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Geopolitical Interests of the People's Republic of China in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China has emerged as one of the most influential actors on the international stage, expanding its economic, political, and strategic presence across nearly all regions of the world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, represents the principal instrument through which Beijing projects its geoeconomic power and consolidates its global influence. In this context, the Eastern Mediterranean has become one of the most significant regions for China's strategic outlook, combining clear geopolitical, economic, energy-related, and maritime advantages.

The Eastern Mediterranean's position as a key maritime corridor linking Asia to Europe, its growing energy importance following the discovery of substantial natural resources, and its function as a major node of international trade make the region vital for the Maritime Silk Road. Consequently, China has significantly increased its presence through large-scale infrastructure investments, technological cooperation, economic agreements, and, in certain cases, limited security initiatives.

This study aims to examine China's geopolitical interests in the Eastern Mediterranean by analyzing the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on its relations with the region's principal states: Greece, Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus. Through an assessment of concrete infrastructure, port, energy, and technology projects, the study evaluates how these engagements are reshaping regional power dynamics and contributing to the expansion of China's influence.

Keywords: People's Republic of China, Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye, Greece, Egypt

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China is one of the global powers that entered the Eastern Mediterranean relatively late compared to other major actors, a delay largely attributable to the fact that Beijing began to emerge as a significant player in international relations and the global economy only over the past two decades. The ascent of President Xi Jinping to the leadership of China injected new momentum and energy not only into the country's diplomatic posture but also into its economic trajectory, signaling that within a remarkably short period China would transform into one of the world's leading economic powers—and, consequently, into an influential actor in global politics.

"Since 2012, China has expanded its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, viewing the region as an area of significant strategic and economic opportunity within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative." (Alterman et al., 2018, p. 16).

This is a colossal project—what Xi Jinping has described as the 'Project of the Century'—as it encompasses powerful geopolitical and economic components. Its core objective is the revitalization of the ancient Silk Road, through which Beijing seeks to enhance cooperation among states, expand its markets, and simultaneously increase its influence across the countries along the initiative's routes. In total, it involves 78 countries across three continents, a scope that underscores the project's strategic weight and the profound geopolitical impacts it is expected to generate, shaping the future trajectory of international relations.

"During his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, and subsequently during his visit to ASEAN member states in October of the same year, President Xi Jinping proposed that China and Central Asia join efforts to develop a Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road and a Silk Road Economic Belt." (Zhang, 2020, p. 9).

The "Belt and Road Initiative" is divided into two components. The first is the land-based economic belt, which aims to connect China with the states of Central Asia and Europe through the construction of road and railway infrastructure. The second component concerns the Maritime Silk Road, which seeks to link China's coastal regions with those of Asia and the Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean as a Constituent Part of the BRI

The Eastern Mediterranean is one of the world's most strategically significant maritime regions, serving as a crucial bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Inevitably, it constitutes a highly important element of China's overall strategy—particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative—given that the initiative effectively begins in Beijing and extends to this region.

Considering its exceptional geopolitical position, China has substantially increased its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean over the past decade, seeking to transform the region into a central hub for the distribution of its goods to the European Union, which remains its largest trading partner. Approximately three-fifths of China's exports are transported via maritime routes, and the Eastern Mediterranean represents the shortest, most direct, and most efficient passage for these goods to reach the EU.

This strategic reality has led China to launch numerous ambitious infrastructure investment projects across nearly all countries of the region. Although these projects are primarily focused on ports, they also encompass broader economic and energy-related components, which lie at the core of Beijing's interests in the area. As a result, China's presence has been significantly strengthened throughout the region, where it is investing hundreds of millions and even billions of dollars. "At the national level, the major countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Türkiye, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Greece, and Cyprus), except for Israel, have signed cooperation agreements with the Chinese government. Although Israel has not signed a cooperation document directly with China, it is also actively dovetailing with the "Belt and Road" construction" (Ye, 2023, p. 65).

The strategic importance of this region for China is also closely tied to the discovery of substantial reserves of natural gas and oil—energy resources for which Beijing has an acute need—making the Eastern Mediterranean one of the most critical focal points of its foreign policy. Another dimension of the region's significance lies in the fact that, through deepening its engagement with the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, China seeks to challenge and counterbalance the influence and power of the United States in one of the world's most geopolitically, economically, and energetically vital areas.

Greece as the Center of Sino–Greek Maritime Cooperation

"Greece is, thus far, the country with which China has advanced maritime cooperation projects most extensively, particularly in 2015, which was officially designated as the Year of China–Greece Maritime Cooperation." (Ekman, 2018, p. 10). The selection of Greece as one of the primary destinations for China's investments is

closely linked to the country's extensive archipelagic structure, its significant geopolitical position, and, simultaneously, its status as a member of the European Union—factors that grant Beijing substantial economic and geopolitical advantages. For Greece, on the other hand, Chinese investments have served as an important lifeline for its economy, which suffered a deep financial crisis from which it has still not fully recovered. Over the past fifteen years, Chinese investments in the country have exceeded €10 billion, concentrated primarily in infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, and maritime transport.

In 2016, an agreement was concluded between Greece and China granting the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) administrative control over the Port of Piraeus, valued at €1.5 billion, along with an additional investment commitment of €500 million dedicated to the expansion of the port's operational capacities. The upgraded facilities became fully operational in 2021 and are expected to serve as the main gateway for Chinese exports to Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. The Port of Piraeus has thus become a symbol of Sino–Greek cooperation, while simultaneously illustrating Beijing's geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This agreement triggered strong reactions both domestically and in Brussels and Washington, heightening concerns about the potential expansion of Chinese influence within the European Union. At the same time, the deal has been perceived as a security risk, as it provides Beijing with facilitated access to the Mediterranean Sea and poses a challenge to NATO's strategic interests in the region. In 2025, the U.S. Department of Defense placed COSCO on a list of companies suspected of having links to the People's Liberation Army of China.

"To counterbalance Chinese influence, Washington and Brussels have backed the Alexandroupolis LNG terminal27—a $380 million project launched in May 2022, largely financed by the EU—as both a strategic and political investment. Linked to regional pipelines, the terminal is designed to strengthen Europe's energy resilience and anchor NATO's presence in Southeastern Europe" (Zeneli, 2025).

This dynamic is most clearly reflected in the growing confrontation between Washington and Beijing over Greek ports. In November of this year, the Greek Parliament authorized the expansion of the port of Elefsina, which had been acquired by the American company ONEX in 2023. The American group has been granted access to an additional 40 hectares, enabling it to expand its activities beyond shipyards into commercial, logistics, energy, port-related, and military sectors. The

strategic importance of this port lies in its proximity to the Port of Piraeus, which is controlled by the Chinese.

Greece has thus become a major arena of competition between Washington and Brussels on the one side, and Beijing on the other, as each seeks to secure influence and supremacy over its port infrastructure. Nevertheless, cooperation between China and Greece has not been limited to the maritime domain. Chinese businesses have expanded strongly into various other sectors, making them an increasingly important component of the Greek economy. In 2024, bilateral trade between the two countries reached €12.6 billion, highlighting the strength of their economic partnership.

Türkiye: A Bridge Between East and West in China's Strategic Vision

China's investments in the Eastern Mediterranean are not confined to Greece; they extend to several other states in the region, most notably Türkiye. As one of the most significant regional actors with substantial geopolitical weight, Türkiye occupies a pivotal position within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Serving as a natural bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa, Türkiye represents an indispensable component of China's broader strategy to expand its influence across the Eastern Mediterranean.

"Kumport, Türkiye's third-largest container port, located at the strategic crossroads between Asia and Europe, is now two-thirds owned by a Chinese sovereign wealth fund." (Linden, 2018, p. 10). This acquisition, valued at 940 million dollars, is located near Istanbul and is expected to have a significant impact on Beijing's Initiative. In addition to this investment, China has undertaken numerous other projects that have further increased interdependence and cooperation between the two countries. Bilateral trade between China and Türkiye reached approximately 50 billion dollars in 2024, underscoring the strong economic partnership between Beijing and Ankara. Beyond economic interests, China also perceives a substantial geostrategic value in Türkiye, particularly in relation to the 'Middle Corridor,' which represents a key component of its broader geopolitical vision.

"The Middle Corridor is a multimodal land and sea transport route starting in China, crossing through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and extending into the South Caucasus and Türkiye before reaching Europe" (Urciuolo, 2024, p. 2). This corridor is emerging as a powerful alternative to maritime transport and to the Northern Corridor, which previously passed through Russia and Belarus for the export of Chinese goods to European markets.

The project will provide an alternative route for the transportation of Chinese goods and products toward Europe, while simultaneously transforming Türkiye into a key hub within the 'Belt and Road Initiative.' Another major Chinese project in Türkiye is the Emba Hunutlu Power Station—a thermal power plant with a capacity of 1,320 MW located in the province of Adana. This investment is estimated to be worth between 1.7 and 2.1 billion dollars. China is also considering the possibility of investing in Türkiye's railway system with the aim of creating a new, rapid transit route for goods destined for European markets; the projected cost of this undertaking is estimated at approximately 60 billion dollars.

Egypt as a Strategic Node for the Belt and Road Initiative

Egypt is another key state in the Eastern Mediterranean whose geopolitical significance holds exceptional importance for Beijing's Silk Road strategy, given that the majority of Chinese exports destined for Europe pass through the Suez Canal—underscoring the pivotal role this country plays in China's strategic calculus. Moreover, as the largest Arab state and a member of the Arab League, Egypt enables Beijing to expand its influence within the Arab world and, consequently, across the broader Middle East.

Bilateral trade between the two countries reached 17 billion dollars in 2024, reflecting a robust partnership between Beijing and Cairo. Cooperation spans nearly all major sectors, including economics, infrastructure, energy, culture, and the military sphere. China has invested approximately 6 billion dollars in the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Additionally, Beijing is financing the construction of a portion of Egypt's new administrative capital, an investment valued at around 3 billion dollars, which forms an integral component of the Belt and Road Initiative.

"Moreover, energy projects are another significant facet of Egypt–China BRI cooperation, something Egypt values given its target of becoming a regional energy hub and desire to industrialize" (Kandil, 2024, p. 6). The Chinese company Power Construction Corp (PowerChina) recently signed a contract with Suez Wind Energy for the construction of a 1,100-megawatt wind power project, which represents the largest wind energy project in Egypt and the second largest on the African continent. Egypt has also concluded an agreement with Energy China for the development of a green hydrogen and ammonia plant in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, valued at 6.75 billion dollars.

Bilateral cooperation has further strengthened in the military domain. In August 2024, the two countries conducted joint military exercises, during which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy carried out a combined naval drill with the Egyptian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea.

Israel as a Strategic Node in the Eastern Mediterranean for the "Belt and Road Initiative"

China has also turned its attention toward Israel, another key state in the region, as it constitutes an important component of Beijing's strategic vision within the Belt and Road Initiative. Israel's strong geopolitical position in the Eastern Mediterranean makes it highly significant for China's project, while simultaneously providing Beijing with an opportunity to balance the influence and power of Washington in the area. China's interests in Israel span multiple domains, including economic, infrastructural, maritime, and technological cooperation. Bilateral trade has reached substantial levels, with exchanges between the two countries amounting to over 16 billion dollars in 2024.

"A Chinese government-owned company — Shanghai International Port Group — has a contract to operate a major new container facility at the Port of Haifa for 25 years, starting from 2021" (Feith & Cropsey, 2019, p. 21). This constitutes a significant geopolitical achievement for China and, simultaneously, a strategic challenge, considering that Israel is one of the closest and most trusted allies of the United States in the region.

One of China's most important port-related projects in Israel is the Gulf Port, which became operational in 2021 and was granted to the Chinese company Shanghai International Port Group under a 25-year lease agreement. In addition to the Port of Haifa, China has also secured concession rights over the Port of Ashdod—clear evidence that Beijing is making substantial inroads into the Israeli market and thereby completing the mosaic of its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Cooperation between the two states extends beyond maritime infrastructure and includes the technological sector, where China and Israel have concluded more than 450 agreements. Energy is also a central component of Chinese investment in Israel. Dalia Energy signed construction agreements with three Chinese companies—CHEC, HEI, and THCC—for the development of two power plants. These agreements include the construction of the Dalia 2 power station in Tzafit, with a budget of 3.8 billion shekels (approximately 1.1 billion euros), and the Eshkol

Avshalom power plant at the site of the former Eshkol facility, with a budget of 3.3 billion shekels (around 1 billion dollars).

Cyprus' Maritime Fleet: A Strategic Asset for Beijing

Cyprus is another state in which China has expressed growing strategic interest, primarily due to its geographic positioning. As an island located at the heart of the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus serves as a crucial nexus between Europe, Asia, and Africa. At the same time, the country possesses a significant maritime fleet, ranked fifth in Europe and fourteenth globally, which makes it an attractive and strategically valuable component of Beijing's broader ambitions. "At the same time, approximately half the cargo consignments carried by RoC-owned or managed ships have China as their destination" (Tonchev, 2025, p. 17). Trade exchanges between the two countries reached more than 1 billion USD in 2024. Cooperation also extends into the telecommunications sector, where Huawei has enabled full nationwide coverage of Cyprus with 5G infrastructure, giving the island the fastest internet network in the European Union. Other areas of partnership include energy and tourism.

Beyond its economic presence, China has, over the past decade, sought to increase its military footprint in the region. In 2015, it participated for the first time in a joint naval exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean alongside Russia—a powerful signal that Beijing is positioning itself as an actor of considerable weight in this strategic maritime space.

China maintains agreements with other Eastern Mediterranean states as well; however, these partnerships are not as advanced as those with the countries previously discussed. This is largely due to ongoing conflicts and instability in places such as Libya, Syria, and Lebanon, which limit the depth and scope of Beijing's engagement.

Conclusion

China is consolidating its position as one of the most influential actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, driven by its economic power and its expanding presence across numerous countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through these investments, Beijing has significantly broadened its influence not only in the Eastern Mediterranean but also in the states that have become part of this initiative.

Although host countries have largely welcomed Chinese investments—given their contribution to the development of various sectors of their domestic economies—the economic presence of Beijing has simultaneously provoked reactions and skepticism from multiple political and strategic centers. The takeover of the Port of Piraeus triggered strong responses within the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), transforming the issue into a form of open rivalry among Beijing, Washington, and Brussels. In response to China's growing economic footprint in Greece, the US and the EU have promoted alternative projects aimed at counterbalancing Beijing's expanding influence.

Similarly, the penetration of Chinese capital and investments in countries such as Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus have sparked comparable reactions, primarily from the EU and the US, which interpret these initiatives as mechanisms through which Beijing "purchases" strategic influence. Western actors have repeatedly issued warnings about the geopolitical implications of this economic presence.

Despite periodic criticism and external pressure, China continues to expand its involvement in the economies of Eastern Mediterranean countries and increasingly positions itself as an economic and financial alternative to traditional Western models. As China intensifies its investments, the US and the EU view this trend with growing concern, while the Eastern Mediterranean is gradually transforming into an arena of intensified geopolitical competition between these major power blocs.

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