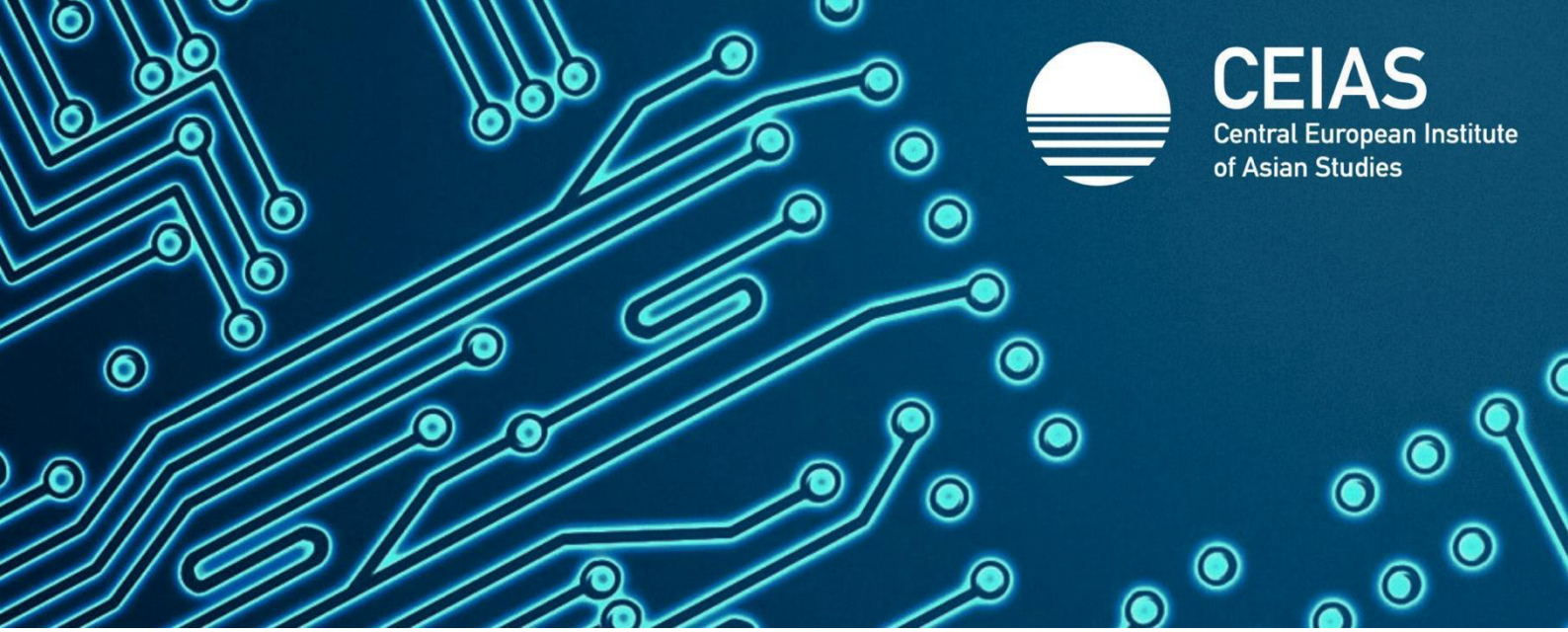


China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

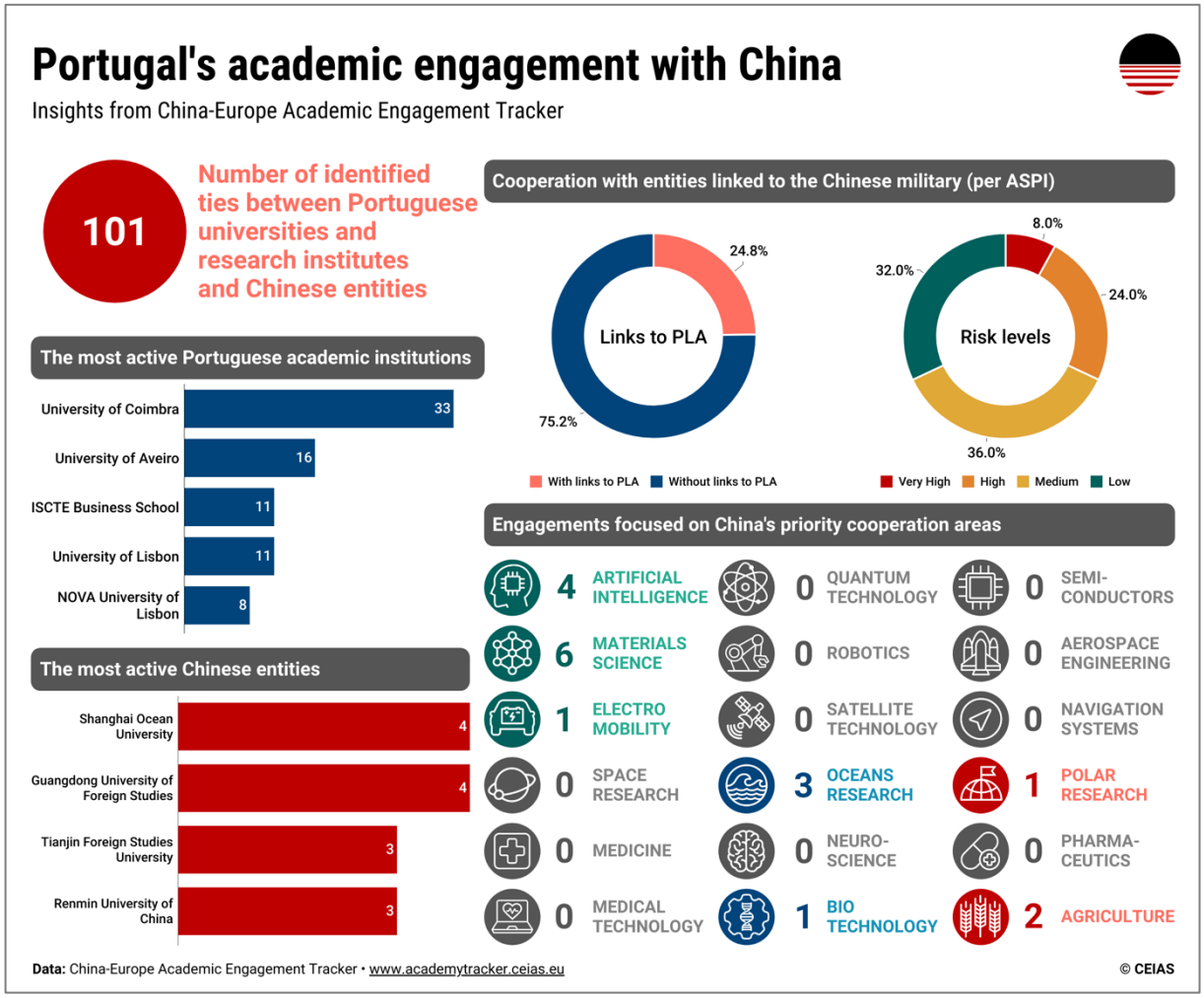
Portugal: Close relations with China beget a lack of scrutiny

Adam Kalivoda

Portugal-China relations are arguably the oldest in Europe, largely due to Portugal's control of the colony of Macao from 1557 until its handover in 1999. Their modern ties, however, are better reflected as dating to the 2005 establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which was the first between China and a Portuguese-speaking country. The mutual relations have further deepened as a result of Portugal's debt crisis between 2010 and 2014, when a number of Chinese firms sought to purchase Portuguese sovereign bonds and acquire major stakes in companies, including China Three Gorges' 2011 acquisition of a 23.3% stake in the electric utility EDP. This has led some in the mid-2010s to call Portugal a "Chinese aircraft-carrier" in Europe.

With respect to the academic ties between the two countries, thirteen public state universities were analyzed. Due to a lack of responses to the FOIA requests, public information has formed the major part of this report. Overall, at least 101 ties between Portuguese universities and Chinese entities were found, with the majority focusing on student, academic and faculty exchanges. However, a number of joint research centers or multilateral institutions have also been established in recent years between the two countries, strengthening academic cooperation, at least on paper. There are also numerous Portugal-Macao collaborations that are important to consider when examining the state of Portugal-China relations. Due to the project's limitations, these are not included in the dataset but will be discussed later in this report. Some of the multilateral cooperations also involve Macao-based institutions.

At the national level, research cooperation between China and Portugal has been facilitated by the Sino-Portuguese Agreement for Cooperation in Science and Technology, concluded in 1993, which has enabled bilateral cooperation among



researchers through visits, joint research projects and workshops. Under this agreement, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology have in the past issued joint calls for proposals, and funded research projects between 2016 and 2018 for joint Sino-Portuguese research projects in areas such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, health sciences, agricultural sciences, chemistry, engineering, computing sciences and energy, ecology and environment. It is unclear whether the call has continued in the following years.

Research security as a separate security consideration has emerged only recently, with a dedicated Unit for Science, Technology and Emerging Areas within the Portuguese Security Intelligence Service established in March 2025, almost a year after the EU Council recommendation on research security in May 2024. As of late 2025, the Unit's main role was to support research institutions in responding to potential threats of espionage, sabotage or foreign interference, as well as to participate in exploratory discussions with other major academic stakeholders from universities and research institutions to prepare guidelines and manage research security risks.

These, however, have not yet been fully translated into an institutional-level research security agenda. Instead, some universities, such as the University of Porto, are adopting frameworks that still rely on research ethics, data protection and IP protection as a baseline for any security discussions regarding international research collaborations. While these are crucial for research security practices, they can be

understood to serve as a starting, rather than an end point for protecting critical research.

"Braga Incident" more than 10 years on

Currently, there are five Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Portugal, with the country's most prestigious universities, the University of Porto and the University of Lisbon, each having one. Furthermore, the University of Coimbra, the University of Minho, and the University of Aveiro host one each as well. The one at the University of Minho is the oldest one, dating back to 2005. As of 2025, these five CIs have also established an alliance to strengthen cooperation in language and cultural education. There is a high likelihood that a sixth CI will be opened soon, with the University of the Azores announcing the intention to do so in early 2025, and the official Chinese website of the CIs hinting at it with the link already present there as of May 2026 (with the actual website still in development).

The crux of their activities today is primarily language education and cultural exchange, with the CIs holding frequent events related to holidays and celebrations in China, as well as various language competitions and student exchange initiatives. However, Portugal has in the past been at the center of one of the most significant CI-related controversies: in 2014, Hanban's Director Xu Lin attempted to censor references to Taiwan, having her staff literally tear out pages from conference materials that referenced Taiwanese institutions. This occurred at the conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies, which was held in coordination with the local Confucius Institute at the University of Minho in Braga. Being one of the cases that have led to the backlash against the CIs in Europe, this incident has been characterized as the prime example of their lack of independence. More than ten years later, CIs are not at the center of discussion when it comes to protecting Portuguese academia from foreign interference. And, as the case of the University of the Azores shows, Portuguese universities seem to have moved past any stigma associated with Confucius Institutes or may not have had it in the first place.

Breakdown of the academic interactions

Of the 101 cooperations identified in this research, a little less than one quarter (25) included entities that, according to various previous research, including that of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), have been linked to the People's Liberation Army or the defense industrial complex in China. According to ASPI research, eight of these links could be classified as High or Very High risk. One of these includes a cooperation between the University of Coimbra and the Beijing Institute of Technology, one of the Seven Sons of National Defense. This specific relation, as far as this research has been able to determine, has been limited to a five-year period between 2017 and 2022, with the relationship seemingly not prolonged. However, when it comes to transparency, only one of the Portuguese Universities, the University of Lisbon, actually publishes the contracts online (even if only in a limited way). Either way, it has still failed to respond to the FOIA request.

A large part of cooperation between Portuguese and Chinese institutions involves student and academic exchanges, with about 75 of 94 agreements including some form of mobility. Some of these mobilities have also been supported by the China Three

Gorges Corporation, which works with at least three Portuguese universities and has provided roughly €500,000 in scholarships for Portuguese Master's and Doctoral students to study in China annually or for at least a period between 2016 and 2020. Huawei also provides universities with such stipends, mostly through the Seeds for Future program, but also through direct cooperation with the Instituto Superior Técnico, an engineering school under the University of Lisbon, where it has been awarding a prize for the best student in the Telecommunications degree, and a scholarship to Master's students to develop their dissertations.

As mentioned before, recent years have seen a proliferation of joint institutes and multilateral agreements that include not only Portuguese and Chinese entities but also institutions from Macao. Such would, for instance, be the March 2025 establishment of the China-Portugal Joint Laboratory on AI and Public Health Technologies, through which the INESC-ID, a private research institute co-owned by the Instituto Superior Técnico, cooperates with Guangzhou Laboratory, Guangzhou Medical University and the Macau University of Science and Technology to leverage AI for public health management purposes. A similar example is the recently established China-European Union Joint Electronic Materials Laboratory, based in Hefei, which NOVA University Lisbon leads, with membership from various other European universities. The outputs of this laboratory are flexible electronics, which are used in a broad range of applications, from biomedical applications to solar cells for space use. In this cooperation, note is taken of the involvement of the Hefei Institutes of Physical Science of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which has been previously deemed a Core Defense Partner in China's military industrial complex.

The Macao factor in Sino-Portuguese academic cooperation

Of note for this paper is also the affiliation of Macao-based institutions. While these are not included in the dataset, which excludes Hong Kong- and Macao-based entities, due to their historic links and other factors, they do appear in numerous Portuguese cooperations to a degree not seen in other countries. Besides figuring in multilateral cooperations between Chinese and Portuguese entities, such as the aforementioned China-Portugal Joint Laboratory on AI and Public Health Technologies, they do also figure in numerous bilateral cooperations, for example under the Sino-Portuguese optoelectronics laboratory established in Macao through cooperation of the NOVA University of Lisbon and Macao University of Science and Technology, which can provide an indirect way for Portuguese universities to cooperate with Chinese researchers without engaging mainland institutions per se. And while the specific links between universities in Macao and China's Military-Civil Fusion are largely murky, the baseline is that second-order exposure to institutions in Macao with deep ties to Chinese military-linked universities may pose undue risk to research collaborations. Since 2024, the Macao University of Science and Technology has had a cooperation agreement with Beihang University. Since 2022, the University of Macao has had a strategic partnership with the Harbin Institute of Technology, with both institutions being part of the Seven Sons of National Defense.

Furthermore, Macao often serves as a platform for broader engagement between mainland China and the wider Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) world. This association allows Macao, which also still includes Portuguese amongst its official languages, to engage with countries such as Brazil, Cape Verde, Angola or Timor-Leste on a rather closer level. Such cooperation also includes academic engagement, ranging

from various fora held under the China-Lusophone countries framework to joint alliances, such as the China-Portuguese Speaking Countries Ocean Research Alliance.

Conclusion

With Portugal having rather warm ties with China, including support from its political or business elites, it is likely that no major change is to be expected in the coming years. With the post-COVID resurgence of academic cooperation coinciding with the release of the Council's recommendations on research security, it is likely that Portugal will only slowly begin adapting its approach to research security. Currently, it seems that some essential steps are being undertaken by the government, but tangible guidelines are yet to be formulated. These are likely to form a first step towards actual implementation of research security at the university level. However, specific steps, such as increasing the transparency of university collaborations by publishing contracts, akin to the University of Lisbon's approach, can help and are fairly easy for individual institutions to implement. Furthermore, while not controversial in the Portuguese context today, CIs should be included in the broader debate given past experience. Similarly, the question of engaging with Macanese institutions should apply the same standards of scrutiny as those associated with mainland entities.

Visit the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker and explore the data on Portugal-China academic engagements.

Author

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Adam Kalivoda is a Project Coordinator and Research Fellow at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies. His work currently focuses on the intersection of research security and EU-China relations, coordinating the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker project, and contributing to economic and research security projects at CEIAS. He is interested in the study of human rights issues, EU-Japan relations and socio-political movements in Asia. He holds a BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from the University of Warwick, and an MSc in Political Science from the University of Amsterdam.

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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).

As of April 2025, data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Greece, France, Luxembourg, Italy, and Slovenia were published on the Tracker. In September 2025, we added data for Croatia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In January 2026 we updated the tracker with data from Estonia, Sweden, Belgium and Ireland. In March 2026, data for The Netherlands, Malta and Denmark was added. As of June 2026, data for Portugal, Finland, and Norway was published.

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**
- **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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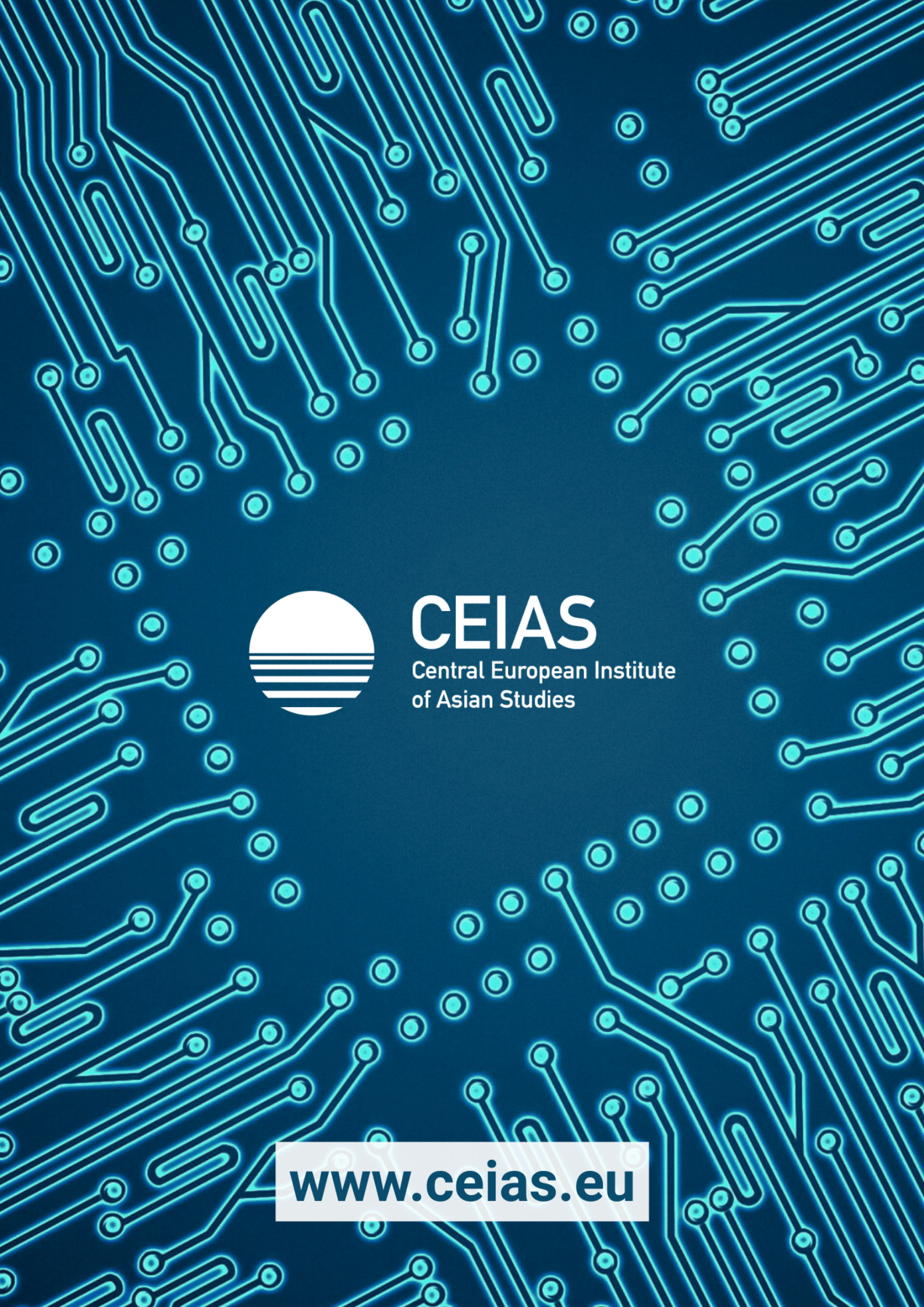
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