



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

Sweden: From Confucius Institutes to structured research security

Johannes Nordin • Christopher Niklas Peterstam

Sweden's first academic exchanges with China took place in 1918, with the inaugural engagement with the People's Republic of China following in 1952. Modern-era academic interactions expanded in the mid-2000s, fueled by bilateral [agreements](#) on science, technology, and higher education. However, Sweden's academic links began to slow in the late 2010s, reflecting heightened diplomatic tensions and growing public scrutiny of engagements with Chinese institutions.

This report examines links to China among 29 public universities and three private or non-profit higher education institutions (HEIs). Of these, 25 institutions have at least one current connection—direct or indirect, including through consortia or multi-institutional agreements—to Chinese partners. Across these institutions, these links amount to 159 agreements or memoranda of understanding.

Transparency

As public authorities, Sweden's public universities are subject to the principle of public access, meaning that agreements and related documents are generally available to the public. Under the [1949 Freedom of the Press Act](#), all documents submitted to, produced by, or stored by a public authority are, in principle, public, thus granting everyone the right to access them and, for a fee, obtain copies.

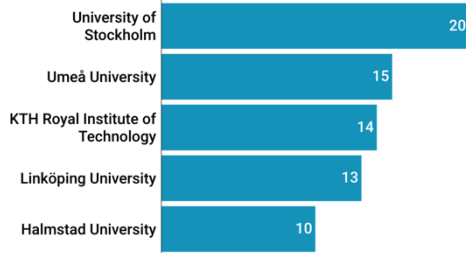
Sweden's academic engagement with China

Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

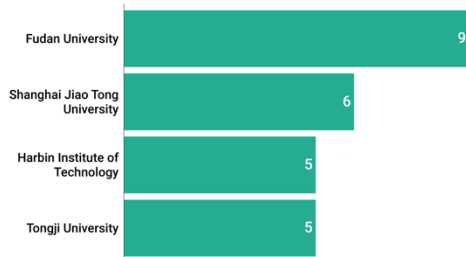


157 Number of identified ties between Swedish universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

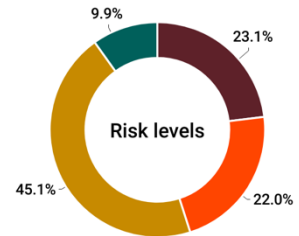
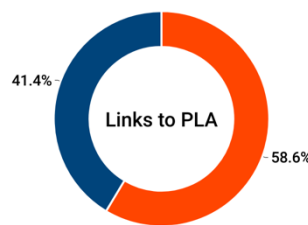
The most active Swedish academic institutions



The most active Chinese entities



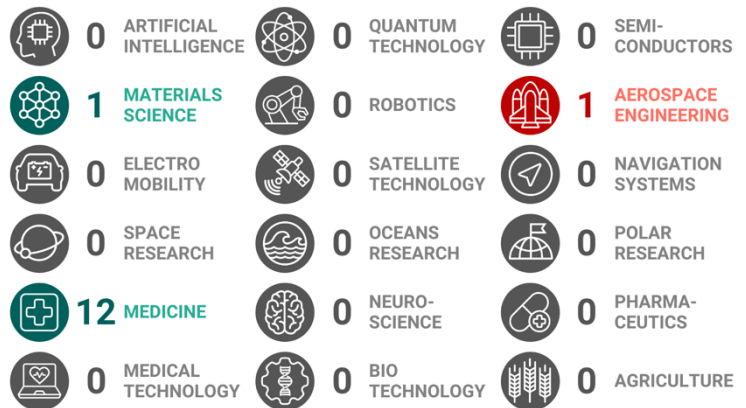
Cooperation with entities linked to the Chinese military



With links to PLA Without links to PLA

Very High High Medium Low

Engagements focused on China's priority cooperation areas



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

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During our investigation, we found that most contracts provided were institution- or faculty-level agreements or memoranda of understanding, offering limited insight into specific research areas. Only two respondents supplied detailed breakdowns of research fields.

While all public universities responded to the request, several noted that the administrative workload of compiling agreements was considerable, resulting in partial submissions. In other cases, respondents provided only a subset of the requested documents without clearly explaining omissions or sent large collections of files with little contextual information about their contents.

For at least 25 links, the material consisted of older agreements that had technically expired but were subsequently renewed, creating ambiguity regarding later versions or amendments.

Confucius Institutes

Sweden was the first EU country to open a Confucius Institute (CI) in 2005, and the first to fully close all CI-related [activity](#) in 2020. At their peak in the early to mid-2010s, Sweden hosted four CIs and one Confucius Classroom, embedded at universities and an upper secondary school.

These programs were phased out between 2015 and 2020 through non-renewal of agreements. Key factors included escalating bilateral tensions following the 2015 [abduction](#) of Swedish-Chinese publisher Gui Minhai, as well as increased [public scrutiny](#) of Hanban financing and its influence over curricula on cultural, historical, and social topics.

Sweden's early adoption and subsequent closure of CIs, together with ongoing debates about safeguarding academic freedom, have heightened public awareness of the potential risks of such partnerships. These experiences have also informed Sweden's proactive approach to research security at the European level.

Sweden's evolving research security policy

Sweden began working toward a more centralized and coordinated system for responsible internationalization in 2018, when the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT) identified gaps in contextual knowledge and risk assessment in project applications.

Between 2019 and 2020, STINT, in collaboration with Karolinska Institutet, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, and Lund University, produced [guidelines](#) for HEIs covering security, ethics, academic freedom, and intellectual property rights. These guidelines laid the foundation for subsequent efforts by Sweden's regulatory agencies to formalize regulations.

During its EU Council Presidency in 2023, the Swedish government [elevated](#) the concept of "responsible internationalization" to the EU policy agenda and welcomed the European Commission's January 2024 [recommendation](#) on managing risks in research collaborations.

In parallel, the government tasked Sweden's three academic oversight agencies with developing responsible internationalization frameworks. This work included pilot projects at HEIs between 2024 and 2025, [resulting](#) in two reports proposing unified national guidelines and a new framework for responsible internationalization in higher education, research, and innovation.

The final [report](#) identified five overarching needs in international academic collaborations: coordinated risk assessment processes between universities and agencies; development and updating of policy frameworks to guide engagement with foreign partners, particularly in authoritarian states; strengthened institutional capacity and expertise to evaluate and manage risks; more integrated support systems across higher education and research institutions; and enhanced dialogue and coordination between academic institutions, government agencies, and security authorities.

Its central recommendation was the establishment of a national support function to coordinate actors, provide guidance, monitor international developments, and liaise with relevant security agencies.

Research security in practice

The challenges identified in the governmental report were also reflected in the data-gathering phase. While HEIs reported having internal routines for evaluating partnerships, the degree of centralized oversight and the administrative capacity to store, identify, and process relevant information varied considerably.

Internal checklists and risk matrices draw on diverse sources, including official STINT and UKÄ guidance as well as, for instance, ASPI's Defense Universities Tracker, the Foreign Ministry's positions, and input from the Swedish Security Service. This diversity does not necessarily indicate shortcomings, but it does complicate national comparisons and underscores the value of greater coordination. Some faculties also flagged a lack of concrete operational routines at the research group level.

These findings support the push for a national support function, even as some reviewing agencies [cautioned](#) against an overly broad mandate. The government has welcomed these developments under the banner "As open as possible – as secure as necessary." In May 2025, the Swedish Research Council was [tasked](#) with developing and operationalizing the national guidelines. Among respondents, there appears to be a cautious approach toward renewals, with some institutions maintaining existing cooperation frameworks in anticipation of the new guidelines.

HEIs generally appear to view research security measures with understanding, though broader concerns exist that overly prescriptive mandates could restrict academic freedom or create excessive bureaucratic burdens. These concerns were [echoed](#) in the 2024 Academic Freedom in Sweden survey by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), where a plurality (29%) of respondents reporting pressure on academic freedom cited political control and influence as their primary concern. Meanwhile, rectors from several leading universities [argued](#) publicly in 2025 that academic engagement with China should be strengthened in areas considered less sensitive from a security perspective, such as sustainability, resource scarcity, and the green transition.

Sweden-China academic engagements

Most identified links between Swedish HEIs and Chinese institutions focus on broader commitments to student, academic and staff exchanges. Among the minority of agreements specifying faculties or departments, non-STEM areas dominate, including law, business, management, languages and medicine. However, the most sensitive collaborations, especially those with defense-linked institutions, appear to center on STEM publications.

A 2023 meta-study by STINT [found](#) a rapid increase in joint research between Sweden and China from 2012 to 2021, with China rising from Sweden's 12th-largest research partner to 4th-largest, and co-publication volumes tripling over the period. The most common co-publication fields between 2017 and 2021 were engineering, medicine, physics and astronomy, and materials science.

STINT also [observed](#) that many Sweden–China research links are initiated at the individual level rather than through centralized institutional channels. This may help explain why few HEIs were able to provide detailed overviews of active research

collaborations for this study, with most submissions limited to general MoUs or framework agreements. The aggregate publication trends nonetheless point to extensive, albeit decentralized, research engagement.

A 2023 investigation by *Svenska Dagbladet* [highlighted](#) a steady rise in co-authored publications between Swedish and Chinese defense-linked institutions from 2010 to 2022. Of the 159 identified links in this study, 41 were categorized as high- or very-high-risk institutions by the ASPI Defense University Tracker. These notably included three academic links to the PLA-linked “Seven Sons of National Defense”: Linköping University (Faculty of Engineering) with Beijing Institute of Technology; KTH Royal Institute of Technology with Harbin Institute of Technology; and University West with Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Contractual and administrative features

Universities are required to self-report research or collaborations involving dual-use items, creating a regulatory grey zone in which the line between basic science and potential military applications is not always clear. In response, Technology Industries of Sweden, the Swedish Security and Defense Industry Association (SOFF), and the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) jointly [updated](#) their 2018 guidelines in September 2025 to help universities and companies mitigate risks such as industrial espionage.

More recent cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts typically include clearer contractual provisions, such as explicitly mandated review and renewal clauses, rather than automatic rollovers.

Swedish universities generally do not record students’ nationality or home institution due to legal and privacy constraints. Exchange students are typically registered under their host institution rather than their home university. Consequently, students or doctoral candidates originally enrolled at a higher-risk institution but studying at a European university and on exchange at a Swedish university would officially appear as students of the European host institution, even though this distinction is recognized.

Non-academic collaborations

This research focuses primarily on HEIs. However, Malin Frenning, the CEO of RISE, has [noted](#) that most research and innovation considered sensitive from a national security perspective takes place within research institutes and private companies. While welcoming stronger research security, she has cautioned that any national support function must be designed in a way that remains relevant for these actors. Even for public research institutes, much of their applied or contract-based research is not subject to full public access when it involves commercial interests, national security, or sensitive personal data. Collaboration outside the university sector, therefore, falls outside the scope of this study.

Recommendations

- **Finalize the national guidelines** so that universities can start adjusting their procedures and partnerships with greater clarity.
- **Set up the national support function** to help coordinate universities, share good practices, and offer practical tools for risk assessment, while avoiding an overly broad or bureaucratic mandate.
- **Keep research institutes and the private sector in view**, since much of the sensitive applied research takes place outside universities.
- **Work with the academic community**, ensuring that stronger research security goes hand in hand with academic freedom and international openness.

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

Authors

JOHANNES NORDIN • Independent analyst

Johannes Nordin was a Research Fellow at ISDP's Asia Program. Within ISDP's Strategic Consultancy, he followed geopolitical developments across Europe and the Indo-Pacific, with a particular focus on China's foreign relations at the intersection of technology, security, and international order. His main areas of expertise include Sino-European ties, semiconductor and technological supply chain issues, non-proliferation, and debates on EU security and autonomy. Mr. Nordin holds an MSc in International and European Relations and a BA in Political Science and Economics from Linköping University. He is also a member of the Younger Generation Leaders Network on Euro-Atlantic Security (YGLN) and BASIC's Emerging Voices Network.

CHRISTOPHER NIKLAS PETERSTAM • Institute for Security & Development Policy

Christopher Niklas Peterstam is a Junior Research Fellow at ISDP's Asia Program. His work focuses on contemporary political and security developments across Asia, with particular attention to state narratives, regional power dynamics, and transnational issues. He contributes to the program's analytical output through research, writing, and engagement in ongoing projects.

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), 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 focus are **focused into several research programs and centers:**

- **Global Perceptions of China Center**
- **Geoeconomics & 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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Authors: Johannes Nordin, Christopher Peterstam

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Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
www.ceias.eu
office@ceias.eu

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