



Universität Augsburg  
Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche  
Fakultät

*Theoretical Considerations for  
Building Strategic Transnational  
Partnerships in Higher  
Education within a Dynamic  
Geopolitical Environment*

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“Rethinking The Geopolitics Of Higher Education”

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# Agenda

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- 1 Motivation
- 2 Research Questions
- 3 Contribution
- 4 Methodology
- 5 Results
- 6 Discussion and Conclusion

# Motivation

## Thinking about the interplay between higher education and geopolitics

- Political rationales of international higher education (IHE) (de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2004)
- Transnational partnerships as levers of IHE activity and mission achievement (Hudzik, 2011; Otto, 2021)
- Impact of regressive geopolitics & power/equity imbalances on transnational partnerships (Otto, 2021; 2023)
- Rise in cases of geopolitical upheaval with tangible consequences for higher education (HE) (Marginson et al., 2018; Hazelkorn et al., 2022)
- Growing concerns at the intersection of national security and HE (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021)
- Redefining the geopolitical sphere of IHE (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023)
- Increasing number of IR theories influencing HE theory and practice (Buckner & Stein, 2020, Knight, 2022; Lumb, 2023; Wojciuk, 2018)



# Research Questions

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## Theoretical Considerations for Building Strategic Transnational Partnerships in Higher Education within a Dynamic Geopolitical Environment

What are the relevant IR theories impacting HE transnational partnerships, given the dynamism of geopolitics?

How do these theories complement and contrast one another?

What are key implications for policy and practice in designing proactive transnational partnership strategies in the HE context?

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*Goal of the project: using a systematic literature review approach, determine and explicate the key theoretical principles influencing transnational partnerships in HE which can be considered in designing proactive strategies amid geopolitical turbulence, providing a framework tool for practical use.*

# Contribution

## Filling gaps in the literature and providing tools for practice

- Few studies considering the multiplicity of international relations/higher education theoretical approaches in this space
- Most studies handling higher education and geopolitics do so reactively instead of proactively
- Much of the current research is light on concrete takeaways for policy and practice

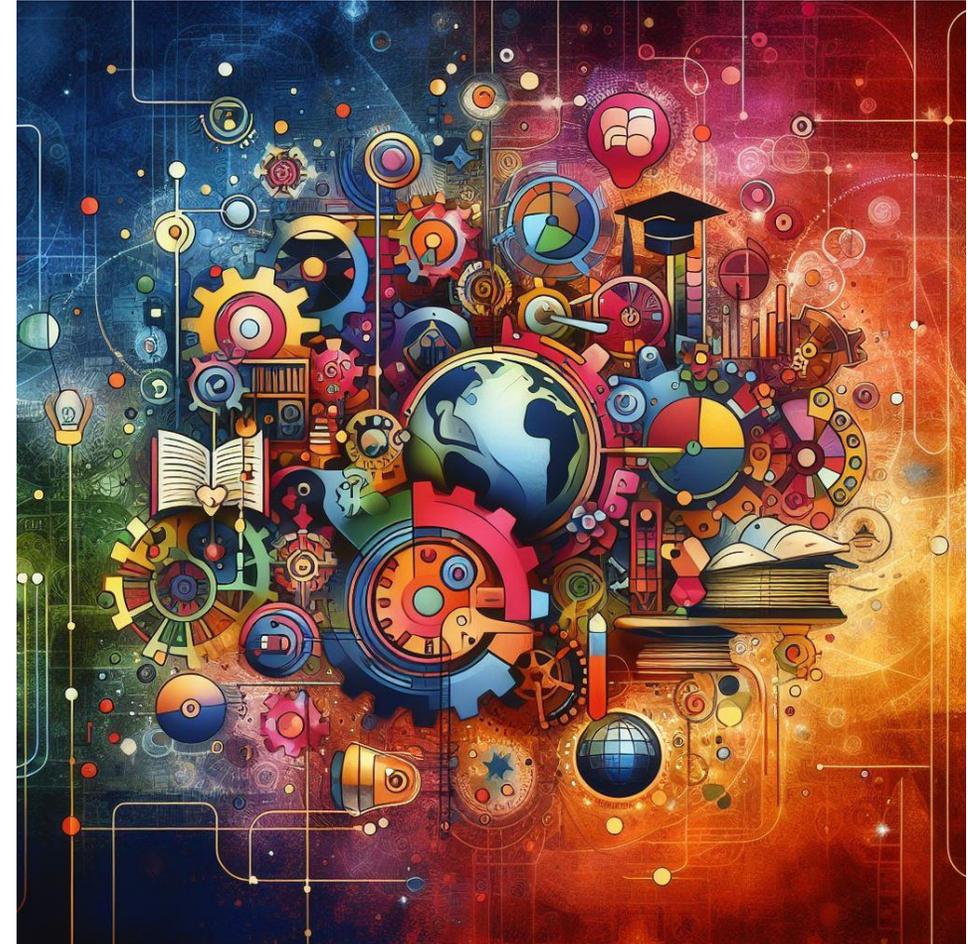


# Methodology

## Systematic Literature Review

### Stage 1 – Identify influential IR theories being applied to the HE context

- OpenAlex, 248+ million records from 1800-2024
- „Higher Education“, and...
  - „Soft Power“ - 2591 publications
  - „Public Diplomacy“ - 971 publications
  - „Cultural Diplomacy“ - 507 publications
  - „Science Diplomacy“ - 209 publications
  - „Knowledge Diplomacy“ - 67 publications
- Total publications considering key theories
  - 4345



# Methodology

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## Systematic Literature Review

### Stage 2 – Identify motivating forces within each IR theory

- Soft Power (Nye, 2005; Wojciuk, 2018)
  - Gaining national influence through international promotion of reputation & legitimacy
- Public Diplomacy (Sharp, 2005)
  - Relationship building w/ foreign publics to advance national interests
- Cultural Diplomacy (Ang et al., 2018)
  - Use of cultural relations internationally to pursue governmental interests
- Science Diplomacy (Fedoroff, 2009)
  - Scientific collaboration to address problems & build partnerships internationally
- Knowledge Diplomacy (Knight, 2021, 2022)
  - Strengthening international relationships via higher education, innovation, and research

# Results

## Influence of International Relations Theories on HEI Transnational Partnerships

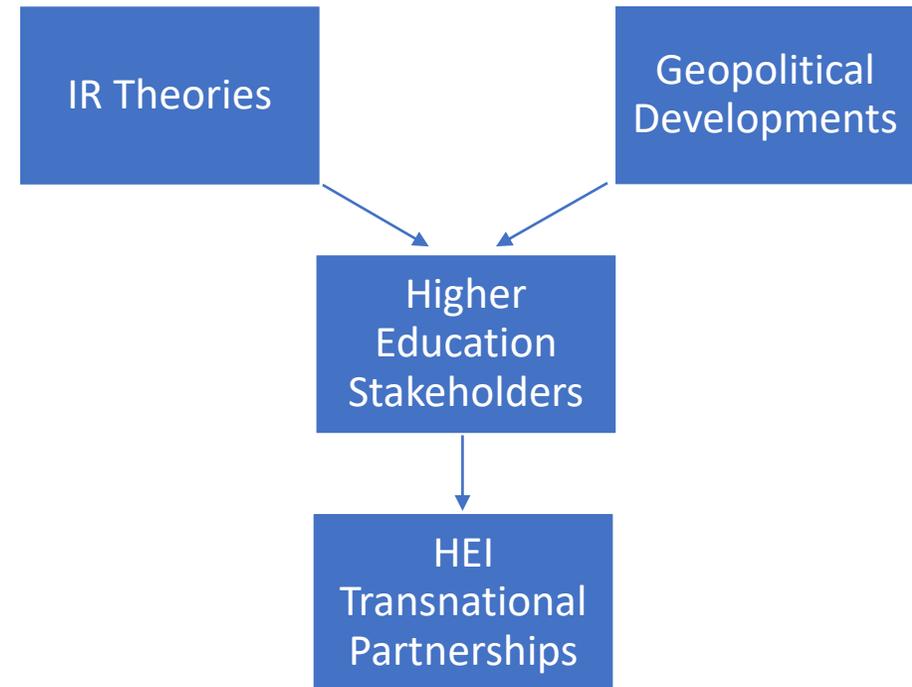
- Leading IR theories help shape the expectations that HE stakeholders place on HEIs in their IHE practices
- These theories also inform how HE stakeholders view geopolitical events/developments
- If HEIs practice IHE in a way which responds to the expectations of influential stakeholders, then their transnational partnership strategies are subject to a combination of the prevailing IR theory(ies) of their most influential stakeholders and geopolitical developments which occur
- This then defines the parameters for transnational partnership strategy at the institutional level – determining the IR theories informing an HEI's key stakeholders' views and being conscious of past, current, and potential geopolitical developments helps in evaluating current partnerships, weighing potential partnerships, and finding opportunities for creativity



# Discussion & Conclusion

## Theoretical Framework for Transnational Partnership Development

- Multiple IR theories impact how HEIs behave within a dynamic geopolitical environment
- They are influential in determining how key stakeholders perceive the purpose of IHE activity and who it should ultimately serve
- They influence how these stakeholders believe HEIs should respond to geopolitical developments in their transnational partnership strategies
- The ways in which these theories complement and contrast with one another adds complexity to the stakeholder expectations that HEIs are beholden to
- HEIs can be proactive by diagnosing the IR theoretical influences of their key stakeholders, then account for them in determining how to best safeguard their transnational partnerships against geopolitical shifts



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## Questions & Discussion