

EDITORIAL

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PORTUGAL AND CHINA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS

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This special issue of JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations, comes to light at a moment of profound disruption in the international rules-based order, marked by heightened geopolitical fragmentation, strategic rivalry, and the reconfiguration of global power structures. Against this setting, the study of Sino-Portuguese relations constitutes not only a timely empirical focus but also a valuable academic opportunity to reassess how medium and small states navigate uncertainty, complexity, and systemic transformation within the international system.

In the context of the national interest of the Portuguese Republic, relations with China acquire particular strategic relevance. Portugal has frequently been characterized as a “special friend” of the People’s Republic of China in Europe (Wise, 2020) and, at times, even described as “China’s best friend in the European Union” (Wejchert, 2021, p. 3). Such labels invite critical scholarly reflection, moving beyond diplomatic rhetoric to interrogate the structural, strategic, and normative dimensions that underpin this relationship. They also open analytical space to assess how Portugal’s historical legacies with Portuguese-speaking countries across Africa, Latin America, and Asia, its Atlantic and maritime orientation, and its membership in the European Union interact with and shape China’s evolving global strategy. Examining these intersecting factors allows for a more nuanced understanding of Portugal’s agency within asymmetrical partnerships and highlights how bilateral relations are embedded within broader regional, multilateral, and geoeconomic frameworks.

The evolving dynamics of international relations between Portugal and China constitute a compelling field of scholarly inquiry, shaped by deep historical legacies, growing economic interdependence, and sustained strategic diplomatic engagement. The Sino-Portuguese relationship is distinctive in comparative perspective, as it is rooted in several centuries of exchange and interaction, most notably embodied in Macao - a former territory under Portuguese administration and now a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. Macao continues to function as both a symbolic



and practical bridge between the two countries, reinforcing cultural affinity, institutional familiarity, and economic connectivity.

The formal establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979, followed by Portugal's accession to the European Union, further consolidated Portugal's position as a reliable regional and international partner. These developments enhanced its attractiveness as a destination for foreign investment and cooperation, particularly for non-European actors seeking stable access points to the EU market. In recent decades, Chinese investment in Portugal has expanded significantly, encompassing strategic sectors such as energy, healthcare, real estate, insurance, infrastructure, and finance (Leandro and Li, 2025, p. 108).

Portugal occupies a distinctive position within the European Union, not only due to its extensive maritime heritage but also because it administers one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones in Europe. This maritime dimension underscores Portugal's long-standing orientation toward global connectivity and outward engagement, which has historically facilitated its interaction with Asia. Within this context, the establishment of the first Sino-Portuguese "blue partnership" in 2017 represents a notable innovation in bilateral cooperation, one that China has since replicated with other partners, reinforcing Portugal's role as a policy laboratory and strategic intermediary.

In 2005, Portugal and China formally established a comprehensive strategic partnership, marking a significant deepening of bilateral relations. This partnership was further consolidated in 2018 through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative, under which Portugal became the sole Western European participant. These institutional milestones have provided a stable framework for the sustained growth of bilateral trade, increased Chinese investment in Portugal, and the intensification of diplomatic engagement. Political alignment has also been evident in multilateral contexts, most notably through China's support for António Guterres' candidacies for United Nations Secretary-General in 2016 and his re-election in 2021. Collectively, these developments reflect Beijing's perception of Portugal as a strategically positioned gateway for engaging with the European Union, leveraging Portugal's political credibility within EU institutions, its open investment posture, and its historical and linguistic ties with Lusophone countries. As such, Sino-Portuguese relations extend beyond narrow bilateralism and are increasingly embedded within broader geopolitical and geoeconomic frameworks. 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Portugal. Diplomatic exchanges between Lisbon and Beijing have remained stable and constructive, characterized by regular high-level visits and a shared commitment to expanding cooperation across economic, political, cultural, and multilateral domains.

Portugal continues to maintain strong diplomatic relations with all Portuguese-speaking countries at both bilateral and multilateral levels, most notably within the framework of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries. This dense network of historical, linguistic, and institutional ties constitutes a central asset in the context of Sino-Portuguese relations, as it positions Portugal as a privileged interlocutor between China and Lusophone spaces across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. From Beijing's



perspective, these connections enhance Portugal's value as a facilitator of engagement with regions of strategic importance within the Global South.

Recent geopolitical and economic developments - such as Timor-Leste's accession as the 11th Member State of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 26 October 2025 (ASEAN, 2025) and the deepening of EU-Mercosur relations, culminating in the signing of the Partnership Agreement (EMPA) and the Interim Trade Agreement (iTA) on 17 January 2026 (European Commission, 2026) - have further strengthened the integration of Portuguese-speaking countries into key regional economic communities. These dynamics have significantly expanded the global projection of the Portuguese language, facilitating access to a vast market of nearly three billion consumers across Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. In this context, language functions not merely as a cultural or historical bond but as a strategic resource underpinning economic diplomacy, regulatory mediation, and transregional cooperation.

Within Sino-Portuguese relations, this linguistic and institutional architecture has particular relevance, as China has increasingly leveraged Macao and Lusophone platforms to advance commercial, financial, and diplomatic initiatives. By anchoring its engagement with Lusophone countries through Portugal and Macao, China benefits from established trust networks and institutional familiarity, while Portugal reinforces its intermediary role between Europe and the Global South. This configuration enhances the geopolitical and geoeconomic relevance of Lusophone spaces within an increasingly multipolar and interconnected international order, while also illustrating how small and medium-sized states can exercise agency through networked diplomacy.

In addition, the prospects for trilateral Sino-Portuguese cooperation merit closer analytical attention, particularly in the context of strategically significant infrastructure projects such as the Lobito Corridor in Angola and the Guarujá Tunnel in Brazil. These initiatives exemplify how China, Portugal, and Lusophone partner countries can leverage complementary strengths in financing, technical expertise, historical connectivity, and regulatory mediation. The Lobito Corridor has the potential to enhance regional integration in Southern Africa by improving transport efficiency between mineral-rich inland areas and Atlantic ports, while also positioning Angola as a logistical hub in Sino-African trade networks (Lobito Corridor, 2024, p. 9). Similarly, the Guarujá Tunnel project highlights opportunities for cooperation in complex urban infrastructure, combining Chinese engineering capacity with Portuguese institutional and linguistic brokerage and Brazilian local knowledge (Macao News, 2025). Together, these cases illustrate how trilateral frameworks can move beyond bilateral dynamics, contributing to sustainable development, economic diversification, and strategic connectivity across the Global South.

This special issue of JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations, entitled "Portugal, China, and International Relations", invited contributions that critically examine the historical, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Sino-Portuguese bilateral relationship. Contributors were encouraged to explore how interactions between Portugal and China shape broader processes of global governance, regional integration, and the formation of transnational networks.



The thematic scope of the special issue included, but was not limited to, the following areas of inquiry: 1) the role of the Macao Special Administrative Region in fostering connectivity, education and language policies as instruments of soft power, scientific and technological cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and paradiplomacy; 2) Sino-Portuguese foreign relations, with particular attention to issues of fragility, cultural relations, and bilateral cooperation; 3) diasporas and education as vectors of transnational exchange and mutual influence; and 4) an additional dossier featuring a study on Brazil's economic complexity, which contributes to situating the economic trajectories of Brazil and China within the broader context of the Global South.

Collectively, these contributions advance scholarly understanding of the evolving dynamics of Portugal–China relations and their wider international and comparative significance. By engaging with a diverse range of political, economic, and cultural themes, this special issue offers a nuanced analysis of how Portugal and China navigate the complexities of an increasingly multipolar world order. The articles gathered here not only shed light on bilateral interactions but also situate them within broader processes of global governance, regional integration, and transnational connectivity, thereby contributing to ongoing debates in international relations theory and comparative diplomacy.

Importantly, this special issue also provides a platform for a number of early-career and emerging scholars, several of whom are publishing in a peer-reviewed academic outlet for the first time – all papers were double peer-reviewed and passed the similarity check. By fostering scholarly inclusion and intellectual renewal, the issue reflects a commitment to mentoring new academic voices and broadening the field of inquiry on Portugal–China relations. In doing so, it underlines the value of intergenerational dialogue in academic research and highlights the role of academic journals as spaces for both rigorous scholarship and capacity-building. Ultimately, the insights generated in this issue speak not only to bilateral relations but also to wider debates on global interdependence, South–South dynamics, and the evolving architecture of the international system.

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