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Silk Road

A new era of
(e-)infrastructure in Europe?



COSCO in the port of Zeebrugge





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Sebastian Franco, GRESEA

In November 2017, the Chinese group COSCO, via its COSCO Shipping Ports (CSP) subsidiary, has taken control of the container terminal in the Belgian port of Zeebrugge. Having already bought stakes in Antwerp (2004) and Rotterdam (2016) container terminals, COSCO aims to make Zeebrugge its main hub in the North Sea.

First international ocean shipping company of the People's Republic of China COSCO was set up 1961. The company grows rapidly in the 80s and 90s amid China's economic development and Western companies' interest for production in the country. In 1993, it becomes the first Chinese state owned enterprise to be listed on Singapore Stock Exchange¹.

At the end of the 90s and following the government « Go Global² » investment strategy, COSCO decides to expand its fleet and diversify by developing its logistics operations, shipping port terminal management as well as shipbuilding and ship repair.

More recently, in 2016, COSCO merged with China Shipping, another state-owned enterprise, to become one of the world largest ocean shipping company. With this merger the government is aiming to streamline the national maritime industry and enhance returns to scale as well as adapt to the national growth decline ergo the decline of ocean transport. The company is currently ranked 264th in the 500 Fortune list ahead of its competitors³.

In 2017, COSCO joins Ocean Alliance, the largest maritime alliance in the world, together with the French company CMA CGM, the Taiwanese Evergreen and Hong Kong based OOCL (acquired by COSCO the same year). The maritime alliances enable operational cooperation between companies (shared capacities, itinerary and schedule coordination, pricing) and therefore exempted from the current anti-trust legislation⁴.

China opposition to the proposed three-way European shipping alliance (Moller-Maersk, MSC and CMA CGM), which had been accepted by the European and US competition authorities, clearly shows its capacity to throw its weight behind world maritime governance⁵.

1 in History of COSCO, COSCO Website: <http://en.coscoshipping.com/col/col6922/index.html>

2 "Go Global Investment strategy needed for Chinese enterprises" People's Daily, 9 December 2001: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/GS-e/19033.htm>

3 <https://fortune.com/global500/2020/>

4 "Alliances maritimes: la Commission européenne confirme leur pertinence", Le Journal de la Marine Marchande, 24 March 2020: <http://www.journalmarinemarchande.eu/actualite/shipping/alliances-maritimes-la-commission-europeenne-confirme-leur-pertinence>

5 "Comment la Chine redessine le commerce maritime mondial", Le Vent se Lève, 8 April 2019: <https://lvsl.fr/comment-la-chine-redessine-le-commerce-maritime-mondial/>

1 — CSP Zeebrugge

In 2014, COSCO acquires a 24% stake in Zeebrugge container terminal, via its COSCO Shipping Ports subsidiary⁶. Its majority shareholder at the time was the Danish Moller-Maersk. Zeebrugge container traffic was struggling to take-off hampered by the local large ports' competition (Antwerp, Rotterdam) and the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis leading to the consolidation of the maritime industry⁷. Then in November 2017 COSCO buys the terminal for €35 million, the other 76% shares⁸, with a 50 year managing concession for the Flemish terminal. The takeover did not really come as a surprise; there were several telltale signs.

In October 2016, the port of Zeebrugge in partnership with COSCO and Minmetals (China owned mining and metal mammoth) decides to establish the 'Silk Road Platform Zeebrugge' in order to facilitate the integration of the port in the New Silk Roads⁹. The platform purports to develop maritime connections but also establish a railway between Zeebrugge and China as well as enhancing the logistics capacities of the port (storage, services) in order to entice parties in trading with China and Europe via Zeebrugge.

In June 2017, the port and China Development Bank sign a Memorandum of Understanding to support Chinese export companies intending to establish their cargo consolidation centres on Zeebrugge. In addition the agreement provides financial facilities for the 'Silk Road Platform'. The presence of Belgium PM Charles Michel and Premier Keqiang Li accentuates the significance of the compact. Concurrently, an agreement is signed between the port and Changjiu Logistics Group for the launch of the Zeebrugge-Heilongjiang railway linking the port to Volvo's production line¹⁰ in China.

6 COSCO's subsidiary operating and managing (on 31st March 2020) 372 mooring docks in 36 ports through out the world with a processing capacity of around 115 million containers year-on-year.

7 In 2009 Zeebrugge had three container terminals against one nowadays and processed over 2.5 million TEU against less than 1 million now. Source: "Economic importance of the Belgian maritime and inland ports - report 2018", Belgian National Bank, July 2020: <https://www.nbb.be/doc/ts/publications/wp/wp384en.pdf>

8 Now COSCO Shipping Ports holds 85% of the shares, 10% held by CMA Terminals (a CMA CGM subsidiary), the last 5% are held by Zeebrugge Port Authorities.

9 "Zeebrugge ambieert rol als centrale europahub voor nieuwe zijderoute", Flows, 9 December 2016: <https://www.flows.be/nl/logistics/zeebrugge-ambieert-rol-als-centrale-europahub-voor-nieuwe-zijderoute>

10 The Chinese group Geely took over Volvo Cars in 2010.

Zeebrugge had several clinchers for COSCO. First, it's a natural deep water draught in the approaches (no river journey as you would with Antwerp or Rotterdam) and its deep berths can accommodate the largest vessels in activity. Secondly, the port is a crossroad of transport infrastructures (roads, rails and waterways) serving Western Europe's vast consumer and production pool. Thirdly, the port is very close to the United Kingdom with whom it has longstanding relationships. Lastly, the relatively small size of the port allows for fast handling thus reducing waiting time with fewer bottlenecks for ships.

Even though it remains a second category port, COSCO aims to boost the container side of the operations. At the time of the takeover the terminal was handling a little more than 300,000 TEU¹¹ a year. Two years later, in 2019, the traffic reached 480,000 TEU - that is a 50% increase. Despite the pandemics the traffic for the last 6 months reached almost 300,000 TEU¹². The actual capacity of the terminal is around 1 million containers a year which Chinese operators are ambitioning to double¹³.

COSCO intends to dock its Europe-Asie NEU1 vessels (on top of the current NEU3) Ocean Alliance most prominent service¹⁴. Zeebrugge will be therefore the port of call for two of the seven services of the Alliance. In preparedness, COSCO decided to increase the height of 5% cranes out of 7 in order to accommodate ships of 23,000 TEU.

11 Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit - 20 feet being the length of a standard container.

12 COSCO Shipping Ports 2020 interim results announcement to be found here: <https://doc.irasia.com/listco/hk/coscoship/interim/2020/int.pdf>

13 "Topmanagement Cosco Shipping ambieert 2 miljoen teu in Zeebrugge", CSP Zeebrugge, 27 November 2018: <https://cspterminals.be/topmanagement-cosco-shipping-ambieert-2-miljoen-teu-in-zeebrugge/>
For reference, Rotterdam's Euromax Terminal where COSCO holds a 35% share handled almost 2.8 million containers in 2019; Antwerp Gateway, where COSCO holds also shares, handled more than 2.1 million

14 "Cosco veut faire à Zeebrugge ce qu'il a réussi au Pirée", Le Journal de la Marine Marchande, 13 May 2019: <http://www.journalmarinemarchande.eu/actualite/shipping/cosco-veut-faire-a-zeebrugge-ce-quil-a-reussi-au-piree>

2 ——— COSCO: a bridge across China

In May 2018, Shanghai Economic Development SOE Lingang Group¹⁵, announces its €85 million investment for the development of a logistic park on the port¹⁶. The plan provides for the construction in two stages of a 30 ha industrial park. Currently 76,000m² are being built¹⁷ and should be operational by the end of 2020 creating around 300 jobs.

Lingang intends to collaborate with COSCO as well as with Chinese and European enterprises, some of which having already announced their arrival, to the development of trade between China and Europe particularly around textile and electronics but also e-commerce. The arrival of the e-commerce giant Alibaba in Liège¹⁸ might well have something to do with the specialism of the Shanghai enterprise. Unless it is to do with the other Chinese e-commerce giant JD.com looking for a base in Europe¹⁹.

However if outlook and expectations are expansive regarding the arrival of further Chinese companies in Zeebrugge, their economic impact on the port remains marginal - as far as value added is concerned or even in terms of investment²⁰. The major economic actors in the port are still Fluxys (the Belgian gas infrastructure company managing the LNG terminal), PBI Fruit Juice Company (a Pepsico subsidiary) or the large companies providing the transport of vehicles (RORO)²¹, such as the Japanese International Car Operators.

15 <https://www.shlingang.com/en/>

16 Lingang Overseas Zeebrugge Modern Industrial Park, more information in "Lingang (CN) invest EUR 85.3 million in Zeebrugge", Flanders Investment&Trade, 4 June 2018: <https://www.flandersinvestmentandtrade.com/invest/en/news/lingang-cn-invests-eur-853-million-in-zeebrugge>

17 <https://transportmedia.be/2020/01/bouw-chinees-logistiek-park-in-zeebrugge-flinke-stap-dichterbij/>

18 See Cédric Leterme (2020), "Setting up of Cainiao Smart Logistics Network Ltd (Alibaba Group) in Liège Airport: background and stakes", Brussels, Gresea.

19 "Chinese online retailer JDCom planning to conquer Europe via Zeebrugge", Retail Detail, 22 January 2020: <https://www.retaildetail.eu/en/news/property/chinese-online-retailer-jdcom-planning-conquer-europe-zeebrugge>

20 "Economic importance of the Belgian maritime and inland ports - report 2018", Belgian National Bank, July 2020, op.cit.

21 Zeebrugge is the one of the world largest port in this sector.

But the port authority²² intends to ride on China's growth and the dynamism of its enterprises to align with Europe's fierce competition between ports. They can certainly count on the support of the highest ranking politicians at the regional and federal (national) level. Belgium too means to cease the opportunity created by the emergence of the Asian powerhouse to increase its exports.

Even if the country is not formally a member of the New Silk Roads it was the first one in Europe to adopt the eWTP²³, a private Chinese undertaking seeking to facilitate e-commerce and, also joined the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) launched by China in 2014. Belgium last trade delegation to China in 2019 counted more than 300 companies, a record marking the country's keen interest for the Middle Kingdom.

22 Maatschappij van de Brugse Zeehaven, is a public company whose majority shareholder is the city of Bruges, managed for many years by Joachim Coens, now president of the Flemish Social Christian Party, a historical party in Flanders.

23 Cédric Leterme, Sebastian Franco (2019), "La Belgique sur l'échiquier mondial d'Alibaba", Brussels, Gresea: <http://www.mirador-multinationales.be/analyses/entreprises-suivies/article/la-belgique-sur-l-echiquier-mondial-d-alibaba>

3 – What does COSCO's strategy reveals?

Given the importance of shipping – which represents almost 90% of the world trade – the Chinese authorities pay close attention to COSCO's activities²⁴. In this highly strategic sector, as a new naval power, China is set to defend its interests against its maritime rivals, such as the USA, de facto guarantors of world shipping or such as Europe home of the industry's major multinationals. COSCO's strategy is underpinned by political stakes.

The 'state-owned' status indicates that activities are supervised by the authorities who also appoint its executives. It reinforces the notion of a political management. However, supervisory capacities over large state-owned companies' operations are often overplayed²⁵ and the public ownership should be put in perspective. The public listing of its numerous subsidiaries truly dilutes its ownership. Moreover, COSCO's strategy at the managerial level does not seem to be much different to that of its competitors.

First because the rise of COSCO's power in European ports like Zeebrugge was only possible through decades of liberalisation and privatisation of port operations²⁶. A greater political independence which pushed the port authorities to behave increasingly like enterprises and favoured private and foreign investments amongst which Chinese state-owned enterprises.

Then, because vertical integration was the trend in the container sector²⁷ it pushed big shipping companies to acquire their own terminals and thus played a big part in the Chinese enterprises decisions to invest in Europe – a safety cushion against local competition bias²⁸.

24 In 2014, the government (Council of State) announced its ambition to make China a shipping power. See in National People's Congress, "Report on the work of the Government", 5 March 2014: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2014/08/23/content_281474982987826.htm

25 Lee Jones (2020) "Beyond China, Inc.: understanding Chinese companies", Transnational Institute-State of Power 2020: <https://longreads.tni.org/understanding-chinese-companies-beyond-china-inc>

26 "EU Regulations reviewed", Port Strategy, 7 May 2020 <https://www.portstrategy.com/news101/world/europe/eu-regulations-reviewed>

27 The market share of the carrier controlled terminals increased from 18% in 2001 to 38% in 2016 in "The impact of Alliances in Container Shipping", International Transport Forum, OECD, 2018.

28 Olaf Merk (2019), "China's participation in European container ports : drivers and possible future scenarios", *Revue Internationale et stratégique*.

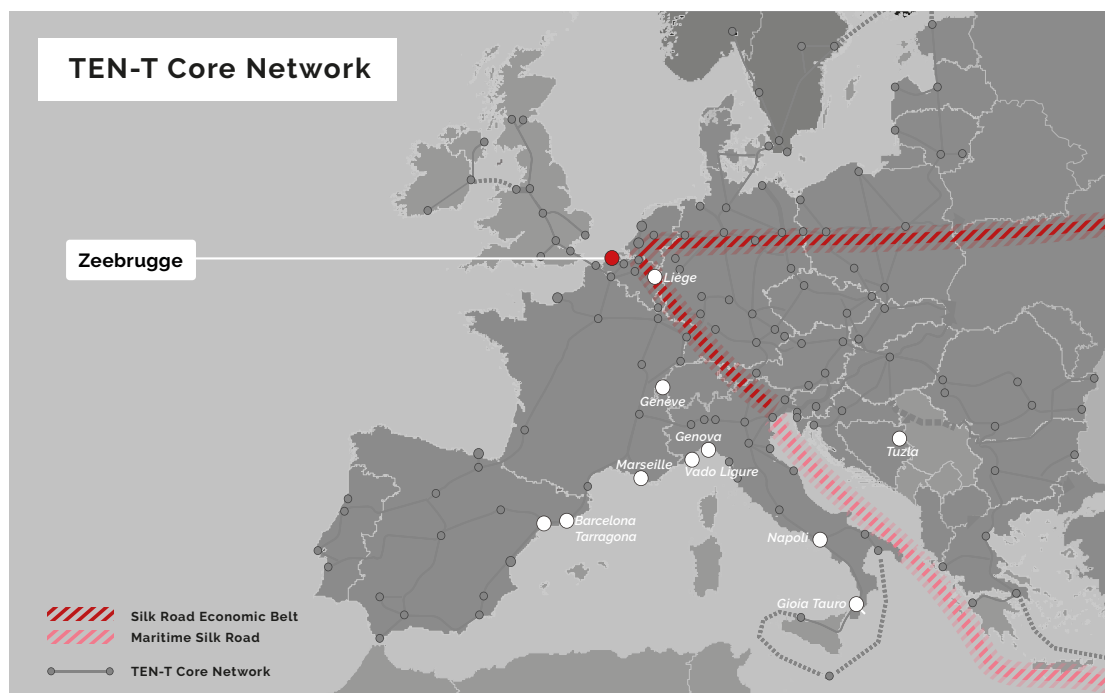
In the same trend of thoughts the acquisition of terminals enable COSCO to strengthen its position and that of Ocean Alliance vis-à-vis 2M (Moller-Maersk & MSC) who controls many terminals around the world²⁹.

As a shipping multinational, COSCO is subjected to the double logic of a competitive market and of geostrategic interests just like its competitors – a fact that will count for the development of Zeebrugge Port.

²⁹ Ibidem.

4 ————— From the New Silk Roads to the Trans-European Transport Network

COSCO's presence on Zeebrugge and China Development Bank's financing – two development pillars of the New Silk Road³⁰ – as well as the multiplication of maritime and rail links with China indicate that the Flemish port is becoming a logistics nexus for the New Silk Roads in the North Sea.



Let's not forget however that the New Silk Roads are concentrated in China's neighbourhood (China-Asia economic corridor in the South-East) then in the Indian Ocean (China-Pakistan economic corridor) if not on the eastern coast and via the Suez Canal towards the Mediterranean for the maritime part of it – the Silk Maritime Route of 21st century. To that effect the ports of Piraeus (Athens – Greece) or the port of Valencia (Spain) are COSCO's greatest European wagers.

30 Proof of this is the colossal \$26 billion from China Development Bank to COSCO in 2017. See "Cosco to receive massive \$26bn loan from China Development Bank", Freight Waves, 12 January 2017: <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/cosco-to-receive-massive-26b-loan-from-china-development-bank>

The relative geographical distance of China's undertaking contrasts with Zeebrugge central position regarding the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)³¹, a European Institutions infrastructure project. The TEN-T aims to improve the rail, road, inland waterways, and maritime shipping connectivity of the continent. In order to achieve this European Institutions are offering financing via several funds among which the 'Connecting Europe Facility'. For 2014-2020 the budget is nearing €25 billion. For its multiannual budget of 2021-2027 the European Commission wants to slightly increase the amount and offer over €40 billion³².

Just like a hundred or so other ports out of the 1200 in Europe, Zeebrugge Port³³, belongs to TEN-T's 'Core Network'; that is the priority network comprising 9 logistics corridors, and Zeebrugge is on two of them.

The vantage point enables regional and national authorities who are very engaged in the development of the port to obtain supplementary financing for its development. Such as for the construction of a new pier for vehicles or more recently for the construction of a new motorway A11 link easing the access to the port and connecting it to the European motorway network for the sum of €674 million financed by the European Investment Bank via a public-private facility³⁴. Infrabel, who manages Belgium's rail network has also invested several hundred millions of Euros³⁵³⁶ with a European support in order to enlarge the station platforms, build new tracks near the port or the construction of two supplementary tracks to ease freight train traffic between Bruges and Ghent³⁷.

31 For more details visit the EU Commission website: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/ten-t_en

32 EU Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/news/2018-06-06-eu-budget-commission-proposes-increased-funding-invest_en

33 "List of Sea Ports in the Core and Comprehensive Network", Europe Commission, June 2014: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/modes/maritime/ports/doc/2014_list_of_329_ports_june.pdf

34 "Belgium: EIB backs A11 Belgian motorway", European Investment Bank, 24 March 2014: <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2014-066-eib-backs-a11-belgian-motorway-link>

35 "Strong port investments to create efficient Intermodal links", Global Railway Review, 26 September 2007: <https://www.globalrailwayreview.com/article/1582/strong-port-investments-to-create-efficient-intermodal-links/>

36 "The Route Map to a Connected Europe", European Investment Bank, June 2016: https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/the_route_map_to_a_connected_europe_en.pdf

37 "Strong port investments to create efficient Intermodal links", Global Railway Review, 26 September 2007. Cit. op.

The Flemish Region decided to invest over one billion Euros in the construction of a new lock for optimising access to the inner port in 2019³⁸. The European Union will contribute financially to the project but the regional government remains the leading actor in the development of Zeebrugge Port.

Obviously, Zeebrugge wants to have it both ways: join the Chinese project on the one hand and take advantage of European policies on the other. There is a lot to be said for a proper coordination between the two; with its inception in 2015 the “EU-China Connectivity Platform” is yet to deliver on a smooth interrelation between TEN-T and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)³⁹ as it has only reached the stage of exchanging project information.

Given the current geopolitical tensions and 8 years of protracted negotiations⁴⁰ the EU should be able to spot some major obstacles to a bilateral investment agreement between the two blocks by examining the constraints and opportunities of the New Silk Roads⁴¹.

38 “Miljardendossier voor vlaamse havens na jaren uit het slop”, Press release of Vlaamse Departement Mobiliteit en Openbare Werken, 21 December 2018: <https://departement-mow.vlaanderen.be/nl/press-release/miljardendossiers-voor-vlaamse-havens-na-jaren-uit-het-slop>

39 European Commission (2015), “The EU-China Connectivity Platform”: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/international/eu-china-connectivity-platform_en

40 “The New Silk Route - opportunities and challenges for EU transport”, Policy Departement B Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament, 2018: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU\(2018\)585907_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU(2018)585907_EN.pdf)

41 “L’Union Européenne appelle la Chine à des concessions pour boucler un accord sur les investissements”, Le Monde, 14 September 2020: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/09/14/l-union-europeenne-appelle-la-chine-a-des-concessions-pour-boucler-un-accord-sur-les-investissements_6052178_3210.html

5 ————— Outcomes for Zeebrugge and European ports

For the port of Zeebrugge, the arrival of COSCO meant the end of container traffic decline. The development of activities on Zeebrugge reflects the growth recorded in most terminals owned by COSCO abroad and particularly for those where it is the majority shareholder and where it can take full advantage of COSCO Shipping Lines and Ocean Alliance synergies. Still it is early days to conclude to a general trend since traffic growth could be prone to cyclical effects.

Traffic (and participation) growth in CSP major terminals abroad (TEU)

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Zeebrugge (85%)	277	316	392	483
Piraeus (100%)	3470	3691	4409	5158
Suez (20%)	2547	2528	2609	3161
Singapore (49%)	1809	2044	3198	5011
Busan (4,89%)	2084	3554	3758	3765

Source: COSCO Shipping Ports Activity Reports (2016-2019)

COSCO's arrival has also opened up a channel for other enterprises trading with Europe and China. Zeebrugge role as a bridge over China should therefore grow in strength as the basic infrastructure (maritime lines, terminal, and industrial park) is now operational.

The 'Chinese Hub' does enable the port to develop by attracting more investments and traffic but could also have unintended consequences such as local enterprises being turfed out by Chinese companies as it happened on Piraeus where COSCO set up in 2009⁴².

42 "Le jeu de go de la Chine autour des ports européens", Mediapart, 21 November 2019; <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/211119/le-jeu-de-go-de-la-chine-autour-des-ports-europeens?onglet=full>

5.1. Do COSCO and Chinese enterprises represent a threat for the port or for Belgium?

Some would say so⁴³. Economic interests tend to politics... If one admits that political interests have more weight in Chinese corporations economic decisions than for that of their Western counterparts - which remains to be proven - Zeebrugge seems to be rather at an advantage here. If investing in Zeebrugge was politically motivated the investment will most likely be seen in the long term rather than if it were a pure financial decision – characterized by short-termism. Besides, since COSCO's arrival favoured an ecosystem linked to trade with China, pulling out would have a negative impact on other Chinese enterprises and to a certain degree on Beijing economic plans.

That said, relying on decisions taken 7,000 km away remains highly problematic. Should political relations between Belgium or Europe and China were to deteriorate the situations could easily switch...

Zeebrugge actual dependency on COSCO does not appear to be the immediate threat for a port industriously preparing for the consequences of Brexit - 40% of its throughput is linked to trade with the UK – recovering from a 70% drop in vehicle traffic in the wake of the health crisis and eventually getting ready for an eminent restructuring of the car industry. Talks with Antwerp for a possible fusion of both ports⁴⁴ might be an indication that the Belgian port sector may well be on course for some major changes...

43 Frans-Paul van der Putten (2019), "European seaports and Chinese strategic influence: the relevance of the Maritime Silk Road for the Netherlands", Clingendael:
https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Report_European_ports_and_Chinese_influence_December_2019.pdf

44 Frans-Paul van der Putten (2019), "European seaports and Chinese strategic influence: the relevance of the Maritime Silk Road for the Netherlands", Clingendael. Op.cit.

5.2. Are we witnessing a 'sinicization' of working conditions?

Besides the political stakes, the arrival of Chinese enterprises raises concerns on the 'sinicization' of working conditions⁴⁵ ; Chinese enterprises have a rather bad reputation being used to disciplined workforce and often, obedient trade unions. So far, Zeebrugge working conditions do not appear to have worsen since the arrival of COSCO⁴⁶. Still if you consider the experience of Piraeus you can take the long view.

Working conditions in COSCO terminals on Piraeus are tough and precarious; anti-trade union practices are recurrent⁴⁷. COSCO 'corporate culture' seems to worsen working conditions but external elements such as the implementation of management algorithms which accelerate the pace of work or special statutes regulating port concessions (special economic zone) do also play an important part in their decline too. The fading trade union culture among young dockers⁴⁸ also contributes to this casualization. As far as Greece is concerned, it is the deregulation of labour laws demanded by the Troika (that is the European Institutions and the IMF) which led to the dismantling of collective agreements⁴⁹ with dire consequences on employment and income benchmark.

It is therefore difficult to assert that working conditions in terminals owned by Chinese operators are worse than their competitors; further comparative and complementary studies are needed.

45 Numerous collective struggles in Chinese ports improved working conditions and they are no longer as bad as in the public imagination. See in Brett Neilson (2018), "Precarious in Piraeus: on the making of labour insecurity in a port concession".

46 "Chinese firms now hold stakes in over a dozen European ports", NPR, 9 October 2018: <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/09/642587456/chinese-firms-now-hold-stakes-in-over-a-dozen-european-ports?t=1602681612396>

47 "Is China Investment good for Workers?", China File, 13 December 2017: <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/chinese-investment-good-workers>

48 Ibidem

49 Ibidem

5.3. Are we invaded by Chinese enterprises?

Chinese enterprises acquisition of stakes in European ports – by COSCO and to a lesser extent by China Merchant Group (CMG) – is rather new. In 2019 both companies had shares in 16 container terminals in 13 European ports for a roundabout volume of 11 million TEU or about 10% of the traffic (against only 1% in 2007⁵⁰).

Given the weightiness of China's economy the numbers are not outlandish. However Chinese enterprises market share could progress in the wake of the evolution of the sector: new procurement contract, privatisation of terminals or M&A, the consequential financial capacity of China SOEs⁵¹ affording them a clear advantage. But the new European rules on foreign investors screening⁵² target specifically China and could well slow down the trend...

50 Olaf Merk (2019), "China's participation in European container ports : drivers and possible future scenarios", *Revue Internationale et stratégique*. Op.cit.

51 "Cosco Shipping Ports envisage sereinement l'après Covid", *Le Journal de la Marine Marchande*, 1 April 2020: <http://www.journalmarinemarchande.eu/actualite/portuaire/cosco-shipping-ports-envisage-sereinement-lapres-covid>

52 European Commission: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/accessing-markets/investment/>

6 ————— Rethinking the world

Ports are historically considered as public service providers, trade unionism historic stronghold and authentic nexus for globalisation yet, more than ever, they are reliant on the big companies who control world maritime trade and logistics flows.

This dependence raises concerns when economic changes commanded by the climate crisis are necessary; especially since ports rely on traffic to generate profit. The rational does not quite agree with the need to reduce international maritime transport – large emitter of greenhouse gases – as well as the unrestrained consumption it implies.

Zeebrugge Port generate 10,000 direct jobs and roughly the same amount in indirect employment and if the issue of employment – as well as its quality – is paramount, the subject of climate is sorely missing in the port development debate.

For now, local as well as European authorities only envisage the development of the port through the neoliberal prism which focuses on competition, privatisations and deregulation in the name of employment and productivity. For its part, the maritime transport sector swears by 'sustainability' or by reaching carbon neutrality... sometime or another, putting forwards a 'fake' green solution⁵³ which consist in replacing petrol with gas to get the ships going.

For society as much as for social movements, the development of ports raises other issues: How to reduce international maritime trade and preserve jobs? How to lead the transition towards clean transport and what role should ports play? How to get back to the initial public service role port played in the past and transform its economic narrative?

These questions should be open to debate instead of blaming the nationality of investments for all the ills and not challenging societal choices.

53 "Natural gas powered vehicles and ships - the facts", Transport & Environment, 24 October 2018: <https://www.transportenvironment.org/publications/natural-gas-powered-vehicles-and-ships-%E2%80%93-facts>



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