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THE CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE EUROPEAN PORT SECTOR

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Since the 2000s, and particularly since 2013, China has been pursuing a global strategy of investment in port infrastructure. This strategy of influence is part of China's broader ambition for global maritime expansion and is often linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. Its objectives are to secure both supply routes and commercial outlets, to project economic power, and to strengthen China's geopolitical footprint worldwide. Researchers Jérôme Doyon and Juliette Genevaz describe China's ambition as follows:

“At the end of his final presidential term in 2012, Hu Jintao set the goal of making the PRC a ‘great maritime power,’ a program that Xi Jinping adopted as his own when he came to power a few weeks later.”¹

Due to its position at the crossroads of international trade, its rich and developed market, and its dense network of port infrastructure, Europe is a strategic area of prime importance for China. It should be noted that China is the European Union's leading partner for imports of goods. Chinese interest in the European economic area has been further renewed by the fact that “tensions between the United States and China have led to a significant decline in American imports from the global manufacturing hub”². Thus, in 2023, according to figures published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China³, the European Union became China's second-largest trading partner by value (USD 501.2 billion in exports), behind ASEAN (USD 523.7 billion) but ahead of the United States (USD 500.3 billion) (see *Annex 1* and *Annex 2*). In this context, and given the central role of maritime transit in global trade, it seems logical that China has deployed a strategy of influence targeting the European port sector. In order to strengthen its foothold there, it has several strategic levers at its disposal, including port concessions, strategic acquisitions and equity investments, infrastructure investments and diplomatic influence. China's strategy mobilizes state-owned companies (such as China COSCO Shipping and China Merchants Port), financial institutions (such as the China Development Bank and the Silk Road Fund) and the Chinese authorities, which support these investments through active economic diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the growing Chinese presence has raised concerns in Europe. It indeed raises questions regarding European sovereignty and foreign political influence, economic dependence, the widening of a trade deficit largely favorable to China, and strategic security issues related to critical infrastructure. A European resolution on the security implications of Chinese influence on critical infrastructure in the European Union (2023/2072(INI)), adopted by the Parliament by 565 votes to 26 with 31 abstentions, states:

“China's party-driven political system and economy often require private companies to align their commercial interests with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) including its military activities, repression, influence and political interference activities. [...] The report stressed the repeated warnings by intelligence agencies against the risks of economic dependence, caused by the espionage and sabotage economic presence of entities from certain non-EU countries, in particular China, in critical infrastructure and strategic sectors across the EU. Members are, in this regard, concerned by the political pressure asserted in the approval of specific Chinese

¹ DOYON, Jérôme et GENEVAZ, Juliette, « Chapitre 1. Puissance chinoise et Indo-Pacifique », in *L'indo-Pacifique*, s. dir. Delphine Alles et Christophe Jaffrelot, Paris, 2024, Presses de Sciences Po L'enjeu mondial, p.17-33.
DOI : 10.3917/scpo.alles.2024.01.0019

² GAUDIAUT, Tristan, « Qui sont les principaux partenaires commerciaux de la Chine ? », Statista, 2024.
URL : <https://fr.statista.com/infographie/30955/principaux-partenaires-commerciaux-chine-exportations/>

³ Ibid.

investments into critical infrastructure, as in the case of the German government's decision to agree to the acquisition of a stake at the port of Hamburg by COSCO, contrary to the advice of the competent institutions.”⁴

Yet, despite this assessment and the ambition to establish a common position, each Member State's perception of Chinese investment remains fragmented, and the European bloc continues to suffer from a lack of genuine strategic coordination. The frequent divergence of Member States' economic interests makes the response uneven and underscores the need for stronger coordination to deploy appropriate legislative tools and complete the development of still embryonic projects promoted by the European Union. This study note aims to analyze the economic, geostrategic and security implications of China's influence in the European port sector. How does Chinese expansion in European ports reflect a global power strategy, while posing risks in terms of economic sovereignty, strategic security and cohesion within the European Union? In particular, it will examine the forms of its influence, the (potential) economic opportunities it entails, the nature of the strategic risks for Europe and possible responses to strengthen European sovereignty.

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As mentioned above, the expansion of Chinese influence in the European port sector is part of a broader geo-economic and geopolitical strategy. For China, this means strengthening its maritime potential in a world where maritime transport shapes the dynamics of globalization, securing its trade flows and supporting Chinese exports, diversifying its supplies, strengthening the integration of its logistics chains and extending its influence over major strategic routes in order to consolidate its position in global trade. China's growing influence in ports fits squarely at the intersection of two of its closely intertwined strategies: establishing itself as a leading maritime power by 2049⁵ and rolling out the Belt and Road Initiative. The French geographer and diplomat Michel Foucher already noted in 2017:

“China's port construction activity, both domestically and globally, is undeniably impressive. 58 % of the world's top fifty container ports are Chinese-owned or have received Chinese investment, and 39 % percent of maritime trade through the world's top ten ports is operated by Chinese firms.”⁶

In recent years, China has further consolidated its strategic presence in ports through a massive and targeted intensification of its investments, acquisitions and equity holdings (see *Appendix 3*). In Asia, it controls the port of Hambantota (Sri Lanka), is developing the port of Gwadar (Pakistan) and is financing projects in Chittagong (Bangladesh), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) and Malacca (Malaysia). In Latin America, it is developing strategic hubs such as Chancay (Peru), which the Peruvian government intends to present as “the Singapore of Latin America”⁷. In Africa, it is strengthening its presence in Djibouti,

⁴ European Parliament, *The security and defence implications of China influence on critical infrastructure in the European Union*, 2023/2072(INI). URL : [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2023/2072\(INI\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2023/2072(INI))

⁵ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025 URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

⁶ FOUCHER, Michel, « L'Euro-Asie selon Pékin », *Politique étrangère*, 2017/1 Printemps, p. 109. I translate. DOI : 10.3917/pe.171.0099.

⁷ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025 URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

Mombasa (Kenya), Tanger Med (Morocco) and Port Said (Egypt). In Europe, as we shall see later, it controls Piraeus (Greece) and holds majority stakes in Zeebrugge (Belgium) and Valencia (Spain). The list is not exhaustive (see *Appendix 4*). In 2022, Chinese companies owned or operated terminals in 96 ports in 53 countries⁸. China's port strategy is based on the coordination of several levers of influence, integrated into a geo-economic and geopolitical vision that is both global and ambitious, mobilising a wide range of actors. As Mathieu Duchâtel, President of the Asia Programme at the Institut Montaigne, notes:

“Chinese port investments abroad have mostly taken the form of minority stakes.”⁹

In 2008, COSCO achieved its goal of operating a port in Europe by securing, against the backdrop of the global economic crisis, a 35-year lease to manage Terminals II and III at the port of Piraeus in Athens¹⁰ “for an initial payment of €50 million and significant investments aimed at increasing the port's capacity”¹¹. COSCO therefore aims to turn the port of Piraeus into a transshipment hub in the Eastern Mediterranean capable of handling the largest container ships, a major center for the cruise and feeder shipping industries, and repair docks for ships over 80,000 tons.¹² Since then, COSCO, which is at the forefront of China's projection strategy, has increased its investments in European ports (see *Appendix 5*). For example, the company holds a 40% stake in the port of Vado Ligure (Italy)¹³, 35% of the Euromax terminal in Rotterdam (Netherlands)¹⁴, and 25% of the port of Hamburg (Germany)¹⁵. Meanwhile, China Merchants Port acquired a 49% stake in 2013 in Terminal Link, a subsidiary of the French group CMA-CGM and operator of container terminals in Marseille, Malta, and Tangier¹⁶. The Grand Port Maritime de Marseille (GPMM), a key hub for submarine cable networks with significant land reserves, has established a partnership with Shanghai Port¹⁷. ZPMC (Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries Company Limited) is the main supplier of quay cranes to European ports¹⁸.

⁸ JÜRIS, Franck, *Étude réalisée pour la sous-commission SEDE - Security implications of China-owned critical infrastructure in the European Union*, European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, Brussels, 2023, p.17

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702592_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA(2023)702592_EN.pdf)

⁹ DUCHATEL, Mathieu, « Investissements portuaires entre commerce et intérêts de puissance », *China Trends by Institut Montaigne*, 2019. I translate.

URL : <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/china-trends-2-investissements-portuaires-entre-commerce-et-interets-de-puissance>

¹⁰ MARDELL, Jacob, *MERICS Global China Inc. Tracker*, MERICS, 2021. URL: <https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-global-china-inc-tracker-0>

¹¹ FABRE, Guilhem, « Les nouvelles routes de la soie et la Grèce, tête de pont de la présence chinoise en Europe », *ILCEA*, 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/7492> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.7492>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ European Parliament, *Chinese strategic interests in European maritime ports*, 2023

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739367/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)739367_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739367/EPRS_ATA(2023)739367_EN.pdf)

¹⁴ CLAVERIE, Benjamin, « La Belt and Road Initiative : l'Europe, terminus du « rêve chinois » ?, in *Une justice pénale internationale encore à venir*, », s. dir. Robert Chaouad , IRIS éditions, 2019

URL : <https://www.iris-france.org/ris/la-belt-and-road-initiative-leurope-terminus-du-reve-chinois/>

¹⁵ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », *Le Monde*, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

¹⁶ CASTETS, Rémi, « Stratégies chinoises sur les rives Nord de la Méditerranée », *Revue Défense Nationale*, 2019/7 N° 822, p.126-129. DOI : 10.3917/rdna.822.0126.

¹⁷ Ibid.

However, China, through public or ‘proto-public’ companies and conglomerates such as COSCO Shipping, Hutchison Port Holdings and China Merchants Group¹⁹, is becoming increasingly active in acquiring majority stakes in strategic ports²⁰. In Europe, while Greece was under intense pressure to repay its debt to the European Union and the International Monetary Fund²¹, COSCO purchased 67% of the capital of the Piraeus Port Authority (PPA) from the government. The company now controls 100% of the port's operations²². It also owns 85% of Zeebrugge (Belgium) and 51% of Noatum Ports, which operates the ports of Bilbao, Valencia and the dry ports of Zaragoza and Madrid (Spain)²³. In addition to its substantial equity investments, China has engaged in financing port infrastructure (greenfield investments)²⁴, logistical partnerships, diplomatic influence, as well as acquiring management rights and concession agreements. Its port strategy is particularly strong in Europe (see *Appendix 5*), a strategic market for its commercial outlets, where China seeks to further expand its export penetration, especially amid the ongoing trade tensions with the United States. Europe is identified as the primary terminus of the Belt and Road Initiative, although not all countries benefiting from Chinese port investments are official members. China's strategy notably aims to secure access to the Mediterranean and the North Sea; this involves controlling key choke points and developing a network of infrastructure along European coasts to support the distribution of Chinese exports into European hinterlands. China is estimated to manage around 10% of European port capacity. At the same time, despite facing sometimes intense internal competition, China is modernizing and expanding its ports to support its export potential. Its strategy adopts a multidimensional, highly geopolitical approach, involving a variety of actors with varying degrees of alignment to the central state, and structured through vertical and horizontal integration of value chains. The example of COSCO Shipping is particularly illustrative in this regard:

“COSCO’s dominance in maritime logistics stems from its complete horizontal and vertical integration, including the ownership and operation of shipping lines, carriers, specialized vessels, terminals, shipyards, and the management of supply chain logistics.”²⁵

¹⁸ GHIETTI, Francesca et al, *Étude réalisée pour la commission TRAN – Investissements chinois dans les infrastructures maritimes européennes* (résumé analytique), European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels, 2023.

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747278/IPOL_STU\(2023\)747278\(SUM01\)_FR.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747278/IPOL_STU(2023)747278(SUM01)_FR.pdf)

¹⁹ Here is how Jean-Michel Bezat presents the main Chinese operators in his article (Op. Cit.):

- Hutchison Holdings: a company founded by Hong Kong business magnate Li Ka-shing (96 years old). While not directly linked to the Chinese government, its Hong Kong base imposes certain constraints. Operates 36 terminals.
- China Merchants Port: a state-owned port company, now listed in Hong Kong but under the direct control of Beijing. Its minority partnership with France’s CMA-CGM (49-51 joint venture) through Terminal Link provides it with a global footprint. Operates 28 terminals.
- Cosco: the world’s fourth-largest shipping company, based in Shanghai, serving as Beijing’s instrument in global trade. Operates 20 terminals.

²⁰ Among the five ports in which COSCO holds a majority stake, three are located in Europe.

²¹ MARDELL, Jacob, *MERICS Global China Inc. Tracker*, MERICS, 2021. URL: <https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-global-china-inc-tracker-0>

²² BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », *Le Monde*, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

²³ DUCHATEL, Mathieu, « Investissements portuaires entre commerce et intérêts de puissance », *China Trends by Institut Montaigne*, 2019. URL : <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/china-trends-2-investissements-portuaires-entre-commerce-et-interets-de-puissance>

²⁴ Ibid.

Does Chinese influence in European ports represent a real economic opportunity for them? It seems that ports where Chinese companies have acquired stakes have seen a significant increase in traffic. Since 2016, the port of Piraeus, managed by COSCO, has seen its capacity increase sixfold and its global ranking rise from 93rd to 36th²⁶. This is primarily because COSCO is a major player in China-Europe maritime transport and, as such, a key user of the port, but also because the Chinese giant has managed to mobilize the commitment of the members of the Ocean Alliance, of which it is a part²⁷, and to attract leading multinationals, such as Hewlett-Packard, to relocate a significant part of their activity to Piraeus²⁸. Similarly, in 2018, COSCO, which owns 51% of both ports, enjoyed 558% growth in traffic in Bilbao and Valencia²⁹.

Yet, Chinese influence in the European port sector raises several concerns regarding the sovereignty, cohesion, and security of the European bloc, as well as the potential deepening of the imbalance in Sino-European relations. As Emmanuel Grasland observes in his article « L'appétit chinois pour les ports européens suscite des inquiétudes croissantes » (*“China’s Appetite for European Ports Is Fueling Growing Concerns”*):

“The question, then, is whether a country can afford to enter into this kind of partnership from a security standpoint. A port is a window to the world and a tool of prosperity.”³⁰

These questions are all the more pressing given that, for China, “defending economic interests and projecting power go hand in hand”³¹. China closely intertwines the economic, security and geopolitical dimensions of its global strategy, as evidenced by its ambition to become the world's leading power by 2049. Closely linked to the central government's national security objectives, Chinese companies with capital holdings or port concessions can be levers of economic and diplomatic influence. However, ports are among the most sensitive types of infrastructure. This presence raises questions about the sovereignty of host states, which are particularly exposed to the risk of access restrictions or pressure in the event of geopolitical tensions.

²⁵ DUCHATEL, Mathieu, quoted by BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025. I translate.

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ With CMA CGM, Evergreen and OOCL.

²⁸ FABRE, Guilhem, « Les nouvelles routes de la soie et la Grèce, tête de pont de la présence chinoise en Europe », *ILCEA*, 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/7492> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.7492>

²⁹ CASTETS, Rémi, « Stratégies chinoises sur les rives Nord de la Méditerranée », *Revue Défense Nationale*, 2019/7 N° 822, p.126-129. DOI : 10.3917/rdna.822.0126.

³⁰ GRASLAND, Emmanuel, « L'appétit chinois pour les ports européens suscite des inquiétudes croissantes », *IFRI*, 06 mai 2024. I translate.

URL : <https://www.ifri.org/fr/presse-contenus-repris-sur-le-site/lappetit-chinois-pour-les-ports-europeens-suscite-des>

³¹ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

The journalist adds that this “belief [is] illustrated by Huawei in telecoms, CATL in batteries and State Grid in electricity networks”.

It also increases commercial dependence and could facilitate intelligence, espionage or maritime projection activities. The risks of espionage and intelligence gathering are heightened when Chinese commercial assets are located near NATO naval bases or ports that have signed logistical support agreements for European or American military forces³². Indeed:

“COSCO aligns itself with national security objectives by integrating civilian maritime assets into military operations, supporting the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), and strengthening China’s influence over major trade routes”³³

And:

“Chinese shipping companies are becoming a branch of the PLA, with missile launchers being tested on container ships”³⁴

For example, Hutchison Holdings has recently strengthened its presence in a 20-hectare terminal in Gdynia (Poland), for which the Hong Kong-based company holds a lease until 2104. This situation has raised security concerns in Europe, heightened by the Chinese Communist Party’s growing control over Hong Kong’s legal system. Indeed, Gdynia also serves as a key logistical hub for the defense of NATO’s eastern flank³⁵. The intertwining of China’s civilian and military ambitions therefore makes it unsurprising that, in early 2025, the United States added COSCO and CIMC (China International Marine Containers) to its blacklist of companies to monitor³⁶. China has been pursuing a strategy of civil-military fusion since the late 1990s, elevated to a national priority in 2015³⁷. It was reaffirmed by Xi Jinping during the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017. This approach aims to enhance the competitiveness of both civilian and military sectors through the development of dual-use technologies. Chinese authorities present this strategy as “necessary for the logistical support of China’s long distance naval operations.”³⁸ In practice, recently built commercial vessels can be mobilized for military purposes. Experts also question the possibility of military activities in some of the deep-water ports invested in by China (in particular, those related to the refueling of military vessels).

³² JÜRIS, Franck, *Étude réalisée pour la sous-commission SEDE - Security implications of China-owned critical infrastructure in the European Union*, European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, Brussels, 2023, p.18.

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702592_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA(2023)702592_EN.pdf)

³³ DUCHATEL, Mathieu, quoted by BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025. I translate.

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

³⁴ ORAIN, Arnaud quoted by BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

³⁵ JÜRIS, Franck, *Étude réalisée pour la sous-commission SEDE - Security implications of China-owned critical infrastructure in the European Union*, European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, Brussels, 2023, p.18.

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702592_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA(2023)702592_EN.pdf)

³⁶ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

³⁷ Centre de documentation de l’École militaire, *Chine*, 2022, p. 13.

URL : https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dems/Synthese_CHINE_CDEM_2022.pdf

³⁸ JÜRIS, Franck, *Étude réalisée pour la sous-commission SEDE - Security implications of China-owned critical infrastructure in the European Union*, European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, Brussels, 2023, p.17

URL : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702592_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702592/EXPO_IDA(2023)702592_EN.pdf)

As Jean-Michel Bezat points out:

“In times of crisis, commercial ports can quickly be transformed into bases for naval power projection; in times of peace, these increasingly digitalized infrastructures become targets for sabotage or espionage.”³⁹

Nevertheless, as Eugénie Davi reminds us, “one should not give in to the fantasy of a systematic and dangerous Chinese militarization,”⁴⁰ since, with the exception of Djibouti, no port has an agreement authorizing non-commercial use. While the possibility of military utilization in times of crisis is plausible, it does not serve China’s image in times of peace. However, it remains highly likely that these increasingly digitalized ports may be used for espionage purposes or as levers of political influence by China. This is why COSCO’s proposed acquisition of a 35% stake in the Tollerort terminal in Hamburg sparked strong opposition from diplomats, intelligence services, and the European Commission, who feared its geopolitical and security implications⁴¹. Despite the reluctance, COSCO ultimately secured a 24.9% stake in the terminal in 2021. Chinese involvement in the European port sector has not only significantly strengthened China’s maritime economy, but also serves as a lever for geopolitical projection and contributes to the Asian giant’s ambition to build a global transport network. There is a risk of strategic dependence linked to the concentration of Chinese influence in sensitive infrastructure, — foremost among which are ports — especially since, since 2019, the European Commission has described China as a systemic rival. Furthermore, as noted in a study on Chinese investment in European maritime infrastructure commissioned by the European Parliament’s TRAN Committee in 2023:

“Chinese state-owned enterprises involved in European maritime infrastructure benefit from a protected advantage in the domestic market and a vertically integrated value chain under the ownership of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), which facilitates the expansion of anti-competitive market shares in Europe and the risks associated with common market dependence on Chinese suppliers.”⁴²

The unbalanced trade flows in ports controlled by Chinese operators reinforce European markets’ dependence on Chinese suppliers and accentuate the strategic vulnerability of the countries concerned. Once again, Greece is a prime example in Europe: the country imports ten times more from China than it exports there⁴³ (see *Appendix 6*). Sophie Boisseau du Rocher and Emmanuel Dubois de Prisque do not hesitate to refer to the China-centric Belt and Road Initiative as the “nouvelles routes de l’entre-soie(e)”⁴⁴ or the “new roads of dependence”⁴⁵.

³⁹ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025

URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

⁴⁰ DAVI, Eugénie, *Sécuriser les Nouvelles Routes de la Soie : quelles implications militaires ?*, Observatoire français Nouvelles Routes de la Soie, 2020. URL : <https://observatoirefrnrs.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Securiser-les-Nouvelles-Routes-de-la-Soie.pdf>

⁴¹ BEZAT, Jean-Michel, « Comment la Chine tisse un réseau portuaire mondial », Le Monde, 15th February 2025

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⁴² GHIRETTI, Francesca et al, *Étude réalisée pour la commission TRAN – Investissements chinois dans les infrastructures maritimes européennes* (résumé analytique), European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels, 2023. I translate.

⁴³ FABRE, Guilhem, « Les nouvelles routes de la soie et la Grèce, tête de pont de la présence chinoise en Europe », *ILCEA*, 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/7492> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.7492>

Similarly, in 2018, Emmanuel Macron symbolically remarked in Xi'an, the historic starting point of the Silk Roads:

“I am simply saying that, in essence, these roads are shared. And if they are roads, they cannot be one-sided.”⁴⁶

The economic dependence created by Chinese investments is compounded by the risk of indirect political influence — what Guilhem Fabre refers to as “political dividends.”⁴⁷ As early as 2016, Greece, joined by Hungary and Croatia, opposed a European declaration condemning China’s militarization and annexation of islands in the South China Sea⁴⁸. In 2017, it blocked a European resolution on China’s human rights record at the United Nations⁴⁹. These actions illustrate how Chinese economic entrenchment can shape political decisions, reshape diplomatic balances, weaken EU cohesion on strategic issues, and undermine its ability to speak with a unified voice on global matters.

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Faced with (among other factors) increased Chinese investment in port infrastructure, European Union institutions have stepped up measures to strengthen supply chain security and protect critical infrastructure from the aforementioned risks. Among these initiatives, the Regulation on the screening of foreign direct investments (2019/452, which entered into force on 11 October 2020⁵⁰, see Annex 7) was a significant step forward, as it formalized the need for coordinated reinforcement of controls on investments that could affect security, public order and national and European strategic interests. However, a special report by the European Court of Auditors notes in 2023:

“Nevertheless, significant limitations remain at the EU-27 level, undermining the effectiveness and efficiency of the framework when it comes to preventing risks to security and public order. Six Member States have no screening mechanism in place. Moreover, there are differences regarding the scope, coverage in terms of the definition of critical sectors, and the understanding of key concepts. As a result, multiple blind spots persist, preventing effective protection across the entire EU.”⁵¹

Although the European regulation on foreign investment screening formalized the need for strategic coordination between Member States, it nevertheless has several limitations. It provides a permissive framework rather than a genuine harmonization tool: it does not give the Commission the power to prohibit or impose conditions on investment transactions “even if EU interests are at stake”⁵², nor does it allow Member States to block or be informed of strategic FDI in other countries. Furthermore, the

⁴⁴ BOISSEAU DU ROCHER, Sophie et DUBOIS DE PRISQUE, Emmanuel, *La Chine e(s)t le monde. Essai sur la sino-mondialisation*, Odile Jacob, 2019, p. 61

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 83

⁴⁶ MACRON, Emmanuel, Speech in Xi'an, 8 January 2018, quoted by BOISSEAU DU ROCHER, Sophie et DUBOIS DE PRISQUE, Emmanuel, *La Chine e(s)t le monde. Essai sur la sino-mondialisation*, Odile Jacob, 2019, p. 91. I translate.

⁴⁷ FABRE, Guilhem, « Les nouvelles routes de la soie et la Grèce, tête de pont de la présence chinoise en Europe », *ILCEA*, 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/7492> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.7492>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ European Court of Auditors, *Filtrage des investissements directs étrangers dans l'UE*, rapport spécial 27/2023, audit dir. by Mihails Kozlovs, p. 12. URL : https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2023-27/SR-2023-27_FR.pdf

⁵¹ Ibid. I translate.

⁵² Ibid., p. 20

diversity of interpretations of the criteria of ‘public order’ or ‘strategic asset’ complicates the uniform application of the regulation (see Annex 8 and Annex 9). Its effectiveness is also undermined by the risk of circumvention and the misuse of security criteria for protectionist purposes⁵³. For now, despite Europe’s increasing vigilance, divergences among Member States — skillfully exploited by China — hinder the development of a coherent, effective, and unified strategic response. The restrictiveness of screening mechanisms varies from country to country, creating systemic vulnerabilities since issues related to strategic assets have implications for the entire bloc. A typology of investment restrictiveness can be established according to the following criteria:

“The most restrictive countries are characterized by (i) commercial exposure to China, (ii) significant investment in R&D and a high number of patents in advanced technology sectors, making them more vulnerable to the risk of technology transfers, and (iii) greater geopolitical distance from China.”⁵⁴

In the port sector, China is skilfully exploiting divisions within the EU and the variability of national regulations by pitting geographically close ports against each other. Among the European countries open to Chinese initiatives are Portugal, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia⁵⁵. Italy, initially enthusiastic and the first G7 country to commit to Belt and Road Initiative projects (Trieste, Genoa, etc.), adopted a more cautious stance and withdrew from the initiative in 2023, disappointed with the economic benefits.

“The reception of the BRI reveals the current divisions among EU Member States, once again following a dual typology.”⁵⁶

Indeed, China favors a bilateral approach when negotiating Belt and Road Initiative investments (as exemplified by the “16+1” framework for Central and Eastern Europe), while also investing in ports of countries not officially part of the initiative. France, although generally reluctant to accept Chinese investments in strategic sectors and equipped with advanced screening mechanisms (see *Appendix 8* and *Appendix 9*), still hosts substantial minority stakes held by China in several ports: China Merchants Port owns 24.5% of the Terminal de Méditerranée, 25% of the Grand Ouest terminal, and 24.5% of Terminal France and Terminal Nord. The bilateral framework allows China to leverage competition among European territories and actors, taking advantage of legislative variations to optimize its strategic benefits and economic-geopolitical projection. Specifically, the opacity and heterogeneity of national legal frameworks regarding foreign investment complicate the establishment of a coherent European response to China’s port strategy.

So what alternative is there to guarantee the sovereignty, security and independence of European value chains and port infrastructure? As an open market, the European Union must balance the protection of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ BENCIVELLI, Lorenzo et al., *Who’s Afraid of Foreign Investment Screening?*, Banque de France, 2023. I translate.
URL: https://www.banque-france.fr/system/files/2023-11/DT927_0.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ CLAVERIE, Benjamin, « La Belt and Road Initiative : l’Europe, terminus du « rêve chinois » ?, in *Une justice pénale internationale encore à venir*, s. dir. Robert Chaouad, IRIS éditions, 2019. I translate.
URL : <https://www.iris-france.org/ris/la-belt-and-road-initiative-leurope-terminus-du-reve-chinois/>

its strategic assets with the openness of investment under fair competition rules and economic attractiveness. While China is a systemic rival, it is also an indispensable trading partner whose logistics and port expertise is widely recognized. The Regulation on the Screening of Foreign Direct Investments (2019/452) represented an important first step, but it remains insufficient to fully address the challenges at hand, in part because its application varies widely among Member States and does not allow for a truly coordinated European strategy. It is therefore necessary to establish a clear and comprehensive list of strategic assets, particularly including port infrastructures, and — as proposed in a new regulation aiming to repeal the 2019/452 framework — to introduce “an instrument to assess and counter the impact of foreign subsidies on fair competition within the internal market”⁵⁷, similar to the controls already applied to state aid within the EU, and to incorporate reciprocity clauses as far as possible. Furthermore, developing Global Gateway projects in Europe (although still largely undefined) could help modernize port infrastructures, adapt them to market demand, and reduce dependence on external investments. The adoption of strict European standards in cybersecurity and digital sovereignty would also ensure better control over port infrastructures. Finally, fostering enhanced cooperation through alliances among key European maritime actors and European public-private partnerships in critical infrastructure would contribute to improving sector competitiveness and ensuring greater strategic independence.

⁵⁷ European Commission, *Proposition de règlement du Parlement européen et du Conseil relatif au filtrage des investissements étrangers dans l'Union et abrogeant le règlement (UE) 2019/452 du Parlement européen et du Conseil*, 2024/0017 (COD), 2024, p. 5, I translate.

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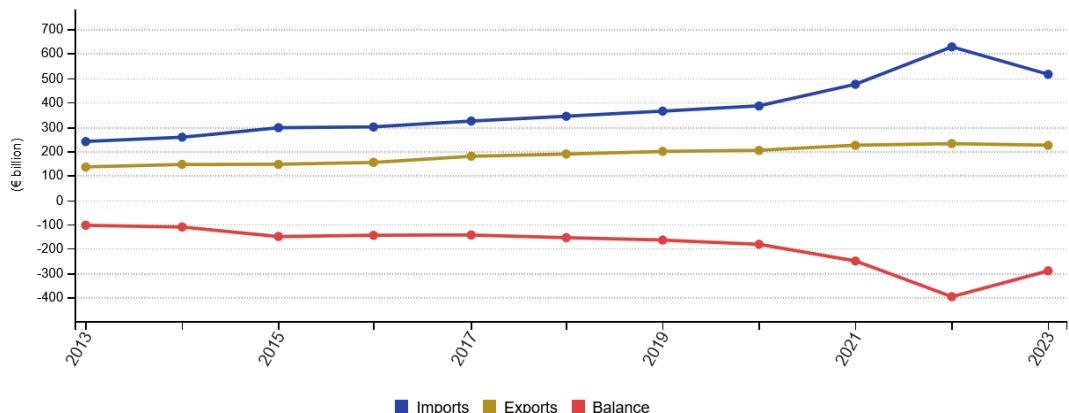
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Evolution of Goods Trade Between the EU and China, 2013–2023

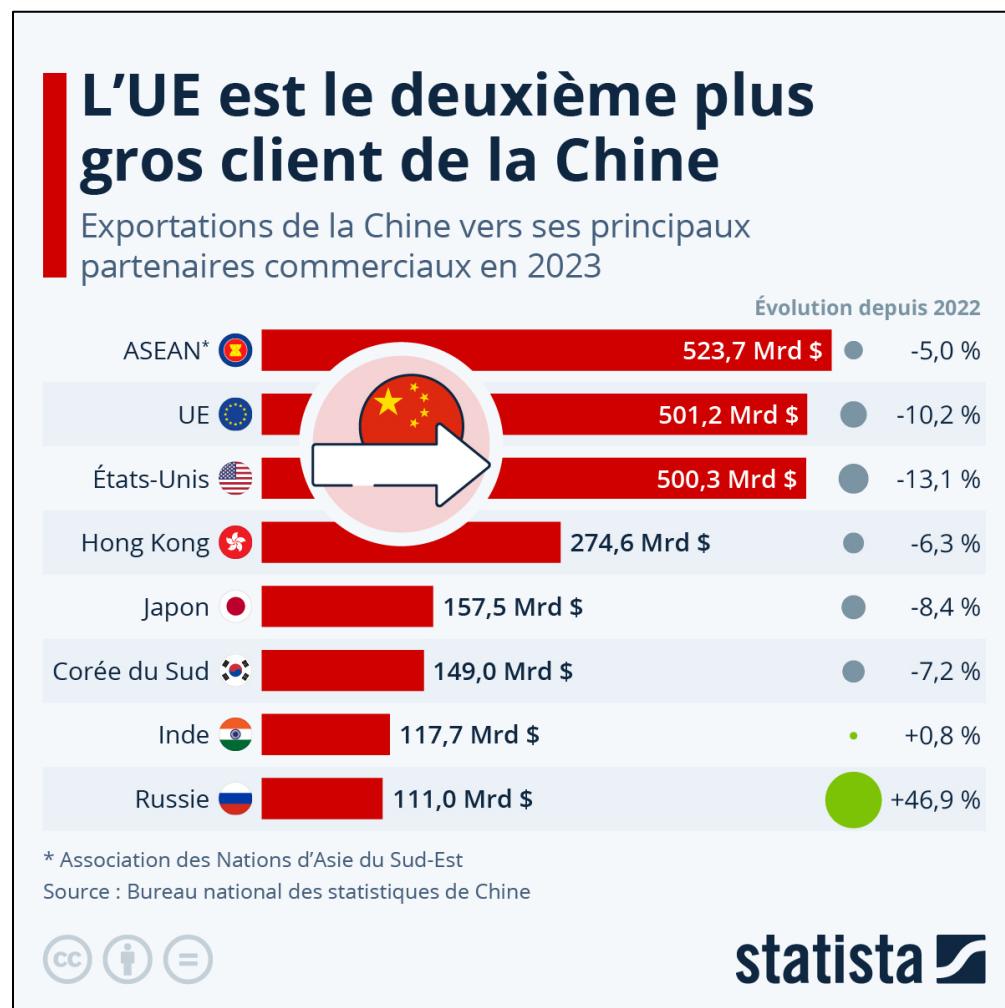


Source: Eurostat (online data code: ext_st_eu27_2020sito)

eurostat

Source : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&action=statexp-seat&lang=fr

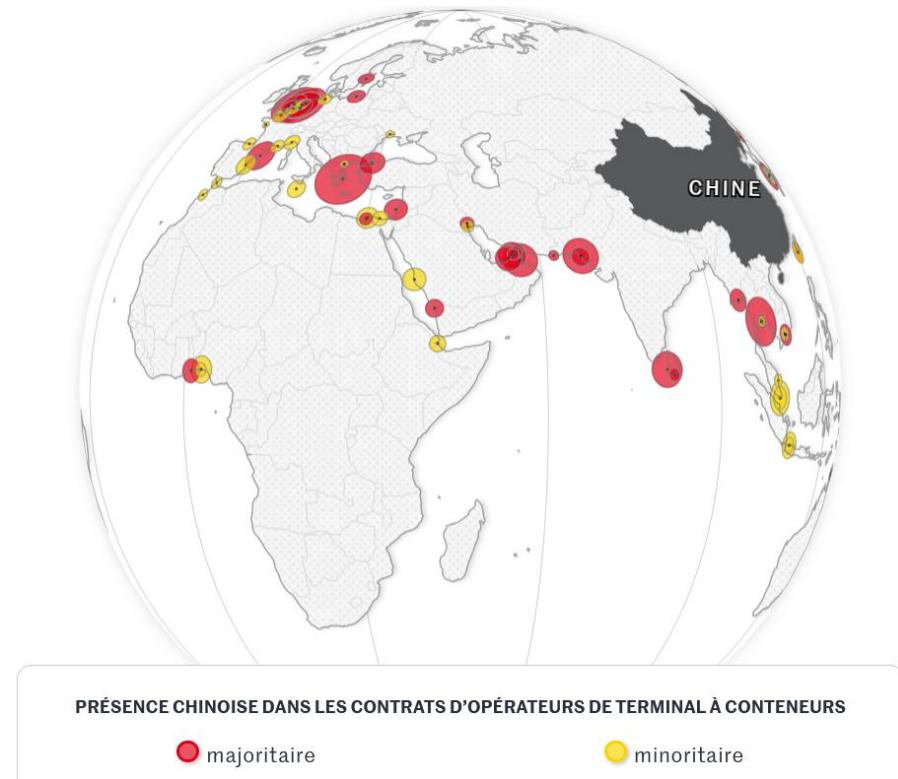
Appendix 2 - China's Exports to Its Main Trading Partners in 2023



statista

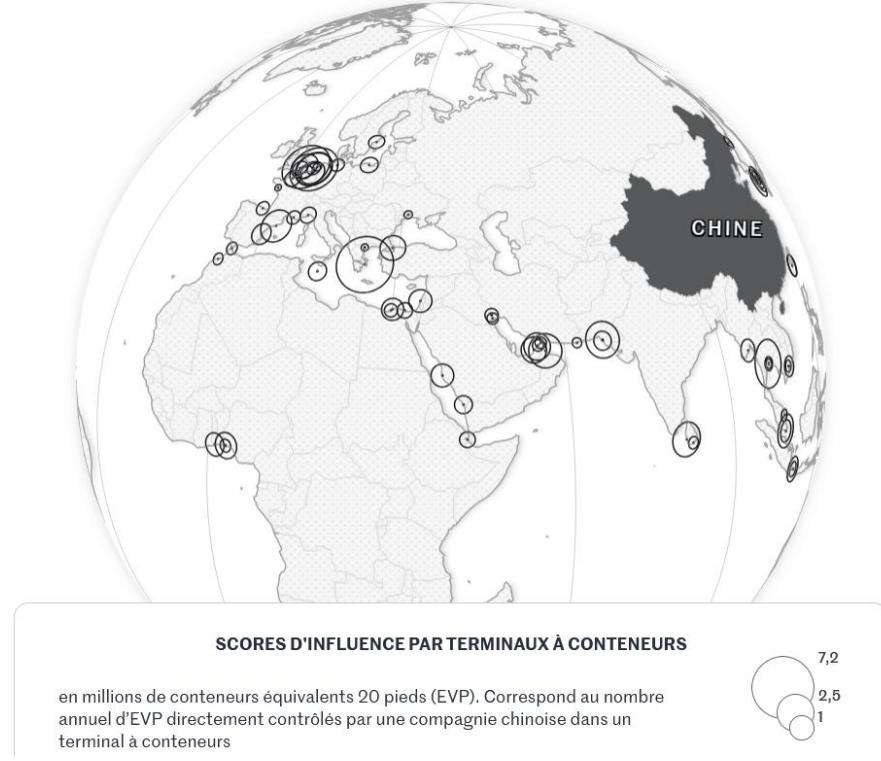
Source : <https://fr.statista.com/infographie/30955/principaux-partenaires-commerciaux-chine-exportations/>

Appendix 3 - Chinese Presence in Container Terminal Operator Contracts



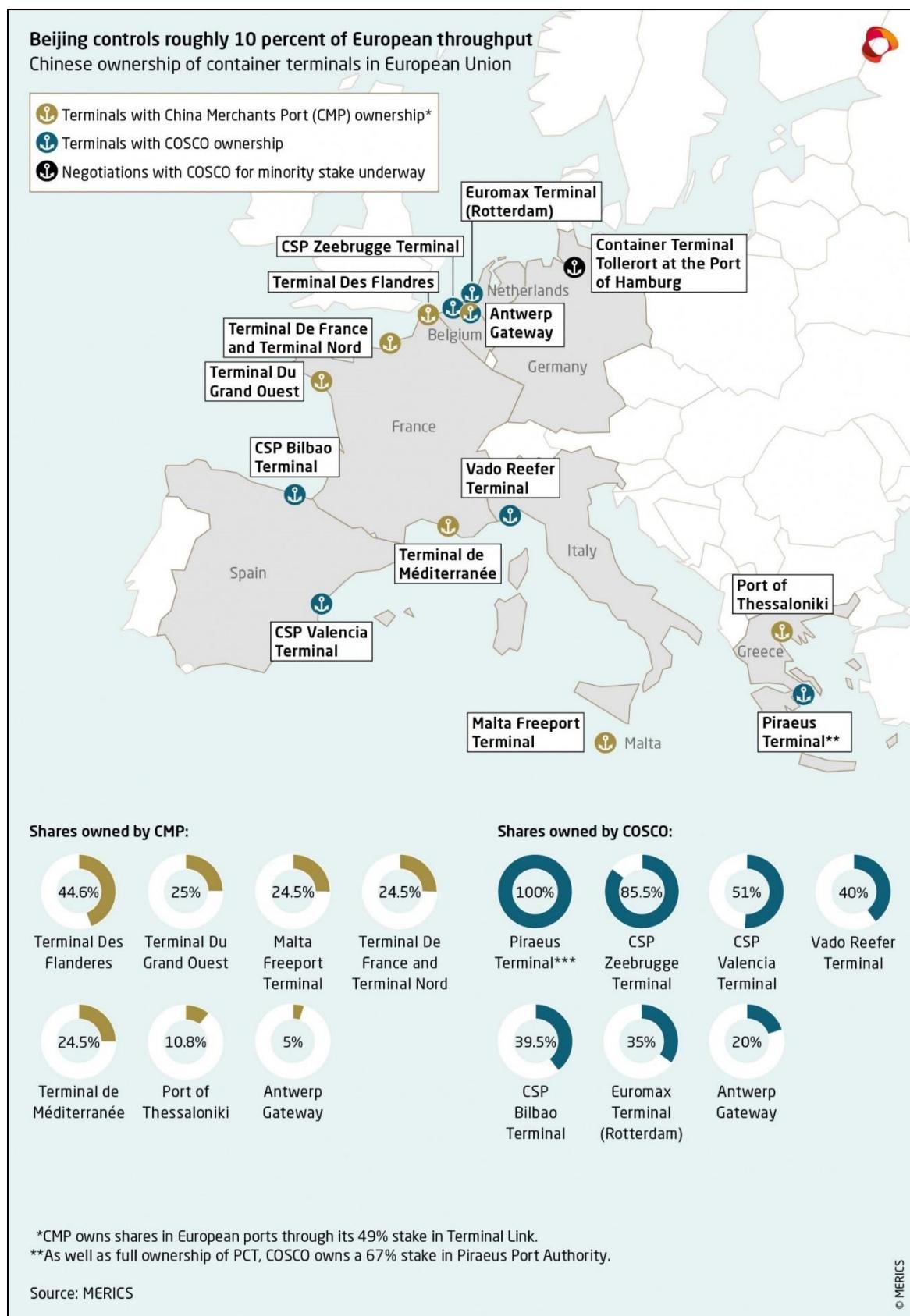
Source : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

Appendix 4 - Chinese Influence Scores by Container Terminals



Source : https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/15/la-chine-tisse-un-reseau-portuaire-mondial_6547389_3234.html

Appendix 5 - Presence of COSCO and CMP in European Terminals



Source : <https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-global-china-inc-tracker-0>

Appendix 6 - Goods Trade Between Greece and China (2013-2015)

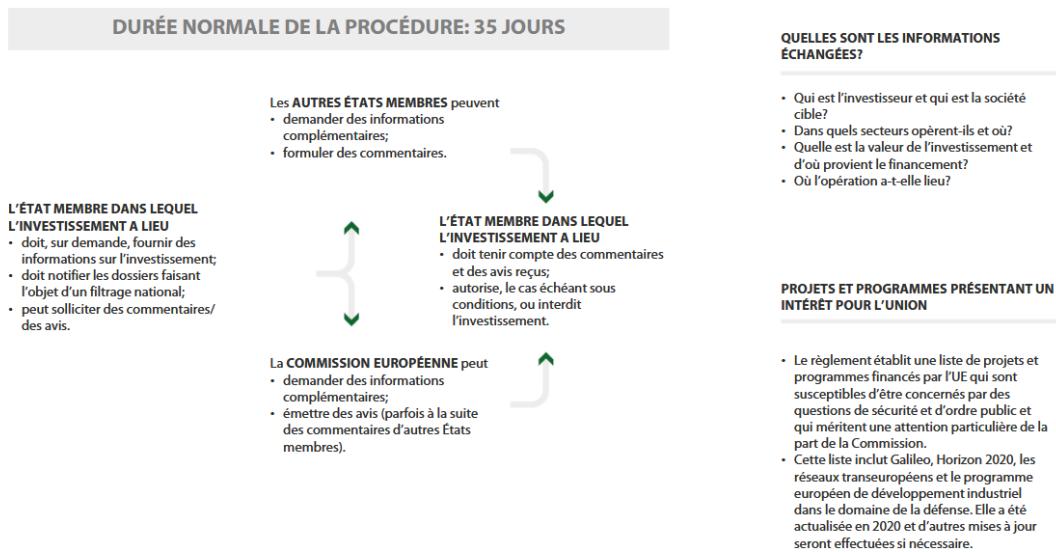
Greece's International Trade in Goods with China (in € billion) 2013 - 2015

	Exports	Imports	Balance
2013	0.419	2.19	-1.78
2014	0.279	2.49	-2.21
2015	0.271	2.87	-2.67

Sources: For 2013 and 2014 data: Eurostat newsrelease: 116/2015 26. June 2015 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6893875/6-26062015-AP-EN.pdf/44d4c87c-98dd-4061-bdf6-b292884a5073>. For 2015 data see: <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/grc/>.

Source : <https://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/7492>

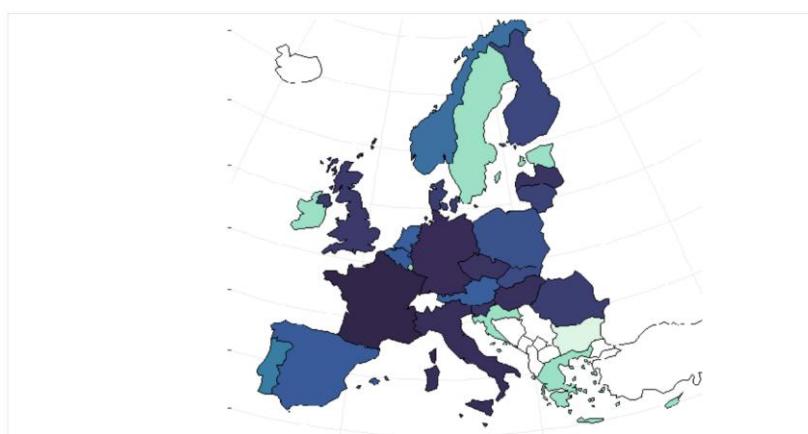
Appendix 7 - EU Framework for Screening Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)



Source: Commission européenne.

Source : https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2023-27/SR-2023-27_FR.pdf

Appendix 8 - Degree of Restrictiveness of Foreign Investment Screening Mechanisms (FISM) in Europe, 2023

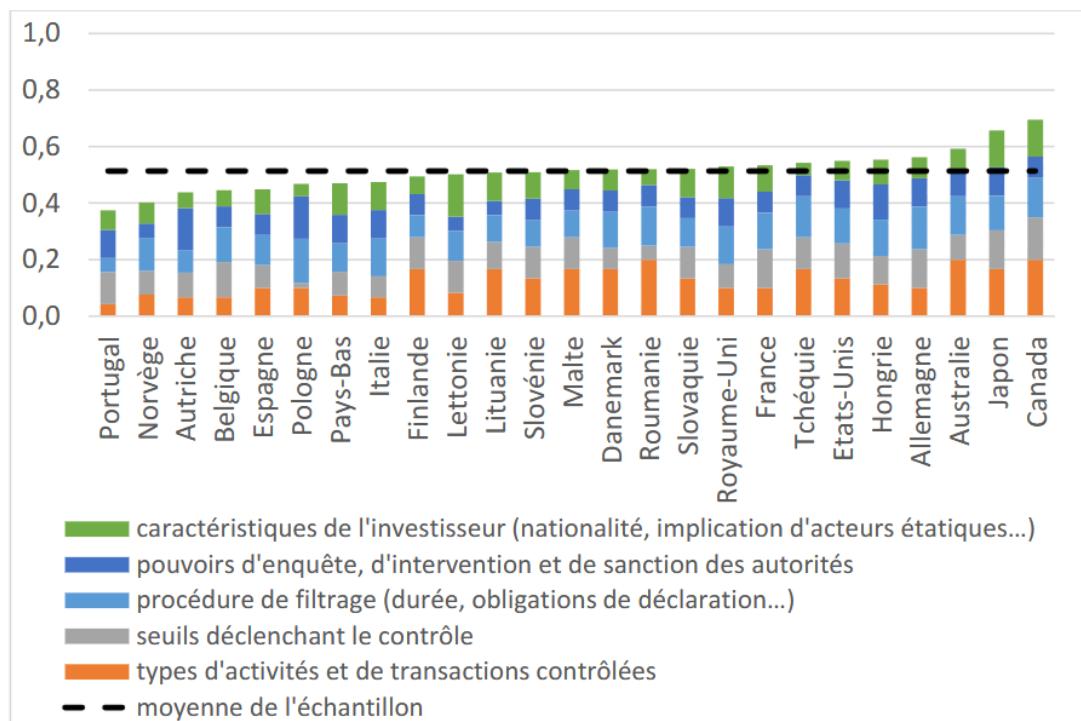


Note: Dark (light) blue: relatively more (less) restrictive FISM. Green: consultative or legislative process expected to result in the adoption of a new mechanism. Light green: no legislative initiative.

Source : https://www.banque-france.fr/system/files/2023-11/DT927_0.pdf

Appendix 9 : Heterogeneity of FDI Screening Mechanisms in Advanced Economies, 2023

Graphique 3 : hétérogénéité des mécanismes de filtrage des IDE dans les économies avancées



Note : l'indicateur va de 0 (MFI relativement peu restrictif) à 1 (relativement restrictif) et repose sur l'agrégation de cinq dimensions équivalentes. Chaque dimension recouvre plusieurs sous-composantes.

Source : <https://www.banque-france.fr/fr/publications-et-statistiques/publications/lessor-du-filtrage-des-ide-dans-lue-et-lesgrandes-economies-avancees>