

Piraeus, and the U.S.– China Global Battle over the Control of Ports

The New Power Chessboard in the Mediterranean

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The international chessboard is shifting, and the port of Piraeus has once again emerged at the heart of geopolitical rivalries. According to an exclusive Reuters report, the Trump administration is exploring ways to curb China's global influence in the strategic sector of maritime transport, placing the spotlight on Cosco's presence at Piraeus.

The Trump administration is preparing a plan aiming at limiting China's influence over global shipping, with particular attention on the Piraeus Port Authority, where the Chinese company Cosco holds a 67% stake.

This development is part of a broader strategy, as Washington seeks to regain ground in a sector where Beijing has made remarkable advances over the past decade.

China's Strategy and the “Maritime Silk Road”

Through Cosco and other state-owned enterprises such as China Merchants and SIPG, China has invested in more than 120 ports worldwide as of August 2024, according to a report published last year by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a U.S. think tank. This strategy is a central pillar of the “Belt and Road” Initiative—also known as the New Silk Road—aiming at securing trade routes, strengthening China's maritime power, and building geopolitical leverage in key sea lanes. Piraeus stands as one of the most emblematic examples of this strategy. Since Cosco's entry, the port has experienced rapid growth, rising to the top ranks in container traffic volume. *For Beijing, Piraeus serves as a gateway to the European market.*

The U.S. Response: Containment and Push-back

Washington views the situation differently. Officials have voiced concerns that China's presence in ports across the globe could be leveraged not only for commercial purposes but also for military or intelligence operations. They argue that Chinese control over ports may provide strategic military advantages, espionage capabilities, and geopolitical leverage that extend far beyond trade.

According to reports, the U.S. plan includes boosting Western investors to acquire Chinese stakes in ports, supporting the American merchant marine—which significantly lags behind China's—and expanding partnerships with allies to reduce dependence on Chinese networks.

In practice, the United States is seeking to disengage from China's strategic footholds, a move that, if carried out, could shift the balance of power in the Mediterranean and beyond.

"I believe the new U.S. administration is applying pressure against the Chinese in all European ports. My impression is that European countries will pursue mature relations with the United States. The balancing act is extremely difficult", said Dr. Ioannis Nomikos, director of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (*RIEAS*), to *The Epoch Times*.

The Military and Intelligence Dimension of China's Presence in Ports

Through Cosco and other state-owned companies, China has acquired or leased strategic ports across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Officially, these investments are presented as commercial ventures serving the "New Silk Road."

However, many Western intelligence agencies have raised concerns for three key reasons:

1. **Dual use of ports:** A port controlled by a Chinese company may operate normally for commercial purposes, but at the same time it has the potential to provide logistical support for the Chinese navy (PLA Navy) in the event of a crisis. This includes the capability for resupply, repairs, or the docking of Chinese warships.

2. **Monitoring and intelligence gathering:** Ports are hubs not only for goods but also for data. Through logistics systems, sensors, and communication networks, Chinese companies could gain access to sensitive information on NATO naval movements, commercial flows and critical supply chains, as well as vulnerabilities in the infrastructure of Western member states.

3. ***Leveraging control during crises:*** In the event of a geopolitical confrontation, China could use its port presence to slow down, restrict, or block access to vital shipping routes. Such actions would have serious repercussions for countries dependent on Chinese networks.

4. ***The Djibouti example:*** The most telling case is Djibouti, where China began with commercial investments and later established its first overseas military base. This scenario has raised Western alarm, as it is feared that it could be replicated in other strategic ports.

Greece's Difficult Position

Athens finds itself in a delicate position. On one hand, China's investment in Piraeus has brought tangible economic benefits and elevated the country's geo-economic standing. On the other, Greece is a member of NATO and the European Union, bound to alliances that may at times clash with Chinese interests.

So far, the Greek government has stated that it has received no official information regarding potential U.S. initiatives. Nevertheless, the debate over the port's future may well become a field of pressure and dilemmas.

"They cannot take legal action against China! But they can create endless bureaucratic hurdles that would complicate Chinese operations in European ports—and, I believe, make them legally unviable", explained Dr. Nomikos, offering a realistic view of the tools available to the West.

Legal and Investment Implications

The issue is not only geopolitical but also legal. As the majority shareholder, Cosco holds strong rights protected by international agreements and European law. Any attempt to alter the current framework could lead to legal disputes or spark diplomatic tensions. At the same time, questioning such a major investment could undermine the confidence of other international investors in Greece.

What Is at Stake

Piraeus is not just a port. It has become a symbol of the new era of geopolitical competition. The outcome of the U.S.–China confrontation over the Greek harbor will reveal much about how Europe and the Mediterranean will balance in the future—caught between two superpowers vying for control over the global maritime order.