



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

Italy: Transparency gap and collaborations under scrutiny

Margherita Capacci • Sofia Turati • Ludovica Meacci

In recent years, European member states have begun to view China as a multifaceted actor. Italy is no exception. Current debates on economic security have prompted Rome to adjust its policy instruments to protect its strategic assets.

Italy was one of the first European countries to sign an academic cooperation agreement with China. The number of agreements steadily increased over time and peaked before Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, only to plateau immediately afterwards. Overall, academic ties between Italy and China are strong. Italian universities host a substantial number of Confucius Institutes and participate in Marco Polo and Erasmus exchange programs, while academic collaboration spans a wide range of subjects. In some cases, Italian universities have set up campuses in China.

Lack of transparency

The primary challenge of this mapping effort was the availability of data. Our research is based on a triangulation of freedom of information (FOI) requests, universities' websites and the database of CINECA, a not-for-profit consortium comprised of almost 70 Italian universities, 40 research and public institutions, and the Ministry of Education. Its online database is jointly promoted by the Ministry of University and Research, the Conference of Italian University Rectors, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

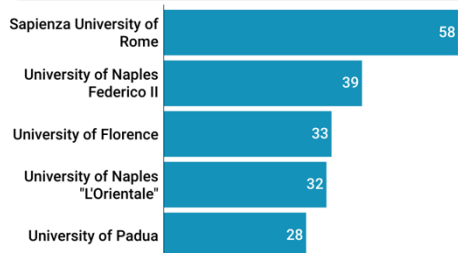
Italy's academic engagement with China

Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

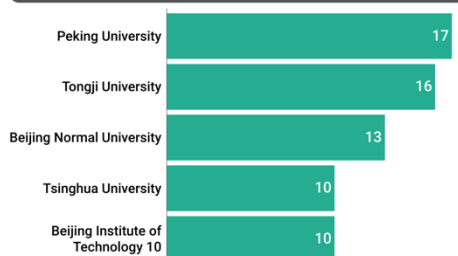


758 Number of identified ties between Italian universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

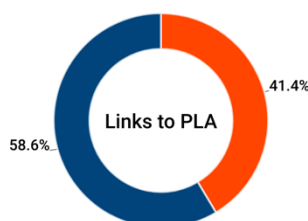
The most active Italian academic institutions



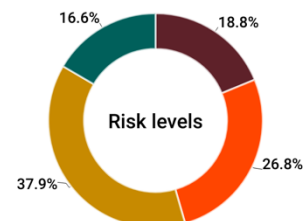
The most active Chinese entities



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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The CINECA database lists international agreements between Italian universities and their foreign counterparts. However, how the data is collected remains ambiguous, and CINECA did not reply to our request for information. We also noticed significant discrepancies between the information provided on the CINECA database and the information from our FOI requests. Some agreements listed on the CINECA were not found on the websites or shared via FOIs, and vice versa. Therefore, although CINECA comprises the broadest range of data, it doesn't provide a complete overview.

Accessing bilateral agreements also proved challenging. Of the 72 public universities and research institutes we looked into, 65 institutions have proven connections to PRC entities. Of these 65, only six have made the contracts available on their website. When presented with FOI requests, only 13 with proven collaborations disclosed the agreements, while less than half (27 out of 65) answered partially to our FOI request, such as by disclosing the names of their Chinese partners but withholding other information. Some 25 universities did not disclose any information at all. The reasons given for a refusal or partial response mostly concerned the excessive workload for the universities due to data processing requests. Some, however, specified that providing copies of the agreements would result in possible damage to "international relations" or "economic and commercial interests."

Most universities did not disclose any financial or non-financial income concerning agreements with Chinese universities. Of the few who did, the data was either

anonymized or the accounting systems did not allow transactions to be traced back to one specific entity.

Regulations

As concerns about research security are gaining traction across Europe, Italy is moving to develop country-agnostic national guidelines. Rome's secret service has long been eyeing the potential national security implications of Chinese hostile practices in academia and research bodies. In its 2021 report, the committee overseeing the activities of the Italian intelligence agencies (COPASIR) specifically warned against "collaborations with foreign companies, often subject to state control, and Italian universities" as part of China's "long-term strategy aimed at strategic markets, such as technological innovation, intended to penetrate the business community and to take advantage of the incentives of international scientific cooperation."

Based on the authors' interview with an Italian administrative lawyer, Italian universities are not generally required to disclose the international agreements they have signed. The current legislative setup (the so-called "golden power") allows the government to screen foreign investment in strategic sectors, such as those with implications for defense and national security like telecommunications, energy and transports, health, food and agriculture, and financial services. Its use has increased recently, especially during the Draghi administration (2021-2022). Although useful in preventing technology transfers in critical sectors, the golden power cannot be applied to academic partnerships, thus creating a "protection gap" for research collaborations.

Following the EU Council's recommendation on research security in May 2024, momentum is now building in Italy for a national approach. After creating an inter-ministerial committee that brought together government officials with representatives of academic and research bodies, the Italian government administered a survey to all Italian universities and research institutions. With an 80% response rate, research bodies have shown a strong interest in being assisted in developing risk-assessment and mitigation measures.

From our FOI requests, universities have shown that there are limited measures in place to address this matter. When asked about procedures to evaluate potential risks of cooperation with Chinese entities, most universities admitted having none. More generally, some mentioned codes of conduct, while others also referred to internal procedures for personal data management, evaluation of legal risks and patent applications for joint projects, which address research security concerns only partially.

In December 2024, the Italian government unveiled its national guidelines on research security. These will expect principal investigators to report on the perceived risks based on the nature of the research, sources of external funding, and partnerships with external bodies. Full implementation is expected by 2026, and participation remains voluntary.

Confucius Institutes

The first Confucius Institute on Italian soil opened in 2005 at Sapienza University in Rome, making it the oldest in Europe. Today, Italy hosts 12 Confucius Institutes—at the University of Bologna, University Kore of Enna, University of Florence, University of Macerata, University of Milan, University of Naples “L’Orientale,” University of Padova, University of Rome “La Sapienza,” University of Turin, University Ca’ Foscari of Venice, Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna of Pisa, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan. In 2020, there were at least 20 Confucius Classrooms in Italy, but as there is no comprehensive data, the actual number might be higher. There have been no registered cases of censorship or scandals involving Confucius Institutes in Italy.

Through research carried out in 2022, we could access some of the financial figures concerning Italy-based Confucius Institutes. Only 4 out of 12 universities provided financial data since the founding of their Institutes until 2021. For instance, the institutes at the University of Milan and the School of Advanced Studies Sant’Anna in Pisa, founded in 2009, have received respectively over €2.4 million and € 1.4 million; the Confucius Institute at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice has obtained € 1.6 million since 2008, while the one at University of Florence has received € 553 thousand since 2014.

Moreover, agreements between Sapienza University and Hanban facilitated the renovation of Palazzo Baleani in Rome’s historic center, with a one million euro investment in 2015. In 2021, Hanban also reportedly contributed €2 million to refurbish Villa Lauri in Macerata, which now houses a “model Confucius Institute” complete with libraries, laboratories, and meeting rooms.

High-risk collaborations

Several Italian universities and institutes interact with Chinese entities deemed “high” or “very high risk” by the ASPI China Defense University Tracker. Of the 826 ties mapped, 91 were carried out with “high-risk” institutions and 66 with “very high-risk” entities. Of these 66 agreements, 24 were with “Seven Sons of National Defense,” a group of Chinese universities with deep roots in the military and defense industry, subordinated to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

Among these “Seven Sons,” the Beijing Institute of Technology, the Harbin Institute of Technology and the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics have the most agreements with Italian universities. These universities have had formal agreements with 10, 4 and 5 Italian universities, respectively. Cooperation spans a broad range of subjects, from industrial and information engineering to biology and medicine. For example, the Polytechnic of Turin and Harbin Institute of Technology run a joint PhD program on “Smart Building and Construction,” supported by the Chinese Education Ministry and the Joint Lab “Green and Low-carbon Urban Regeneration.”

The security credentials of the Chinese institution were deemed “top secret” for 23 agreements and “secret” for 230 collaborations by the ASPI Tracker. In 86 cases, the Chinese partner has been put on entity lists by foreign governments. For 106 agreements, the Chinese counterpart had conducted economic espionage or misconduct in the past. Examples include the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC), which, according to the ASPI tracker, is one of China’s

leading universities for defense electronics research. UESTC is subordinate to the Ministry of Education (MOE) and jointly supervised by defense industry agencies MIIT and SASTIND, as well as the Chinese military's leading electronics manufacturer, China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC). From 2015 to 2020, UESTC held a cooperation agreement with the University of Tor Vergata on computer science, bioengineering, robotics, and system engineering.

Details about the areas of cooperation were often not included in the agreements and were not freely available online. The information shared showed that the most common fields included agriculture, medicine, biotech, material, aerospace, robotics, space, and MedTech.

Italian universities also have ties with Chinese state institutions. In nine cases, they are seen to cooperate with local or national administrative bodies, like the China Scholarship Council, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Science and Technology Department of Sichuan Province.

Cooperation with Chinese corporations is also substantial. According to the [head of corporate communications](#) of Huawei Italy, in 2021 the Chinese tech giant had 20 active collaborations with Italian universities, mostly through the [Huawei ICT Academy](#) program and 5 joint labs. Among them, the [joint lab](#) at Milan Polytechnic focuses on developing 5G/6G technology, vehicular radar, vehicular wireless connectivity and networking; the [joint lab](#) at the University of Siena works on antennas and electromagnetics; the [joint lab](#) established with the National Laboratory of Wireless Communications (WiLab) works on 'Internet of Things' networks. Similarly, in 2019, the University of Pavia established a "[Microelectronics Innovation Lab](#)," focused on microelectronics and high-frequency technologies and received €1.7 million in funding from the Huawei Research Centre in Milan. No information could be found on the joint lab with the University of Naples "Federico II."

The University of Bologna has also made an agreement with Huawei. While the university did not answer our FOI request, its [agreement](#) with Huawei had already made headlines in 2021. The agreement specifically focuses on artificial intelligence, with Huawei explicitly asking to be involved in EU-funded projects through the University of Bologna.

Finally, the National Inter-University Consortium for Telecommunications, a non-profit consortium that brings together 42 public Italian universities working on information and communication technologies, also has an agreement with Huawei. Its National Laboratory of Wireless Communications (WiLab) has a [joint innovation center](#) with Huawei and works on the Internet of Things. The website states that every WiLab affiliate can respond to the yearly call for projects and that "every party involved in the project will be bound to Huawei's NDA and IPR rules."

There might be other cases of cooperation between Italian universities and Huawei that we could not identify. For instance, the Institute of Advanced Studies in Lucca revealed that it has signed a non-disclosure agreement with Evidence srl, an Italian company controlled by Huawei Technologies Cooperatief U.A., located in the Netherlands.

Cooperation with corporations is not only limited to the ICT sectors. For instance, in 2016 Sapienza University of Rome signed a cooperation agreement with China Aerospace Science and Technology, a [prominent contractor](#) in China's space program

and on the [US entity list](#) since 2022 for its efforts to “acquire U.S.-made products in support of the East Asian country’s military modernization efforts.” The agreement with Sapienza University covered a broad range of topics, from deep space exploration and interplanetary missions to new materials for space vehicles and satellite tracking. Similarly, the University of Naples “Federico II” cooperates with the Chinese Aeronautical Establishment, a state-owned research institute, on industrial and information engineering.

Conclusion

Academic ties between Italy and China are diverse and involve most Italian universities and research institutes. As this research effort shows, however, data is, at present, difficult to access, and with no obligations in place for institutions in Italy to make their agreements public, mapping academic collaborations remains extremely challenging. While not all academic exchanges present research security risks, the lack of transparency impedes the development of a screening mechanism to identify those who might.

The development of national guidelines on research security is undoubtedly a step in the right direction, as universities themselves are often ill-equipped to perform risk assessments on their collaborations with entities in authoritarian states. In addition to ad-hoc training to raise awareness, Italy should establish a knowledge center at the national level to assess and mitigate the risks of academic collaborations with authoritarian countries.

**[Visit the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker](#)
and explore the data on [Italy-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), 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:**

- **Geopolitics • Security**
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- **EU-China Relations**
- **Taiwan • Cross-Strait Affairs**
- **Southeast Asia • ASEAN**
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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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