



## **A New World of Science**

Keynote of the President of the Max Planck Society

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– Check against delivery –

Recently, four humans ventured further into space than anyone had before. For ten days, the mission ARTEMIS II captured the world's attention. Millions watched the spacecraft circle the Moon.

Dear laureates, distinguished guests,

Looking back from the Moon to our home planet, the astronauts saw the iconic blue globe – beautiful and peaceful. What they could not see, however, was the profound change that our world is undergoing. Geopolitics is shifting rapidly – and this is also affecting science. Before our eyes, a new world of science is emerging. Let me explain.

Since World War II, the United States have been the leader in global science. But now, U.S. institutions are under massive pressure from their own government. At the same time, China is advancing at breakneck speed – driven by the ambition to lead in science, technology, and economy. The “engineering state” may well be winning the race. Under its current Five-Year Plan, Chinese research benefits from annual budget increases of seven percent or more.

These developments are not without consequences. In the last Nature Index ranking, there were eight Chinese institutions amongst the top ten in the world. The two others were Harvard and – of course! – the Max Planck Society. Obviously, I wouldn't have told you if it was otherwise.

But rankings like these might soon be the least of our concerns. Scientific competition between countries may soon become a sideshow. We are facing something more fundamental. I believe that science itself is at risk – due to a gradual process of fragmentation. We are heading toward a split of the global scientific system as we know it. A split into spheres of political influence, each with its own standards.



This fragmentation has already begun. It is driven by growing isolationism in the States and in China. And it strikes at the very core of science. Why? Because science is universal. It is the global search for truth. Science is based on openness, shared standards, and self-control. It provides evidence, insights and reliable knowledge. The strength of science lies exactly in its global nature. It is the interplay of competition and cooperation that leads to progress: by sparking each other's ambition, and by holding one another accountable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last month, I traveled to the United States and China. Talking to many colleagues reinforced my impression: the global scientific system could lose its shared order. In China, huge research facilities and entire universities are being built within just a few years. They are equipped with cutting-edge infrastructure and strengthened by a return of many Chinese scientists from the U.S.. In contrast, money for research in the States is still not flowing, although Congress has averted the funding cuts proposed by the administration. A deep sense of uncertainty is affecting the U.S. system that, for decades, has set global standards and embodied openness.

My assessment is clear: in both superpowers, science policy is increasingly shaped by motives that distort the very nature of science. The pursuit of truth, an activity of society for society, is replaced by a quest for national power and short-term economic interests. These developments are alarming – because they place individual political interests above a collective search for truth. But science is not a closed, national project – it is an open, international discourse.

In this situation, what should we do? First, European research institutions must not be drawn into bloc thinking. Instead, we must help prevent science from splitting along geopolitical lines. We must work to preserve an open science system. We must uphold research integrity, academic freedom, and international cooperation.

Dear guests,

To have global influence, Europe's scientific institutions must be strong. And we are strong. Look around you! Today we are celebrating the scientific successes of our laureates! Our first strength is the quality of our research. Did you know? With respect to scientific publications, Europe still operates at the level of the U.S. and China. But to stay in this league, we must work closely together in the European Research Area. And we must significantly increase research funding, especially for the European Research Council.

Strength also comes from identity. We should be clear about what defines us: stability and long-term performance, critical thinking and self-regulation, and the ability to link technological progress with societal responsibility. At the heart of our efforts stands academic freedom. It enables us to question assumptions and to explore new ideas. It also makes Europe attractive to talent from around the world. Remember: talent flows are shifting – many young scientists are now turning to us.



Additional strength will come from better translating research into innovation. Europe produces patents and start-ups, but too many ideas reach the market elsewhere. We often miss out on commercialization. Clearly, Europe needs less bureaucracy, more venture capital, and strong engagement of the private sector. In this respect, the Hector foundation is really a shining example.

Finally, we must fully leverage our strength in multilateralism. We must safeguard our transatlantic collaborations while expanding our cooperation with China. And we should diversify our partnerships in the world. To give you an example: At Max Planck, we are now launching six new cooperation centers with leading U.S. institutions – and eight new centers with partners in Asia, including Singapore, China, India, Japan and South Korea. But we are also starting a new center with Sao Paulo in Brazil.

Of course, we must not be naïve. Partnerships must be free of risk and mutually rewarding. Cooperation only works when it creates synergy. Working with many partners, Europe can counter the fragmentation of science. It can build bridges, promote standards and preserve the reliability of knowledge. Such European “soft power” can strengthen global science.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to do science in Europe. This privilege comes with responsibility: Let us hold on to the values of the Enlightenment. Let us carry forward its legacy and defend science as a shared global good. Let’s work together so that science can remain what it always must be: an open, critical process in the pursuit of truth – independent of political trends, power interests, or purely economic logic.

Dear laureates,

Let me be clear: you are pursuing your careers at a time of uncertainty. Like the four astronauts, you are setting out on a journey that is not easy – but many in this room would certainly agree: science is one of the most rewarding activities in the world! So we are here today also to support you on your path ahead. The award you receive today can serve as a booster rocket for your scientific journey. And we hope that in a few years, when you look out of the window of your own “lab spaceships,” you will see a scientific world that resembles that wonderful blue globe – whole, and held together across borders and oceans by strong ties between people who care for science.

My message is simple: You are the future! Stay committed to excellence, openness, and collaboration. And continue to contribute to this precious, rewarding human activity called science. So let me close with the words of NASA, provided upon lift-off: You are go for launch – please enjoy the ride!