



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

Malta: Recent rise in cooperation with Chinese universities lacks discussions on potential risks

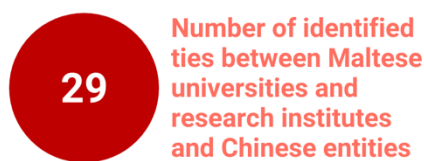
Veronika Blablová • Kara Němečková

Malta's engagement with China is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although cooperation began in 2009, activity has increased sharply over the past two years. Contrary to the growing skepticism and the publication of research guidelines across European countries, Malta appears to remain open to Chinese students and researchers.

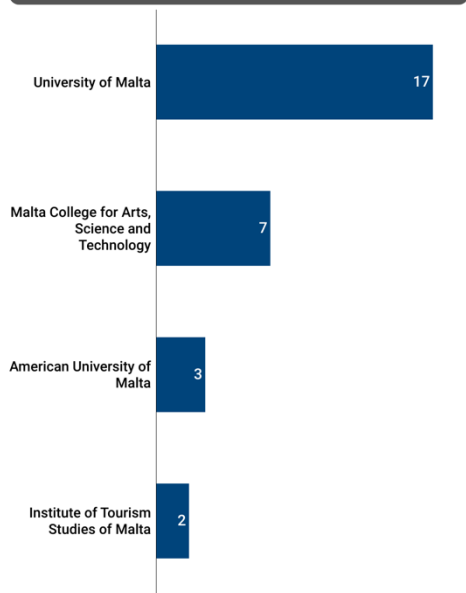
As part of this project, we have investigated links to China among four public and twelve private universities. This analysis identified four Maltese universities that maintain links with Chinese partners. Altogether, these institutions have at least 29 connections to China. Of these, 26 were entered by Maltese public universities: the University of Malta, Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology, and the Institute of Tourism Studies of Malta. The Institute of Tourism Studies also maintains campuses in Shanghai and Zhengzhou.

Malta's academic engagement with China

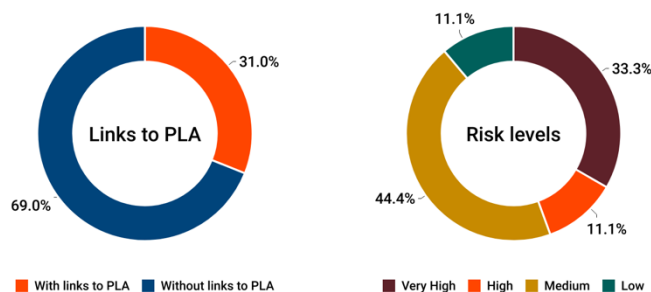
Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker



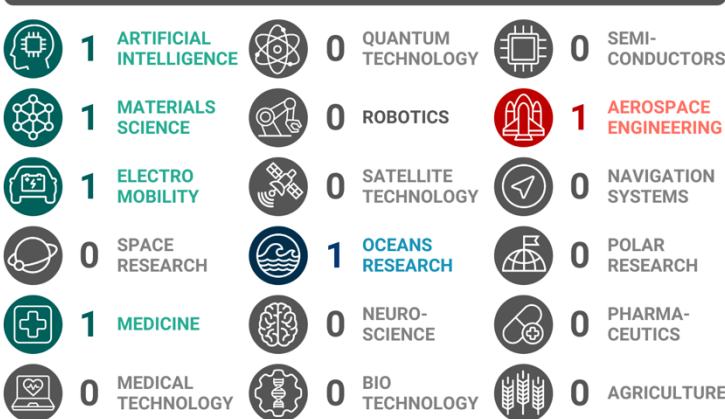
The most active Maltese academic institutions



Cooperation with entities linked to the Chinese military



Engagements focused on China's priority cooperation areas



Data: China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker | www.academytracker.ceias.eu

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In addition to its ties with public universities, the American University of Malta (AUM), based in Cospicua, has maintained ties with three Chinese counterparts since 2019. Whereas public universities predominantly focus on joint research or short-term student and faculty exchanges, AUM offers a double-degree program. However, in 2019, media reports noted a lack of English-language proficiency as a significant barrier to deeper collaboration with Chinese students. Furthermore, despite efforts to establish cooperation with universities in China, India, and Ghana, AUM has struggled to fill its campuses since its opening in 2017. It has been controversial from the outset, as it was developed by a Jordanian company with no prior experience in the education sector.

In recent years, cooperation between Maltese and Chinese universities has grown significantly, with 2021 and 2024 standing out as peak years, each seeing the establishment of eight new partnerships. At a time when many European countries are reexamining their research ties to China and increasingly implementing due diligence processes, this development in Malta may seem unusual. However, it reflects the country's strong economic ties with China, particularly in key sectors such as ports, energy grid, and telecommunications. The intensifying academic links are thus part of a broader context in which Malta positions itself as "China's friend in Europe," as emphasized by Maltese Foreign Minister Ian Borg during his 2023 visit to Beijing.

Transparency

Since 2012, Maltese residents have been able to request information from universities under the Freedom of Information Act. However, due to legal constraints related to residency status, this study is based solely on information obtained from open sources.

Confucius Institutes

As of 2025, a single Confucius Institute is operating in Malta, located at the University of Malta in Msida. This institute was established in 2009 through a cooperative agreement between the University of Malta and Xiamen University in China, under the framework of the Confucius Institute Headquarters, now the Center for Language Education and Cooperation. In addition to the institute, cooperation with other Chinese counterparts ensures the provision of Chinese language and culture courses at Maltese universities, including the American University of Malta's collaboration with East China Normal University and the University of Malta's cooperation with Beijing Foreign Studies University.

The primary role of the Confucius Institute at the University of Malta is to teach Chinese language and culture. In addition to formal credit-bearing courses, the Institute organizes extracurricular activities, such as the annual "Chinese Bridge" Chinese Proficiency Competition. It hosts public seminars, film screenings, and cultural festivals that engage both the university community and the wider Maltese community. The Institute serves as Malta's exclusive testing center for the HSK examination, offering all six levels of the writing test and three levels of the speaking test, thereby enabling Maltese students and professionals to obtain internationally recognized Chinese language certifications. To date, there have been no documented controversies in Malta regarding academic freedom or attempts to censor course content within the Institute.

Military-linked cooperation

Malta's National Research and Innovation Strategic Plan 2023–27 does not address research security, and no national guidelines on research security have been adopted to date. However, the University of Malta has facilitated access to a series of online events on research security, hosted by ARMA UK and EARMA.

Out of the 29 identified cooperation links between Maltese and Chinese institutions, 9 are considered as potentially risky due to their links to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), with two of the cooperations with Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) and one link with Harbin Engineering University, classified as "very high" risk based on the ASPI Defense University Tracker. These universities are considered part of the "Seven Sons of National Defense," a group of China's leading research and development universities, as approximately 30% of their graduates work in the defense sector.

At least two Maltese universities maintain relations with BIT: the University of Malta, based in Msida, and Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), based in Paola. Both collaborations began in 2024. The University of Malta is conducting a joint research project with BIT on energy transitions, green energy, and EV charging options.

On the other hand, in the case of MCAST, the nature and aims of the cooperation are not documented in publicly available sources. Furthermore, the University of Malta conducts joint research with Harbin Engineering University and the Henan Diesel Engines Industry Company, focusing on dual-use marine engines that are designed to operate on a diesel-gas mixture to reduce carbon emissions. The same university also cooperates with Southeast University, considered an institution of “high” risk potential, on a joint research project focusing on additive manufacturing of parts and components used in marine transportation.

Besides, the University of Malta maintains cooperation with four Chinese universities with “medium risk” potential. First, it collaborates with Ocean University of China, based in Qingdao, on a joint research project on groundwater resources management. The second link is to Xiamen University, which helped establish and further maintain the only Confucius Institute in Malta, and the cooperation primarily focuses on Chinese-language teaching, based on open-source information. Third, it maintains ties with the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, with which it conducts research in artificial intelligence. The fourth cooperation focuses on medicine, specifically the treatment of hemophilia, which the University of Malta conducts together with Soochow University (Suzhou).

Among private universities, the American University of Malta collaborates with East China Normal University, which is classified as a low-risk institution by the ASPI tracker, on Chinese language instruction.

Technology research

The cooperation between Maltese and Chinese universities predominantly focuses on culture, economic and business areas, and Chinese/Maltese language exchanges. Of the 30 ties, only 10 focus on research in technological areas, most of which occur in collaboration with institutions linked to the PLA, as described in the previous section.

The Sino-Malta Fund serves as a key platform for deepening scientific collaboration between Malta and China, with the goal of strengthening research and development, promoting technology transfer, and fostering comprehensive, steady, and long-term cooperation. Launched in 2019, the Fund is a bilateral research initiative jointly administered by the Malta Council for Science and Technology and China’s Ministry of Science and Technology. It originated from an initial agreement on science and technological cooperation between the Government of Malta and the Government of the People's Republic of China, which was further developed through the efforts of the Joint Committee for Cooperation.

The Fund is awarded annually, and the 2023 Call for Proposals marked a significant expansion, with approximately €1.2 million allocated by the Maltese side and matched by China. Since its inception, the Fund has supported more than a dozen joint research projects in diverse areas, including environmental robotics, maritime mapping, aerospace systems, and digital health.

Way forward

In the context of the warm ties between Malta and China, including support among Maltese political elites for strengthening these ties, it may be anticipated that the cooperation that has notably intensified in the past five years will continue along the established path. No revision of mutual ties, particularly in cooperation with military-linked universities or in emerging technologies, appears to be underway in the small-island country, at least publicly. As such, the Maltese government and higher education institutions do not appear to reflect the current EU-wide debate and the publication of research security guidelines across the continent. Consequently, without discussion of the importance of due diligence and the potential underlying risks, focusing on academic ties with China may make Malta an inconspicuous gateway for Chinese academics and students to enter Europe, including those from military-linked institutions.

Visit the [China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker](#) and explore the data on [Malta-China academic engagements](#).

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China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker serves as a database of interactions between European academic institutions and Chinese entities. It was created by CEIAS and partners from investigated countries.

Along with the Tracker, country-level analyses were created to help better understand the specific circumstances of academic relations with Chinese entities in individual countries. They provide information on the significant points in regards to individual academic interactions, look at their current state, and identify what may improve them. They also map the current guidelines used by institutions involved in such interactions.

The goal of the Tracker is to provide a record of how European academic institutions engage with China so as to help understand the nature and volume of these interactions, as well as to improve their transparency. The Tracker can help with further research by individual scholars, provide the initial information for policy-making as well and help guide the universities themselves in establishing and improving their academic interactions.

Project scope

The Tracker was launched in June 2022; however, due to its nature, it is subject to ongoing updates. At the point of the launch, the Tracker mapped the engagement of academic institutions from 11 European countries with their Chinese partners.

In some cases, especially the larger countries (like France, the UK, or Germany), investigated universities were sampled, with investigation priority put on researching China links of those academic institutions that would be considered the most significant - due to their overall internationalization, academic ranking, or dominant focus on research (especially in STEM fields).

The 11 European countries initially covered (data published in June 2022) by the project are Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. As of April 2025, data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Greece, France, Luxembourg, Italy, and Slovenia were published on the Tracker.

Methodology

To map the interaction of European academic institutions and Chinese entities, we have relied on data collected from various open sources. The methodology of this research has been built on previous research into the ties of Slovak academic institutions with Chinese entities [published by CEIAS](#) in December 2020.

The methodology consisted firstly of gathering data through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests (where applicable; otherwise similar approaches were used if possible) to the public universities and research institutes. We have used this method to gather data on the scope and outcomes of cooperation with Chinese entities, as well as to evaluate the financial flows between them. Filing the FOIA requests has also helped us to evaluate the overall openness of public academic institutions when it comes to their dealings with China.

Second, we juxtaposed the collected data with media coverage of various academic interactions and other public sources so as to broaden the scope of the information where possible. In cases where it is allowed (such as Slovakia or Czechia), we also relied on publicly disclosed contracts to help supplement and check the transparency of contracts signed as a part of various interactions.

Where available, we have also cross-referenced the collected data with the [China Defense University Tracker](#) by ASPI, which has allowed us to note instances of cooperation with entities linked to the People's Liberation Army and assign approximate risk levels. However, as ASPI itself notes, the fact that such a link is not recorded does not automatically indicate no risks are associated with cooperating with an institution.

Caveats

Despite the large-scale data collection that took place, please take note that the data contained herein are not comprehensive. The reasons for this are twofold. First, given the nature of the data collection process, which relied on Freedom of Information Act requests and open source data collection, there is a risk that certain data were not included as they were not disclosed by the universities so far. Second, even though we strived to be as comprehensive as possible, in certain cases (e.g. France, Germany, Poland, UK), local limitations forced us to rely on a sampling method in the data collection process, thus deviating from the general approach of collecting data on all the publicly financed academic institutions.

Despite these limitations, it is our view that shedding light on a large number of existing links, though not all of them, still contributes to the overall goal of this project, i.e. improving the transparency of the engagements between European and Chinese academia.

Nevertheless, we strive to overcome these limitations and plan to update the database. To this end, please do not hesitate to submit to us information about any links between European academic institutions and their Chinese partners.

About CEIAS

Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank focusing on Europe-Asia relations and developments in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally founded in 2007 in Slovakia, CEIAS is today a **transnational think tank with main branches in Bratislava (Slovakia), Prague (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria)**, and further regional presence in Poland, Hungary, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and beyond.

We strive to combine **academic and policy advisory role**, producing **data-driven, methodologically rigorous, reliable, and practically relevant research** that is highly valued by experts and policymakers.

Our activities are focused into **several programs and centers**:

- **Global Perceptions of China Center**
- **Geo-economics & Technology Center**
- **EU-Taiwan Center**
- **Indo-Pacific Program**
- **EU-China Relations Program**
- **Southeast Asia Program**
- **Human Rights & Law Program**

Since its establishment in 2007, CEIAS has consistently worked towards becoming a **go-to think-tank in the CEE for matters related to East Asia and the Indo-Pacific**

region. We have a track record of successful project implementation **supported by regional and international donors**, including the European Commission; Government of Taiwan; US State Department; UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; the Government of Japan; the Government of Slovakia; National Endowment for Democracy (NED); the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE); Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Fridrich Naumann Stiftung; International Visegrad Fund; International Republican Institute (IRI); Korea Foundation, and many others.

CEIAS is **embedded into the key European networks of premier East Asia scholars**. Examples include the European Think-Tank Network on China (ETNC), European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), or China in Europe Research Network (CHERN).

CEIAS researchers regularly comment for and publish op-eds in leading CEE and international media. Our work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, South China Morning Post, NHK, Deutsche Welle, Euractiv, CNA, The Diplomat, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Euractiv, and other media.

Our outputs are referred to in the work of other thinktanks, e.g. Brookings (USA), Clingendael (Netherlands), MERICS (Germany), Institute for Security & Development Policy (Sweden), IFRI (France), ISPI (Italy), Global Taiwan Institute (USA), Prospect Foundation (Taiwan), ISEAS (Singapore), Elcano Royal Institute (Spain) and many others.

CEIAS analysis was also highlighted in the outputs of the **European Parliament** and the **U.S. Congress**.

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