sensitive, although explicit geographical diversification is less evident than in several other cases. The three universities continue to support extensive international collaboration while subjecting particular forms of engagement to closer assessment. Institutional guidance increasingly evaluates international projects and partnerships in relation to academic value, research integrity, intellectual property, data security, export controls, and federal requirements. The resulting pattern is not systematic disengagement from particular regions, but differentiated collaboration in which the conditions of engagement vary according to research field, technology sensitivity, funding source, and regulatory exposure.

Institutional Coordination is central to the US pathway. Responsibility for international research engagement increasingly extends across university research leadership, research administration, legal and compliance functions, export-control specialists, information-security units, and academic researchers. Federal requirements are translated into institutional practice through research-security programmes, training requirements, disclosure procedures, export-control systems, and guidance for international projects and collaboration. Institutional Coordination therefore functions as the organizational bridge between federal requirements and academic practice.

Risk Governance is one of the most developed dimensions of the US case. National Security Presidential Memorandum-33 and related federal measures have strengthened expectations concerning disclosure of foreign affiliations and research support, research-security programmes, training, export controls, cybersecurity, and the protection of sensitive technologies. Across the three universities examined, these expectations are incorporated into institutional governance through formal guidance, structured training, due diligence, compliance procedures, and specialized administrative functions. Institutional documents from MIT and Stanford also show continued emphasis on research security, compliance, academic integrity, foreign engagement, and support for researchers (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2024; Stanford University, 2021, 2023). At the same time, these documents continue to emphasize academic freedom, scientific openness, and principled international collaboration. The US model is therefore characterized by differentiated risk governance rather than broad restriction.

Adaptive Capability is expressed through continuing institutional adjustment to changing federal requirements and technological conditions. Universities have revised research-security programmes, strengthened compliance infrastructure, introduced or expanded training and disclosure requirements, and developed more detailed guidance for international research activities. Adaptation occurs through decentralized institutional learning rather than coordinated system-wide change. This enables universities to respond to external regulation while maintaining institutional discretion over how global engagement is organized.

Overall, the United States illustrates an autonomy-mediated pathway of SMI. Its distinctive feature is the translation of strong federal research-security expectations into decentralized institutional governance. Universities remain committed to international collaboration, but global engagement increasingly operates through compliance-intensive, risk-sensitive, and institution-specific arrangements. The US case therefore shows how institutional autonomy can function not as insulation from state influence, but as the mechanism through which universities interpret, implement, and manage external geopolitical and regulatory pressures.

6. Cross-National Comparative Analysis: Convergence, Divergence, and Strategically Managed Internationalization

The comparative findings demonstrate that research-intensive universities across the six higher education systems are neither abandoning internationalization nor simply continuing earlier expansion-oriented models of global engagement. Instead, they are reorganizing the governance of internationalization in response to a more uncertain geopolitical environment. The evidence reveals a dual pattern: convergence around a common set of governance functions alongside continuing diversity in the institutional pathways through which these functions are configured and implemented.

This dual pattern constitutes the central comparative finding of the study. Universities increasingly develop governance capabilities that enable them to sustain international engagement while responding to political, technological, regulatory, financial, and organizational uncertainty. However, these capabilities do not produce a single model of institutional adaptation. Similar governance

challenges are interpreted and addressed differently according to national policy environments, state–university relationships, funding structures, institutional missions, and organizational capacities.

6.1 Comparative Patterns of Functional Convergence

The cross-national comparison reveals convergence around the five governance functions identified in the SMI framework, although their relative importance and organizational expression vary considerably across the six systems.

Strategic Integration is evident across all six cases as internationalization becomes more closely connected with institutional priorities concerning research, education, talent development, innovation, financial sustainability, and organizational resilience. The underlying drivers nevertheless differ. In Australia, integration is closely associated with financial sustainability, diversification, and resilience. In China, it is embedded in national innovation, talent development, and institutional upgrading. Japan integrates internationalization through gradual alignment with broader institutional development, while South Korea connects it strongly with research competitiveness and talent attraction. In the United Kingdom and United States, international engagement is increasingly integrated with research governance, regulatory requirements, and institutional risk management.

Partnership Portfolio Management also appears across the cases, but its geographical and strategic logics differ. Australia emphasizes diversification in response to market concentration and institutional dependence. China combines continued engagement with established partners with broader geographical and regional diversification. Japan adjusts partnership portfolios incrementally through strategic partnerships aligned with institutional missions and research strengths. South Korea broadens networks primarily in pursuit of research opportunity, talent development, and competitiveness. In the United Kingdom, portfolio management combines academic excellence, geographical differentiation, and growing regulatory awareness. In the United States, the pattern is less one of explicit geographical diversification than of differentiated engagement according to research field, technology sensitivity, funding conditions, and regulatory exposure.

Institutional Coordination constitutes another area of broad convergence. Across the six cases, responsibility for international engagement increasingly extends beyond international offices to involve senior leadership, research administration, legal and compliance functions, information-security units, graduate education, technology-transfer structures, and academic units. Yet organizational forms differ. China demonstrates comparatively formalized coordination through administrative and institutional structures; Australia and the United Kingdom increasingly connect international engagement with due diligence and research-security arrangements; Japan generally incorporates new responsibilities into existing organizational systems; South Korea coordinates internationalization closely with research development, talent support, and competitiveness; and the United States translates federal requirements through decentralized, institution-specific governance mechanisms.

Risk Governance has expanded across the six systems, but its intensity and institutionalization vary significantly. It is especially prominent in the United Kingdom and United States, where research security, export controls, due diligence, disclosure requirements, and compliance systems have become increasingly embedded within institutional governance. Australia has also developed comparatively formalized arrangements, particularly in response to foreign-interference and research-security concerns. In China, risk governance operates through approval, confidentiality, data-management, and administrative procedures within a model of governed openness. Japan has gradually incorporated research security into existing research-management and integrity systems. In South Korea, risk governance remains less prominent in publicly articulated internationalization strategies, although emerging developments in STEM-intensive institutions indicate growing attention to research security.

Adaptive Capability is similarly evident across the cases, but adaptation takes different forms. Australia adapts through diversification and resilience-building; China through geographical diversification, new partnership formats, and adjustment to changing strategic and regulatory conditions; Japan through incremental modification of established organizational arrangements; and South Korea through qualitative upgrading, talent attraction, and network diversification. The United Kingdom adapts to post-Brexit conditions, changing research-security expectations, and evolving global partnerships, while the United States responds

through decentralized institutional adjustment to changing federal requirements and technological conditions.

The comparative evidence therefore suggests functional convergence without uniformity. Universities increasingly address a similar set of governance challenges, but the relative priority, institutional location, and organizational expression of the five SMI dimensions differ across systems. Convergence occurs at the level of governance functions rather than organizational structures.

6.2 Divergent Institutional Pathways

Although the five governance functions are broadly evident across the six systems, their configuration produces distinctive institutional pathways. These pathways reflect differences in political systems, state–university relationships, funding structures, demographic conditions, dependence on international engagement, and institutional traditions. They identify the dominant organizational logic through which universities combine the five governance functions rather than mutually exclusive national models.

Australia represents a market-oriented pathway. Its defining tension lies between continuing dependence on international engagement and the need to reduce concentration and strengthen resilience. Diversification, coordination, and risk management therefore develop within a system in which international education and global research collaboration remain academically and financially important.

China illustrates a state-embedded pathway. Universities continue to pursue global academic engagement while internationalization becomes increasingly connected with national innovation, talent development, and institutional upgrading. Strong internal coordination, geographical diversification, and governed openness characterize a pathway in which institutional agency operates within a strongly state-shaped strategic and regulatory environment.

Japan demonstrates an adaptive pathway characterized by managed continuity. Universities gradually incorporate partnership selectivity, institutional coordination, and risk governance into existing organizational arrangements while preserving established commitments to international cooperation.

Adaptation is evolutionary and institutionally differentiated rather than based on abrupt strategic reorientation.

South Korea represents a competitiveness-oriented pathway centred on competitive upgrading. Internationalization is closely connected with research excellence, talent attraction, global positioning, and qualitative improvement. Governance adaptation is therefore driven primarily by efforts to strengthen the quality, institutional integration, and strategic value of international engagement rather than by geopolitical risk management alone.

The United Kingdom illustrates a risk-governance-oriented pathway in which institutional autonomy operates within an increasingly demanding guidance and regulatory environment. Universities remain strongly committed to global engagement, but internationalization is increasingly mediated through Trusted Research, due diligence, export control, research security, and cross-functional governance. The resulting pattern can be understood as autonomy-mediated risk governance designed to sustain managed openness.

The United States represents an autonomy-mediated pathway. Universities retain considerable discretion in translating federal research-security requirements, export controls, disclosure obligations, and related expectations into institutional governance. The defining feature is therefore neither unrestricted institutional autonomy nor direct centralized control, but decentralized institutional implementation within an increasingly consequential federal regulatory environment.

These pathways are analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive. Market orientation, competitiveness, state influence, risk governance, adaptation, and institutional autonomy are present to varying degrees across several systems. Their comparative value lies in identifying the dominant organizational logic through which common governance functions are configured within different national and institutional contexts.

6.3 Comparative Synthesis: Functional Convergence without Organizational Homogenization

The central comparative finding is a pattern of functional convergence without organizational homogenization. Geopolitical change creates broadly similar governance challenges for research-intensive universities: sustaining global research networks, managing increasingly complex partnerships, responding to research-security requirements, coordinating multiple organizational functions, and adapting to continuing uncertainty. These shared challenges encourage convergence around common governance capabilities.

However, common functions do not produce identical organizational forms. National policy environments shape the constraints, incentives, and regulatory expectations facing universities, while governance traditions, funding structures, institutional missions, disciplinary profiles, and organizational capacities influence how these pressures are interpreted and addressed. The same governance function may therefore be expressed through different organizational arrangements. Risk Governance, for example, may operate through Trusted Research frameworks, federal compliance systems, foreign-interference guidelines, formal administrative approval procedures, or the gradual incorporation of research-security responsibilities into existing research-management systems.

This distinction between functional convergence and organizational diversity clarifies the comparative significance of SMI. The framework does not predict convergence towards a universal model of internationalization governance. Rather, it identifies a common set of institutional capabilities whose relative importance, configuration, and organizational expression remain nationally and institutionally differentiated. Similar external pressures are therefore mediated through different governance arrangements, producing common functions but contextually distinctive pathways.

The comparative findings also indicate that geopolitical change does not produce a simple transition from internationalization to de-internationalization. International engagement continues across all six systems, but the organizational conditions under which it occurs are changing. The principal transformation is therefore not the disappearance of internationalization but its reorganization as a more strategically coordinated and institutionally governed process. The theoretical and policy implications of this transformation are examined in the following section.

7. Discussion and Implications

7.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

This study examined how research-intensive universities are adapting internationalization to geopolitical change, whether common governance patterns can be identified across different higher education systems, and what these developments imply for the changing nature of internationalization.

In response to the first research question, the findings demonstrate that universities are responding to geopolitical uncertainty primarily through governance transformation rather than uniform international retreat. International engagement remains important, but universities increasingly integrate it with broader institutional strategy, manage partnerships more selectively, coordinate multiple organizational functions, incorporate risk assessment into decision-making, and adapt governance arrangements to changing external conditions. The central transformation therefore concerns how international engagement is governed rather than its simple expansion or contraction.

In response to the second research question, the comparative analysis identifies functional convergence combined with institutional diversity. The five dimensions of SMI are visible across the six systems, but their relative importance and organizational expression differ substantially. Convergence therefore occurs primarily at the level of governance functions, while institutional pathways remain shaped by state–university relations, funding structures, regulatory environments, institutional missions, and organizational traditions.

In response to the third research question, the findings suggest that internationalization is increasingly becoming a governance capability rather than simply a portfolio of international activities. Sustainable international engagement depends on universities' capacity to connect strategic priorities, partnership decisions, organizational coordination, risk governance, and institutional adaptation. Internationalization under geopolitical uncertainty is therefore best understood neither as unrestricted expansion nor as inevitable retreat, but as a process of institutional recalibration.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three interrelated theoretical contributions.

First, it reconceptualizes internationalization as an institutional governance capability. SMI builds on earlier approaches to internationalization but shifts attention from international activities themselves towards the institutional capabilities required to organize and sustain them under geopolitical uncertainty. Its distinctive contribution lies in explaining how universities coordinate multiple and sometimes competing objectives, including academic openness, research excellence, regulatory compliance, institutional resilience, financial sustainability, and geopolitical risk. Universities with similar levels of international activity may therefore differ substantially in their capacity to govern international engagement.

Second, the study provides an integrative framework for connecting perspectives that have often been examined separately. Responsible internationalization emphasizes the values guiding international engagement; research security and Trusted Research focus on emerging risks; selective internationalisation explains differentiated engagement across partners, regions, disciplines, and technologies; and geopolitical approaches illuminate the changing external environment. SMI connects these concerns by examining how they are translated into institutional governance. This perspective also helps explain why internationalization increasingly involves research administration, legal and compliance functions, information security, finance, technology transfer, graduate education, and senior leadership alongside traditional international offices.

Third, the study contributes to comparative higher education by identifying functional convergence without institutional homogenization. Universities operating in diverse political and governance environments increasingly develop similar governance functions because they face comparable organizational challenges. Yet these functions are configured differently according to national policy environments, state–university relationships, funding systems, institutional missions, and organizational traditions. The concept of functional convergence therefore provides a way of explaining similarity and difference simultaneously.

Overall, these contributions extend internationalization research beyond the question of whether universities are becoming more or less international. The

more significant theoretical question concerns how global engagement is being reorganized institutionally. SMI provides a framework for analysing this transformation by connecting geopolitical change with university agency, organizational governance, and comparative institutional diversity.

7.3 Policy and Institutional Implications

The findings have several implications for policymakers and university leaders.

For governments, the comparative evidence suggests that research security and geopolitical risk should be governed in ways that preserve the conditions necessary for scientific collaboration and international knowledge exchange. Universities require clear regulatory expectations, but highly generalized or excessively restrictive approaches may create uncertainty, discourage legitimate collaboration, and weaken international research networks. Policy frameworks should therefore distinguish among different levels and types of risk and allow institutions to develop proportionate responses appropriate to particular disciplines, technologies, projects, and forms of international engagement.

The findings also suggest that governments should recognize universities as active governance actors rather than simply as organizations implementing national policy. Institutional missions, disciplinary profiles, research strengths, international networks, and organizational capacities differ substantially. Effective policy should therefore establish clear principles and responsibilities while allowing sufficient institutional discretion in implementation. The comparative cases indicate that the relationship between national frameworks and institutional governance is particularly important: geopolitical pressures become consequential for internationalization through the ways in which universities interpret, translate, and operationalize them.

For university leaders, the findings suggest that internationalization can no longer be managed effectively through international offices alone. International engagement increasingly intersects with research strategy, legal and regulatory compliance, information security, intellectual property, finance, student and researcher mobility, and institutional reputation. Universities therefore need governance arrangements that enable coordination across these functions without allowing compliance concerns to displace academic objectives.

Partnership management also requires greater strategic differentiation. This does not necessarily mean geographical diversification in every institutional context. Depending on institutional mission and external conditions, universities may diversify regional engagement, deepen selected strategic partnerships, differentiate collaboration according to disciplinary or technological sensitivity, or periodically reassess the balance of their international portfolios. The broader principle is that partnership decisions should be connected with academic value, institutional mission, sustainability, and proportionate risk assessment rather than evaluated primarily by the number of agreements or activities.

Finally, universities need to treat adaptation as an ongoing governance responsibility rather than a sequence of temporary responses to individual geopolitical events. The comparative evidence suggests that geopolitical uncertainty is becoming a continuing feature of the environment for international higher education. Institutions therefore require the capacity to monitor external change, review previous decisions, learn from organizational experience, and adjust strategies without abandoning long-term academic commitments. The objective is not to eliminate uncertainty, which is impossible, but to develop institutional capabilities that allow international engagement to remain academically productive, organizationally sustainable, and appropriately governed.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on research-intensive universities in six higher education systems. These institutions possess substantial resources, global networks, and organizational capacities, and their responses may differ from those of teaching-oriented universities, smaller regional institutions, and other universities operating under different resource constraints and policy environments. Future research should therefore examine whether the SMI framework applies across different institutional types and whether particular governance dimensions vary according to institutional mission, size, disciplinary profile, and resource capacity.

Second, although the six cases represent diverse governance systems and influential actors in global higher education, they do not encompass all major regional and institutional contexts. Further comparative research should examine

universities in continental Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and other settings where geopolitical dynamics, regional integration, colonial legacies, security concerns, and patterns of international dependence may produce different forms of institutional adaptation.

Third, geopolitical conditions and institutional responses continue to evolve. The findings capture a particular stage in an ongoing process of organizational transformation rather than a definitive endpoint. Longitudinal research is needed to examine whether the governance arrangements identified in this study become institutionalized, are subsequently modified, or give way to new organizational forms as geopolitical conditions, technologies, and regulatory environments continue to change.

Finally, the comparative qualitative design is intended to develop analytical explanation rather than statistical generalization. Future studies could operationalize the five SMI dimensions and examine their relationships across larger samples of institutions. Such research could investigate whether particular configurations of governance capabilities are associated with different forms of international engagement, institutional resilience, research collaboration, or organizational performance. Comparative longitudinal and mixed-methods research would be especially valuable for testing and refining the SMI framework across different institutional and national contexts.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that geopolitical change is not bringing about the end of higher education internationalization but is transforming the conditions under which international engagement is organized and sustained. Across the six systems examined, research-intensive universities continue to value international collaboration, mobility, talent, and knowledge exchange, while increasingly governing these activities through more integrated, selective, coordinated, risk-aware, and adaptive institutional arrangements.

The concept of Strategically Managed Internationalization (SMI) captures this transformation by shifting analytical attention from the scale of international

activity to the governance capabilities through which universities sustain global engagement. The comparative findings reveal functional convergence around five interrelated governance dimensions alongside distinctive national and institutional pathways. Internationalization is therefore becoming more strategically governed without converging towards a single organizational model.

The broader implication is that the future of internationalization will depend not simply on whether universities remain globally connected, but on their capacity to govern that connectedness under increasingly complex conditions. As academic openness can no longer be treated as an uncontested background condition, universities face the challenge of preserving the intellectual and scientific value of international collaboration while developing governance arrangements capable of responding to geopolitical uncertainty. SMI provides a framework for understanding this transformation and for examining how universities seek to sustain meaningful international engagement in a more fragmented and strategically contested global environment.

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Data availability statement

The data used in this study are publicly available online information.

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