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H I D D E W A M S

## Chinese FDI in EU Seaports and the Challenge to European Strategic Autonomy

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines Chinese investments into major container ports in the European Union (EU). These ports matter: the advent of containerisation has rapidly impacted the face of the modern world economy and has irreversibly globalised supply chain economics. In times of war, seaports play an essential strategic role as well. Therefore, seaports are understood as part of a state's (or the EU's) strategic or critical infrastructure, the disruption of which would have sizable implications. Currently, we see a development of Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, increasingly investing in the EU's major seaports. This cannot be seen as an innocent type of investment. By gaining a stake in the EU's critical infrastructure, China can bolster its political influence throughout the EU. These dynamics were described by an EU port lobbyist as 'he who pays the piper calls the tune.' This has to be understood within a context of changing EU-China relations, demonstrated by the European Commission naming China a 'systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' in 2019. This essay argues that to protect European strategic autonomy, the EU needs to adopt robust policy measures to counter the increasing Chinese influence on the EU's critical infrastructure.

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## Chinese FDI in EU Seaports and the Challenge to European Strategic Autonomy

By

Hidde Wams

### Introduction

About ten kilometres from the centre of Athens lies Piraeus. A municipality of under 200 thousand residents, Piraeus is home to the largest seaport of Greece, which in August 2016 was largely conceded to a Chinese shipping giant by the name of China Ocean Shipping Company (*zhongyuan haiyun* 中远海运 COSCO Shipping) (Neilson 2019:563; Yang, Pan & Wang 2016:83). This concession sparked a heated discussion in Greece and beyond, both in the realms of academia and politics (Geeraerts 2019:3; Ma & Peverelli 2019:50). How should Greek and European Union (EU) policymakers view this concession? Is it simply a story of successful foreign direct investment (FDI), or are we witnessing Chinese power geopolitics at play?

This essay will attempt to answer these questions, drawing on fieldwork at the port of Piraeus, interviews with EU officials and a literature review focusing on concepts such as the EU ambition of ‘strategic autonomy’ (Franke & Varma 2019). The essay is structured as follows. First, the relevance of ownership structures of container ports will be explained by introducing the concepts of containerisation and critical infrastructure. Next, the essay will relate these topics to the case of Chinese influence at the port of Piraeus. By involving the concepts of economic statecraft and strategic autonomy, the essay will argue that the increasing Chinese influence on European ports potentially affects the EU’s external ‘capacity to act’ (Leonard & Shapiro 2019) and why this may be understood as a challenge to the EU. The conclusion will assess the main policy measure adopted in response to these dynamics and provide some contextualisation.

### Containerisation and critical infrastructure

Container ports matter. One of the major *space-shrinking technologies* largely responsible for the rapid globalisation of trade since the second half of the twentieth century has been the advent of containerisation (Coe, Kelly & Yeung 2013:268). Containerisation refers to ‘the adoption of standardized 20- and 40-foot-long metal containers for land and sea freight, thereby vastly simplifying the transport and transshipment (i.e., transfer from ship to ship, or ship to train) of a huge range of commodities’ (Coe, Kelly & Yeung 2013:268).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) asserts that ‘world trade is fundamentally dependent on a system of maritime transport that has been made as frictionless as possible’ (Cowen 2014:56). Container ports constitute key nodes in this system of maritime transport. For this reason, seaports are often referred to as (part of) a nation state’s *critical infrastructure* or *strategic infrastructure*, since ‘both national security and economic prosperity depend upon that system of roads, railways, seaports, and airports’ (Dodd 2012:1).

In this sense, seaports not only have important economic value; in times of war, seaports play an essential strategic role as well. For that and other reasons, ports ‘can be seen as security bubbles, especially in regard of the amount of money that goes into port security’ (Eski 2011:423). As an official of the European External Action Service (EEAS) affirmed: ‘large-scale Chinese investments in major seaports might pose security issues in maritime areas since we are talking about critical infrastructure. Investing in this kind of infrastructure cannot be seen as simply innocent investment’ (Anonymous 1, 2020).

Another outcome of global containerisation has been the changing ownership structure of seaports. These spaces have seen a change from being nationally owned public infrastructural sites to their incorporation as companies, often privatised (Castelein, Geerlings & Van Duin 2019:6; Psaraftis & Pallis 2012:27). It is with this shift that ports have become ideal opportunities for large FDI. This has notably been the case in Piraeus.

### **China’s influence through its ‘national champions’**

The company conceding the port of Piraeus was not just any Chinese company. COSCO Shipping has been described by scholars as ‘an organ of the Chinese party-state’ (Neilson 2019:565). It is owned and supervised by a special body that falls under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), ‘China’s highest organ of state power’ (Neilson 2019:565). Furthermore, the chief executives of COSCO Shipping are appointed by a specific department of the Communist Party of China’s Central Committee, the top leadership of the PRC’s long-time ruling party (Neilson 2019:565). COSCO Shipping is one of the so-called ‘national champions’ of China’s state-capitalist system (Lin & Milhaupt 2013:725). China’s national champions are state-owned companies supervised by the State-owned Asset Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (*guowanyuan guoyou zichan jiandu guanli weiyuanhui* 国务院国有资产监督管理委员会 SASAC) (Naughton 2015:46). These national champions profit from national policies and aim to

serve Chinese national interests abroad (Hemphill & White 2013:207; Lin & Milhaupt 2013:702; Melnik 2019:28; Van Dijk 2020:87).

Since COSCO Shipping established its presence, the port of Piraeus has featured prominently as an important infrastructural node in many Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (*yidai yilu* 一带一路 BRI) communications (Van der Putten 2016:2). The BRI is the Chinese foreign policy endeavour of increasing Chinese-led connectivity throughout Eurasia and Africa (Van Dijk 2020:124; Chen et al. 2018:1; Huang 2016:314; Van der Putten 2016:2; Zhao 2016:109; Neilson & Rossiter 2014:5). The BRI, sometimes referred to as ‘One Belt, One Road’ or as the ‘New Silk Road,’ has been conceptualised as a ‘grand strategy’ of Chinese foreign policy (Leverett & Wu 2017; Zhang 2017:311; Fallon 2015) or an evolving ‘geopolitical culture’ (Lin, Sidaway & Woon 2019).

Although China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi 王毅 has repeatedly stated that the BRI should not be viewed with an ‘outdated Cold War mentality’ (Demiryol 2019:169) and that it is not a ‘tool of geopolitics’ (*diyuan zhenzhengzhi de gongju* 地缘政治的工具) (Sidaway & Woon 2017:593), the BRI is largely perceived abroad as a ‘tool for China to exert global ascendancy’ (Lin, Sidaway & Woon 2019:514) and to ‘establish its great power status in the world’ (Liu 2018:7).

The power dynamics at play in Piraeus were made visible to me when walking past one of the Port Authority buildings in Piraeus. The name of the port authority was depicted on the façade of the building in three languages: Greek, English, and in Chinese simplified characters. The English name was a literal translation of the Greek words for ‘Piraeus Port Authority’. The Chinese translation, however, added the name of the Chinese concessionaire COSCO Shipping to the name: *zhongyuan haiyun bi lei ai fu si gangkou youxian gongsi* 中远海运比雷埃夫斯港口有限公司 [COSCO Shipping Piraeus Port Limited Company]. The addition of the name of this Chinese national champion marks how this Greek port is understood, especially for readers of Mandarin Chinese. Much like planting a Chinese flag (which is also increasingly done in and around Piraeus) (Grappi 2015), the naming also constitutes a practice of place-claiming, as geographers have long argued (Dodds 2013:5).

Many European seaports are becoming more dependent on Chinese state-owned companies, with the port of Piraeus as a notable case in point. As the dependence on Chinese state-owned companies grows, port authorities increasingly need the cooperation of the Chinese Communist Party to make strategic decisions (Garschagen 2019:115).

For European authorities, this might prove undesirable, since China and the EU member states have diverging views on a number of topics, including market access, political freedoms, and geopolitical issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea (Leonard & Shapiro 2020:2; Garschagen 2019:115; Smith 2014; Crookes 2013; Mattlin 2012). In the words of Cowen (2014:68): ‘China’s influence over Greek politics grows alongside Chinese investment, a direct result of Greek leaders’ hope that China could save Greece from total financial collapse.’ This poses a distinct challenge for the EU, given the fact that China was proclaimed a ‘systemic rival’ by the European Commission as recently as 2019 in the *EU-China Strategic Outlook* (European Commission & the HR/VP 2019). This statement was issued in cooperation with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), the highest foreign affairs official of the EU. This ‘change of mind’ *vis-à-vis* China (Wright 2020) was also summarised by an EEAS official: ‘it is increasingly being understood that China will not help us. A new realism with reference to China is emerging’ (Anonymous 1, 2020).

### **Economic statecraft and ‘conceptual gaps’ in EU-China relations**

By gaining a stake in a state’s critical infrastructure, another state (such as China) can bolster its political influence. This kind of international behaviour is sometimes referred to as *economic statecraft*, ‘understood as the systematic use of trade, investment and other economic instruments for strategic purposes’ (Demiryol 2019:168). When applied to investments in logistical techniques and technologies, what we see is ‘logistics as a political force’ (Grappi & Neilson 2019). In other words, ‘logistical power is political power’ (Neilson 2012:328).

Or, as an EU seaport lobbyist summarised these dynamics: ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’ (Anonymous 2, 2020). This has already become clear in the recent unwillingness by Greece to condemn Chinese behaviour in the European Council: in 2017, when the EU was planning to make a statement criticising China’s human rights record at the United Nations human rights council, Greece blocked the action, calling the statement ‘unconstructive criticism of China’ (Emmott & Koutantou 2017).

Such instances exemplify how the growing exercise of Chinese economic statecraft may pose a serious challenge for the EU. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the EU ‘is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.’ Article 3 TEU states that in its relations with the wider world, ‘the Union shall uphold and promote

its values'. As a 'systemic rival', however, China is understood to promote an 'alternative model of governance' (European Commission & the HR/VP 2019:1).

Although the *EU-China Strategic Outlook* does not specify what is meant by an 'alternative model of governance', one way to understand the difference in models of governance between China and the EU relates to their different attitudes in foreign policy. The EU has often been conceptualised as a 'normative power', meaning that the EU as a polity is fundamentally based on a set of norms and values and that the EU aims to export these norms and values beyond its own territory (Manners 2002; Sjursen 2006; Forsberg 2011). Important examples of values the EU has long attempted to export include human rights and liberal democracy (Reiterer 2014:135; Manners 2002:241). The PRC leadership, on the other hand, is broadly understood as valuing state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference (An, Sharp & Shaw 2020:10; Van Dijk 2020:150; Maher 2016:971; Zhang 2012:89-90; Men 2011:541; Holslag 2011:309).

This Chinese attitude has been called 'sovereignism' (Pan 2012:8; Holslag 2011:309). The Chinese 'sovereignist' emphasis on the importance of state sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the EU is interesting, given the fact that the concept of sovereignty has originated in Europe and was exported to China from Western states in the 1800s during the Qing dynasty (*da qing* 大清) (Tok 2013:40). Scott (2013:40) quotes an unnamed Chinese scholar as stating that 'historically, sovereignty is what Europeans invented and what the Chinese were forced to accept, today it is what Europeans try to bury and what the Chinese hold dear.'

The process of translating the European concept of sovereignty during the Qing dynasty to create the new Chinese concept of *zhuquan* 主权 [sovereignty] was shaped by certain Chinese cultural concepts including *tianxia* 天下 [all under heaven] (Tok 2013:46). This has created a fundamentally Chinese conception of sovereignty, which adds to the current differences between China and the EU in the way sovereignty is understood.

Many Western states have moved to a 'post-sovereign' order that 'entails a stronger emphasis on human rights' (Zheng 2016:352). The existence of the EU, as a 'post-sovereign union' (Chen 2016:782), serves as an important case in point. This strongly differs from China's sovereignist worldview, where absolute state sovereignty and the related notion of non-interference still reign (Tok 2013:85). An example of this can be seen in the fierce way China has responded to Western states' criticism of the way local authorities have dealt with the recent protests in Hong Kong, with

Chinese authorities calling these criticisms ‘serious interfering in China’s internal affairs’ (Hua 2020).

These ‘conceptual gaps’ (Pan 2012) in the different worldviews portrayed by China and the EU have led to a crisis in EU-China relations (Zhang 2016:463; Crookes 2013:639; Mattlin 2012:182), which is embodied in the EU calling China a ‘systemic rival’ in 2019 – an ‘unprecedented’ step in the development of the bilateral relationship between the EU and the PRC (Brattberg & Le Corre 2020).

### **European strategic autonomy**

In the EU, policy discussions of sovereignty are currently strongly focused on the issue of ‘strategic sovereignty’ (Leonard & Shapiro 2019). According to some, ‘European countries are increasingly vulnerable to external pressure that prevents them from exercising their sovereignty’ (Leonard & Shapiro 2019:1). Therefore, strategic sovereignty has also been described as ‘the capacity to act’ (Leonard & Shapiro 2019). Others prefer the term ‘strategic autonomy’ (Franke and Varma 2019). This concept, originating from the defence sector, has gained traction among EU policy circles (Anghel et al. 2020:1). After being appointed as the new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen called for a ‘stronger Europe in the world (...) that would have strategic autonomy’ (Bassot 2020:8). President of the European Council Charles Michel has called strategic autonomy ‘goal No. 1 for our generation’ (Tamma 2020).

Although the term ‘European strategic autonomy’ has subsequently been used in communications by the European Council, European Parliament, and EEAS, this term is in practice characterised by ‘uncertainty and confusion’ (Franke & Varma 2019). Franke and Varma (2019) have explained how among different EU member states the concept of strategic autonomy is interpreted very differently. For example, in some member states, strategic autonomy is mostly understood as autonomy from other powers, whereas in other member states it is mostly understood as the autonomy to conduct operations (Franke & Varma 2019).

A helpful definition of strategic autonomy has been suggested by Lippert, Von Ondarza and Perthes (2019:5), who define strategic autonomy as ‘the ability to set priorities and make decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone.’ In other words, strategic autonomy is not just about being able to take foreign policy decisions



autonomously, but also about being materially able to carry out these decisions, unilaterally if necessary.

Especially because China does not share the same values and norms on which the EU according to Article 2 TEU is fundamentally based, the negative impact on the EU's strategic autonomy created by Chinese economic statecraft is problematic for the EU. The example of Greece has suggested how EU member states, increasingly influenced by China through investments in their critical infrastructures, may become less autonomous in taking foreign policy decisions – thus potentially surrendering part of their 'capacity to act' (Leonard & Shapiro 2019). This is underscored by the fact that the Greeks' unwillingness to criticise China was centred around the topic of human rights, which is one of the main values the EU is built upon.

Seen in this optic, Chinese investments in EU critical infrastructures can be seen as challenging European strategic autonomy, with the concession of the Piraeus port as an important case in point. By gaining a stake in Greece's critical infrastructure, China has increased its influence on Greece's willingness to take a foreign policy decision that would offend China and, as an EU member state, Greece has a say in the EU's common foreign policy. Since consolidating the EU's strategic autonomy is an important ambition for the EU, emphasised by both the presidents of the Commission and the Council, one would assume that the EU institutions would try to actively push back against this kind of Chinese influence on EU member states such as Greece.

Nevertheless, the story does not end at Piraeus. Other European seaports also face increasing Chinese influence. The EU's largest seaport and 'the most important port for the continent of Europe' (Shi & Xing 2015:116), the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, is no exception. Currently, three major Chinese shipping companies have a presence at the port of Rotterdam: COSCO Shipping, China Merchants Port (*zhaoshang ju konggu gangkou* 招商局控股港口), and Hutchison Ports (*heji gangkou* 和记港口), two of them Chinese state-owned companies belonging to the 'national champions', while the third is a Hong Kong-based enterprise.

Being Hong Kong-based, some would argue that Hutchison Ports should not be understood as a Chinese company and therefore does not fit into this geopolitical analysis. Although Hong Kong remains a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC and as such holds certain semi-autonomous liberties, recent events in the SAR have shown that Hong Kong is not as independent from China as some in the West had previously thought (Au 2020:vii; Van Dijk 2020:117; Bush

2016:1). Furthermore, the new Chinese economic model under president Xi Jinping 习近平, dubbed ‘Xinomics’ by *The Economist*, entails that the difference between private companies and the Chinese state is increasingly blurring (Economist 2020). In short, it would be naïve to omit Hutchison Ports in the analysis of growing Chinese influence on core EU infrastructural sites.

Hutchison Ports, operating the ECT Delta and ECT Euromax terminals, operates roughly half of all the container transshipment at the port of Rotterdam (Van der Putten 2019:20). This percentage is set to increase, as Hutchison Ports is currently in the process of taking over the APMT Rotterdam terminal from Danish shipping giant Maersk (Mackor 2020). With three major Chinese terminal operating companies having a significant presence at the port of Rotterdam that is increasing, and roughly one in four containers arriving in Rotterdam originating in China (Economist 2016), it is hard to overlook the growing Chinese influence on the largest seaport of the EU.

### Conclusion

Will a concession like Piraeus happen again? Probably not, interviewed EU officials have asserted. However, if southern or eastern EU member states suffer a new sovereign debt crisis – for example following the current global Covid-19 pandemic – how will the EU behave? Will austerity measures again be put in place, allowing third states such as China to step in and concede or otherwise take over EU critical infrastructure? What can the EU do to counter such developments?

One measure put in place to counter the growing Chinese influence over the EU’s critical infrastructure is a new screening mechanism, proposed by the European Commission. This Investment Screening Regulation, fully applying from mid-October 2020, provides a way to critically scrutinise FDI before allowing it to take place (European Commission 2019). However, the screening of investments is a member state responsibility, and it is questionable whether this will form a strong enough measure to successfully counter Chinese FDI in the EU’s critical infrastructure. As an official at the European Commission told me, ‘the screening mechanism is a good stepping-stone. But which specific measures have we taken in response to these large-scale Chinese investments in major EU seaports? None, really’ (Anonymous 3, 2020).

We should see these developments in context. The concession of the port of Piraeus might indeed remain a unique case, and Chinese state-owned ‘national champion’ companies such as COSCO Shipping still play a subordinate role in the EU’s top three container ports of Rotterdam, Hamburg,

and Antwerp. Nonetheless, their role is growing, and the difference between Chinese private and state companies is increasingly fading. What if Chinese enterprises concede a whole network of major seaports in the EU? Scholars like Russel and Berger (2020:8) have, indeed, pointed to the strategic importance of ports in ‘weaponising’ the BRI.

What has become clear is that through COSCO Shipping, China has established a degree of authority within a key EU infrastructural site, which has important implications for European strategic autonomy. At the same time, Chinese presence at the EU’s largest seaport is also growing. If the EU is serious about viewing China as a systemic rival and about its own ambitions of strategic autonomy, it would be wise to counter these developments at all scales of governance, to prevent concessions like the one in Piraeus from happening again and to retain strategic autonomy in the EU’s foreign policy.

This calls for increased integration of EU policymaking (Leonard & Shapiro 2020:3). As an EEAS official told me in a private interview: ‘many answers to the Chinese question are not in EU-China relations, but in the internal relations of the EU’ (Anonymous 1, 2020). Chinese shipping companies are increasing their presence in major EU seaports including Rotterdam, but also Antwerp, Duisburg, and Zeebrugge. If the EU wants to continue to ‘call the tune’, it would be wise for European policymakers to take a close look at the recent history of Piraeus and the question of who they allow to ‘pay the piper’.

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