

# Geopolitical tensions harm international research

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On April 4, the *Boston Business Journal* published an op-ed column by FBI agent Lucia Ziobro, warning of “scams involving malicious foreign venture capitalists.” The column, full of unfounded and hypothetical statements, is in fact an attempt to clamp down on scientific collaboration between American and Russian scientists, taking specific aim at the Skolkovo Foundation. It is part of a broader trend in which scientific research—and therefore human knowledge—is falling prey to geopolitical rivalries and preparations for war.

The Skolkovo Foundation, funded by the Russian government and championed by Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, is building an English-language technology institute near Moscow. Plans include research centers focusing on information technology, nuclear technology, energy, biomedical research, and space-related research.

While the Russian government has alleged corruption among members of the foundation, the proposed scientific studies are of a high enough quality that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is training future students, supplying faculty and receiving funding. Cisco Systems has opened a facility there, and others are planned by Siemens, Intel and Microsoft.

The FBI’s response is that “the Foundation may be a means for the Russian government to access our nation’s sensitive or classified research”; it claims a “growing concern that the purported reasons offered by the Russian partners mask their true intentions.”

The *Boston Globe*—the only news organ to pick up on the *Business Journal* column—called it “extraordinary” before bluntly stating that Ziobro has no evidence to back up her claims. “Instead,” it writes, “the warning grew out of a proliferation of intellectual property theft from US companies by Chinese firms

over the past decade.”

Ziobro went on to tell the *Globe* that “the warning had been in the works since early February, before the situation began in Crimea,” as though US designs on Ukraine were something new. “Rather than waiting for a crime to occur,” she continued “we’re putting the alert out in case something comes up from Russia.”

Such imaginary and hypothetical accusations against targeted countries are the stock-in-trade of US imperialism. In this case, the charges against Russia differ from George W. Bush’s lies about Iraq only in that they are not being peddled by the president himself.

Whatever the fate of the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, scientific knowledge will be one of the many victims of any war growing out of tensions between the United States, Russia and China.

The US and Chinese governments have collaborated on research projects for more than 30 years, beginning with an agreement signed in 1979. When an extension of that agreement was signed in January 2011, a fact sheet summarizing the many results was presented. Included were student exchange programs, research on high energy physics and nuclear fusion, investigations of such diseases as salmonellosis and SARS, and the construction of energy-efficient buildings.

The United States and Russia have worked closely together on space research and—notwithstanding its dreams about private sector providers—the US is now completely reliant on Russia for travel to and from the International Space Station. It is also reliant on the Russian manufacturer of the RD-180 rocket engine, used on Atlas V rockets to launch many NASA payloads. More broadly, NASA took part in approximately 600 cooperative agreements with 120 countries in 2013, according to a January 2014 report

by the National Academy of Public Administration.

The ability to transmit 10 Gb per second of data from computers on one continent to those on another makes possible scientific collaborations that have never before been attempted. At the same time, the pooling of international resources makes possible projects like ITER (the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor) which, if successful, will be the first nuclear fusion facility to produce energy.

All of these projects have suffered under the constraints of bourgeois society—including corrupt officials in their administrations—but represent remarkable progress nonetheless. Publication of the results has also become increasingly international. In February 2011 the US Office of Science and Technology Policy held a workshop on international collaborations, the proceedings of which were summarized in the National Academies Press. It noted that in the early 1980s approximately 20 percent of articles in the journal *Science* were “based on international collaborations,” a percentage which increased to more than 55 percent by 2011.

Now the bourgeoisie is moving backwards, motivated in part by its use of ignorance as a political weapon, in part by the contradictions of the nation-state system.

Visa requirements for working in the United States are not a new impediment to collaboration, but are getting worse. The 2011 OSTP workshop included representatives from Brazil, Bangladesh, Egypt, Germany, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa and Syria. The National Academies Press summary noted that US visa policies have become an increasing burden since 2001, “making it more difficult for some scientists and engineers to study, conduct research, work, or even attend meetings and conferences in this country.”

In April 2011 President Obama signed a law containing language written by Representative Frank Wolf, barring NASA from scientific collaboration with organizations incorporated in the People’s Republic of China, even if no funds are exchanged. The law forbade NASA “to develop, design, plan, promulgate, implement or execute a bilateral policy, program, order, or contract of any kind to participate, collaborate, or coordinate bilaterally in any way with China or any Chinese-owned company.”

While Wolf claimed publicly that he was motivated

by Chinese government espionage and religious repression, it is no accident that this measure has been renewed several times as the Chinese government develops its space program and the economy of China becomes the world’s largest.

Similarly, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, NASA issued a statement that “all NASA contacts with Russian Government representatives are suspended ... This suspension includes NASA travel to Russia and visits by Russian Government representatives to NASA facilities, bilateral meetings, email, and teleconferences or videoconferences. At the present time, only operational International Space Station activities have been excepted.”

In response, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin told *the Moscow Times* that “they do not understand that these sanctions will boomerang back on themselves.”



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