

Securitising Piraeus Port: EU Perceptions and Political Responses to Chinese FDI

Signe Balling Larsen

Student number: 20204757

Aalborg University, International Relations

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Supervisor: Jesper Willaing Zeuthen

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Abstract

This thesis analyses COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, Greece's largest port, as a case of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in European strategic infrastructure, examining how the European Union (EU) constructs such investments as security threats. While the EU has strengthened its investment screening mechanism, member states remain divided between economic pragmatism and security-oriented concerns.

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach: Methodologically, it combines Lene Hansen's poststructuralist discourse analysis with stakeholder interviews. The theoretical framework draws on economic statecraft, party-state capitalism, securitisation theory, and the role of epistemic communities to examine how COSCO is used as an instrument of China's broader geopolitical strategy, prompting discursive and regulatory reactions from the EU. The analysis finds that COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port entailed an intensification of EU securitisation discourse on Chinese FDI, essentially leading to the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation in 2019. Although China is rarely named directly, Chinese SOEs are increasingly perceived as threats to the EU's rule-based, economic order and governing authority. Conflicting perspectives among epistemic communities mirror internal EU division, highlighting their influence in shaping securitisation discourse during times of uncertainty.

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that EU discourse on Chinese FDI is not only shaped by concerns over COSCO's close ties to the CCP, but also by deeper internal divisions that risk undermining EU cohesion. By situating the case of Piraeus Port within broader EU-China relations, this thesis contributes to the debate on how the EU can balance economic openness with security implications in an era of increasing geopolitical competition.

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Introduction

In recent years, Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure have sparked significant political debate within the EU. This development is particularly evident in the port sector, where Chinese companies, including the Chinese shipping giant COSCO, have acquired substantial ownership stakes. Chinese companies hold stakes in 31 European port terminals, with COSCO being the largest investor (Kuehne+Nagel, 2023). This reflects China's expanding economic presence in European strategic infrastructure, which has led to an increased securitisation discourse from the EU towards Chinese FDI. The EU's FDI screening mechanism can be seen as a reactive strategy to mitigate security threats posed by Chinese investments and as a way for the EU to balance China's growing global influence. The EU seeks to prevent China from leveraging economic power to gain political influence, which could ultimately threaten the EU's strategic autonomy. In 2016, COSCO acquired a majority share of Piraeus Port in Greece, which was met with opposition from EU officials, who were concerned about the security risks associated with the Chinese shipping company's takeover of European strategic infrastructure. In response, the EU adopted the Foreign Investment Screening Regulation in 2020, later revising it in 2024 in which screening in certain sectors, among others in strategic infrastructure, became mandatory for member states (European Commission, n.d.).

Beyond Piraeus Port, COSCO acquired a 24.99% stake in Hamburg Port's Container Terminal Tollerort in 2023, after the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation (Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG, n.d.). This fuelled the ongoing debate within the EU on growing concern over China's economic presence in European strategic infrastructure, as member states remain divided on whether to embrace Chinese investment or reduce dependency.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative case study approach, combining discourse analysis with stakeholder interviews as a framework for exploring the underlying factors of the EU's securitisation discourse, its formation and execution, and what implications it has. As part of the empirical foundation, stakeholder interviews were conducted with representatives from Think Tank Europa and Rasmussen Global to provide insights into EU's strategic considerations and policy responses regarding Chinese FDI. The stakeholder interviews will be integrated in a discussive analysis section on the impact of epistemic

communities on EU policy responses. The framework of the discourse analysis is based on Lene Hansen's poststructuralist method. This approach enriches the analysis by examining how the securitisation process serves as a way in which the EU constructs its identity through respectively spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions. By presenting China as a contrasting "other," the EU discursively positions itself as an open investment market and a defender of fair competition and ethical rights.

The study applies the concept of economic statecraft to analyse how China uses foreign investments as a strategic tool, particularly through state-owned enterprises like COSCO. This includes an exploration of how COSCO's role is shaped by broader dynamics of party-state capitalism, where SOEs operate as part of China's geopolitical and economic strategy. Additionally, the study will through securitisation theory examine EU discourse on Chinese investments, particularly related to Piraeus Port. This includes an analysis of how the EU functions as a securitising actor by examining discourse of particularly EU commissioners and the extent to which they frame Chinese investments as existential threats. It also investigates political responses from member states, particularly Greece, to assess whether the EU's securitisation discourse has been successful. Finally, it considers whether excessive securitisation related to this discourse pose a risk to EU cohesion. By combining securitisation theory and Lene Hansen's poststructuralist discourse analysis, this study adopts a comprehensive approach to understanding how the EU constructs Chinese investments as a security threat and the implications hereof. The last part of the analysis investigates the impact of epistemic communities on EU securitisation discourse and general policy responses based on stakeholder interviews with representatives from two distinct expert communities.

By assessing the case of Piraeus Port within this methodological and theoretical framework, the study contributes to the broader debate on how the EU can navigate economic openness while mitigating security risks in an era of intensified geopolitical competition.

The thesis addresses the overarching research question: *How does the EU securitise Chinese investments in strategic European infrastructure, and what factors drive this securitisation, particularly in the case of COSCO's acquisitions of Piraeus Port?*

To answer this, the analysis is guided by three sub-questions, which explore the strategic rationale behind Chinese investments, the construction of EU securitisation discourse, and the role of epistemic communities in shaping policy narratives:

1. What is the extent and strategic rationale behind Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure, particularly through the lens of economic statecraft and party-state capitalism?
2. How has the EU constructed and articulated a securitisation discourse around Chinese investments, specifically in the case of Piraeus Port?
3. What role do epistemic communities, such as Think Tank Europa and Rasmussen Global, play in shaping the EU's securitisation discourse on Chinese investments?

Literature Review

While existing academic literature provides a comprehensive understanding of Sino-EU relations from economic, geopolitical, and strategic autonomy perspectives, there remains a lack of focused case studies examining the security implications of Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure. This thesis seeks to address this gap by conducting an in-depth case study of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, and its role in shaping EU security discourse and policy responses.

Several scholars have examined the economic drivers behind Chinese FDI in Europe. Susan Soh (2022) highlights how Chinese investments surged following the 2008 financial crisis, as European nations sought external capital to stabilise their economies. She argues that China strategically capitalised on this opportunity to expand its global economic influence. Her findings align with international relation theories indicating that Chinese SOEs are driven by the pursuit of strategic assets, such as advanced technologies and infrastructure, to enhance their competitiveness and economic influence in line with party objectives. Building on this perspective, Carlos Lima da Frota Araujo (2024) investigates the correlation between a country's economic size, government indicator scores, and its likelihood of receiving Chinese FDI. Findings suggest that China strategically targets economically weaker European countries, while wealthier nations remain more cautious about foreign investments. This raises important questions about economic dependency, as financially weaker nations may become more reliant on Chinese FDI, while wealthier EU countries have the flexibility to limit their reliance on foreign investments. These insights are significant in understanding the EU's ability to balance economic benefits and security concerns. Araujo's study focuses on macroeconomic trends and does not examine how these investments impact specific strategic sectors, such as ports, which this thesis will address.

Other scholars emphasise the geopolitical dimensions of Chinese FDI. Grant F. Rhode (2021) explores the geopolitical consequences of Chinese investments in European ports, particularly the role of "port diplomacy" in shaping regional divisions. He argues that Chinese investments may contribute to political fragmentation within the EU, particularly between Eastern and Western EU member states. His analysis is particularly relevant to this thesis, as it highlights the intersection of economic, political, and security interests in the case of Piraeus

Port. The geopolitical implications of Chinese FDI are further explored by Alexandra Hennessey (2023), who examines the influence of external actors on Sino-EU relations. She argues that the EU's response to Chinese investments has been shaped not only by concerns over economic dependency but also by shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China. Her study highlights how the war in Ukraine has accelerated EU efforts to reduce strategic vulnerabilities, yet she claims that these efforts do not indicate economic decoupling from China but rather a move toward diversification. Hennessey's research provides a useful framework for understanding the external pressures shaping EU policy responses, but it does not specifically analyse how these pressures translate into concrete measures, such as the EU's FDI screening mechanism.

Collins and O'Brien (2022) analyse how China employs FDI and bilateral agreements to expand its economic influence in small European states, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Their study argues that China uses investments in critical infrastructure as strategic tools. They emphasise that China's approach is not purely economic but designed to shape political alignments and dependency structures, which aligns with the theoretical view of economic statecraft as a means of achieving strategic dominance.

Ziegler and Menon (2014) examine how major powers, including China, use foreign investments to enhance their geopolitical influence, particularly through energy investments. They demonstrate how Chinese FDI in energy sectors serve to both expand economic influence and secure strategic geopolitical interests. This approach aligns with China's broader strategy of leveraging economic power to achieve political and strategic dominance.

There are a great deal of studies exploring EU's response to Chinese foreign investments through the lens of securitisation theory. Talisha Schilder (2022) argues that the EU's shift towards stricter FDI controls, particularly concerning Chinese investments, is not solely driven by material threats but also by ideational factors. By analysing European Commission discourse, the study highlights how Chinese FDI has been constructed as an existential threat, legitimising the adoption of extraordinary measures that contrast with the EU's traditional commitment to market openness. This thesis rests upon Schilder's research, connecting EU discourse to the political and economic sectors of securitisation theory, however, it extends the

research by framing it within the case of Piraeus Port and within a broader contextualisation of Chinese strategic geopolitical goals.

Giovanni Faleg (2012) explores the impact of epistemic communities on the EU's 'Security Sector Reform' initiative. It concludes that while epistemic communities played a role in shaping the initiative, it also demonstrated that fundamental divisions between epistemic communities directly entailed a fragmented SSR policy implementation. This thesis aims at exploring whether the same connection can be established on the issue of Chinese FDI in European strategic infrastructure, however, it focusses on a security-economy nexus where Giovanni Faleg's study focus on a security-development nexus. The study highlights that despite the clear influence of epistemic communities, their role in shaping security policies has been neglected by scholars of international relations, which furthermore highlights that there is a gap in literature on studying the impact of epistemic communities on security policymaking.

This master thesis builds upon existing literature and provides an up-to-date analysis and a focused case study examining Piraeus Port as a strategic focal point in EU-Sino relations. While existing literature has made significant contributions to understanding Chinese FDI in Europe, there is a lack of focused case studies that explore the strategic implications of Chinese investments. By addressing this gap, this thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure, such as Piraeus Port, influence EU security discourse and policymaking. This thesis uniquely examines these dynamics through an integrated theoretical lens of economic statecraft, party-state capitalism, securitisation theory, and epistemic communities.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data collection process combines both desk-based research and fieldwork. The desk-based research includes a mix of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of official EU documents and speeches, analysed based on securitisation theory and discourse analysis. Secondary sources encompass news articles, peer-reviewed papers, journal articles, and books, aiming at gaining knowledge, identify gaps in literature, and establishing historical and theoretical context. This research is further complemented by fieldwork, as two stakeholder interviews have been conducted, serving as primary and qualitative data.

The use of AI

The use of AI has been limited to ChatGPT as the only AI tool employed. ChatGPT has primarily been used as a search engine assisting in identifying relevant data, clarifying definitions, and summarising texts. Additionally, ChatGPT has been used for translating material between Danish and English, including the two stakeholder interviews, as well as for identifying suitable synonyms for words. Throughout this process, references and factual claims have been verified to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Case study

This thesis adopts a single case study approach, because it allows for an in-depth understanding of EU securitisation discourse on Chinese FDI, particularly COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port. The study aims to establish a connection between the organisational framework of Chinese SOEs and the way the EU perceives Chinese foreign investments as a potential security threat. This dual focus allows for a thorough exploration of the strategic and discursive dimensions of the case.

Bent Flyvbjerg argues that single case studies can provide valuable generalisations when selected strategically (Flyvbjerg, 2006). COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port is a critical case in understanding the EU's securitisation of the issue, prompting the adoption of stricter foreign investment screening as a strategic response to China's growing economic and geopolitical influence. By examining this case, we can gain insights into the broader trends of EU discourse and policy towards foreign investments from China, especially in strategic sectors.

The analysis will be divided into three parts. The first part examines the relationship between COSCO and the CCP through the theoretical framework of economic statecraft and party-state capitalism. The aim is to establish an understanding of the organisational and structural framework of Chinese SOEs. The second part of the analysis shifts focus to the discourse of European commissioners within a securitisation framework. It analyses the extent to which the EU has framed Chinese investments, specifically COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, as an existential threat to the EU liberal economic order and European autonomy. Furthermore, this part of the analysis will be supplemented by an analysis on how the EU constructs its identity based on its threat perception, relying on Lene Hansen's discourse analysis framework. The third part of the analysis explores the role of epistemic communities in shaping EU securitisation discourse and policy response.

Flyvbjerg further states that case studies are not limited to generating hypotheses alone but can also be used to test existing theories. Ultimately, the case of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port will serve as a framework for understanding both COSCO's objective role in the acquisition and how it is perceived by EU stakeholders. By identifying key interests, power dynamics, and threat perceptions, this approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of how COSCO's expansion aligns with China's global ambitions, and how EU discourse and legislative responses are shaped by this understanding. This study tests the hypothesis that the EU's response to COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port is shaped by a securitisation discourse that not only reflects broader concerns about China's geopolitical and economic influence but involves a concern over disagreements between member states, ultimately threatening EU internal cohesion.

Discourse analysis

The analysis adopts Lene Hansen's poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis, which offers a method for examining discourse on the basis of how foreign policy is constituted through identity (Hansen, 2006). Hansen argues that foreign policy must appear legitimate to the audience, thus, to achieve this, policymakers construct a narrative that aligns foreign policy with a coherent identity. This is comparable to the notion of securitisation theory that asserts that successful securitisation is dependent on the audience's accept of the presented issue as a genuine threat (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 25). She argues:

“The goal for foreign policymakers—as well as for other actors trying to influence foreign policy—is to present a foreign policy that appears legitimate and enforceable to its relevant audience. Thus, at the center of political activity is the construction of a link between policy and identity that makes the two appear consistent with each other” (Hansen, 2006).

Her perspective on discourse analysis is relevant to this study, as it can be used as a tool to examine how the identity of the EU is discursively constructed by differentiating the self (the EU) from the other (China). As it will be discovered, the EU suffers from internal fragmentation regarding how China and Chinese investments are interpreted by EU member states as rather an economic opportunity or as a security threat. Consequently, the EU use discursive measures to establish a sense of cohesion among EU member states by framing certain Chinese investments as a common threat, posing risks to EU security, sovereignty, and autonomy.

Building on the work of David Campbell and Iver B. Neumann, Hansen asserts that “the state's construction of ‘its’ national identity is only possible through a simultaneous delineation of something which is different or Other” (Hansen, 2006). This study focusses on political and economic securitisation based on the assertion that the EU, as the securitising actor, frames Chinese state-led investments as a threat to two key referent objects: the EU’s institutional authority and the liberal international economic order. Using wording such as “collective security” and “European standard”, the EU Commission deploys discursive measures to reinforce internal unity, while framing external influence as a threat.

According to Hansen, a state’s identity is constructed through what the state constitutes as threats to this identity. Thus, she argues that by examining a state’s threat perception, it reveals what makes up the identity of the state. As will be explored through securitisation theory, the EU’s threat perception reflects its desire to establish an identity reflecting an open investment regime, fair and regulated competition, and a market-oriented system rooted in ethical principles. Hansen argues that framing an external actor as a threat might suggest that the threat actually comes from within:

“Threats and insecurities are not just potentially undermining of the state and things that could be eliminated, they constitute the state: the state only knows who and what it is through its juxtaposition against the radical, threatening Other. And, the protection of the state against an external Other is often intimately linked with the delineation of an internal Other” (Hansen, 2006).

This applies to the argument of political securitisation stating that the EU can be threatened by factors undermining its governing authority (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). In the case of COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port, this is particularly relevant. While Greece perceives Chinese investments positively and as an economic benefit, the EU commission presents Chinese investments as a threat to European security and strategic autonomy. This underscores a broader internal fragmentation within the EU. The EU does not specifically identify internal disagreement as the threat, however, it can be argued that its securitising discourse, positioning Chinese FDI as the threat, shifts the attention away from internal division. Framing China as the threat thus becomes a discursive tool for the EU to manage fragmentation and establish a sense of cohesion during a time with geopolitical and economic uncertainty.

According to Hansen, there are three dimensions through which identity is constructed in discourse: spatial, temporal, and ethical (Hansen, 2006). Spatial identity refers to how the self is defined in relation to the other by means of boundaries. Traditionally, these boundaries have involved states, regions, and people, however, they can also include more abstract constructions of political space and subjectivities (Hansen, 2006).

Temporal constructions involve themes, such as development, transformation, continuity, change, repetition, or stasis, which can describe where a state is positioned in relation to time (Hansen, 2006). This helps define both the self and the other in terms of historical narratives.

A state’s ethical identity concerns a state’s self-representation of its moral value, such as defender of human rights. Ethical claims often serve to legitimise foreign policy actions and distinguish the self as morally superior to the other (Hansen, 2006).

Lene Hansen criticises the Copenhagen School of Securitisation Theory for lacking the inclusion of broader dimensions. As outlined above, Hansen asserts that a state's identity is constructed through three dimensions of constructions, based on which she criticises Ole Wæver, for arguing that state identity is constructed by temporal constructions alone. According to Hansen, Wæver's approach means that the EU in reality fears its previous temporal other more than it fears a geographical, spatial, other, for example China (Hansen, 2006). If relying on this argument, it can be said that the EU is indeed more threatened by the internal fragmentation initiated by Chinese investments in strategic important sectors, rather than by China itself. Hansen, however, believes that all three dimensions are equally important and interdependent, meaning that a change in one of the dimensions is often influenced by changes in one of the other (Hansen, 2006). When Ole Wæver argues that the biggest threat to the EU lies in "a return of its own violent past," reflecting a temporal other, this threat perception can be shaped by changes in the spatial or ethical dimensions. Based on Lene Hansens approach, China, as a spatial other, can thus be perceived as threat if it directly contributes to or exacerbates the threat posed by the temporal other. She also argues that a state's identity is constructed through what the state constitutes as threats to this identity. The EU constructs its identity around internal cohesion, based on the threat of fragmentation, which risks associated with Chinese foreign investments threatens to undermine.

Securitisation theory is focused on how actors use language in the form of speech acts to present issues as external threats. Lene Hansen's poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis deepens the work laid out by securitisation theory by exploring how such speech acts simultaneously construct identities. Hansen's three-dimensional framework further strengthens the analysis by revealing how the EU's security discourse is not only about external threats but also about reversing internal fragmentation within the EU. In this way, the combination of these two approaches enables this study to capture both security in the form of how threats are discursively framed and security from the perspective of how the EU constructs its identity as a contrast to China.

Stakeholder interviews

As part of the empirical foundation, stakeholder interviews were conducted with representatives from Think Tank Europa and Rasmussen Global to provide insights into EU's

strategic considerations and policy responses in regard to Chinese FDI and investment screening. The interviews are used in the third part of the analysis, exploring the impact of epistemic communities on EU securitisation discourse. Their distinct perspectives help uncover the underlying dynamics of competing approaches to Chinese investments present in the EU debate. Both interviews are based on a semi-structured model. Semi-structured interviews blend elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. While they follow a predetermined framework, they allow for flexibility in exploring new questions as the conversation unfolds, enabling a deeper engagement with participants' responses compared to fully structured interviews (Lamont, 2015, s. 84).

The two interviews were recorded and have been transcribed and edited to exclude filler words and similar, such as “uh” and “like,” however, the meaning and sequence has been preserved. The transcripts are included as appendices 1 and 2. The interviews were conducted in Danish, therefore, when direct quotations are used in the text, they are translated into English, with the original Danish version provided in the footnote. Descriptions or paraphrased statements by the interviewees are not referenced.

Participant selection

The first interviewee, Svend Roed Nielsen, is a senior advisor at Think Tank Europa. He has written multiple articles on Chinese FDI in European strategic infrastructure and EU's legislative responses, including the FDI screening mechanism (Nielsen, 2025) (Nielsen, EU's "de-risking"-politik over for Kina: Øget samhandel og investeringer, 2025). The second interviewee, Jonas Parello-Plesner, is a senior advisor at Rasmussen Global, specialising in EU-China relations and investment flows. Both interviewees were selected for their in-depth expertise on the topic, providing valuable insights as key stakeholders in the field of EU economic policy and foreign policy. The purpose of selecting both stakeholders was their distinct perspectives on the topic. Svend Roed Nielsen and the Think Tank Europa take a more favourable view on Chinese investments and EU legislation on the issue, while Jonas Parello-Plesner and Rasmussen Global adopt a more critical stance on China's involvement in European strategic infrastructure. This contrast ensures a more nuanced and balanced analysis.

Research paradigm

This paper primarily adopts a constructivist epistemological approach, recognising that power and security are not fixed or objective realities but are shaped through discourse. By examining EU discourse, the study explores the extent to which the EU Commission securitise Chinese SOE investments, framing them as part of China's broader geopolitical strategy.

In the introductory analysis section, however, the study adopts a realist epistemological approach, focusing on the concrete reality of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, as well as the structures of the Chinese SOE framework. The purpose is to establish a clear understanding of the case, before moving into the discourse analysis section. This part of the analysis also addresses its relevance to the EU's perception by framing the circumstances around COSCO's takeover through the lens of how the EU securitises the issue.

Within this framework, the study applies theoretical perspectives outlined in the theory section, including economic statecraft, party-state capitalism, securitisation theory, and epistemic communities. This enables an exploration of how Chinese investments serve as instruments of economic and geopolitical power, while also providing insights into the development of the EU's security discourse and its policy responses. The study examines how China's geopolitical strategies, framed through concepts such as party-state capitalism and economic statecraft, are interpreted by the EU, thereby influencing their evolving security discourse. By drawing on securitisation theory, the analysis explores how EU officials construct and respond to China's presence as a security challenge, interpreting economic engagement through a security lens.

Furthermore, Lene Hansen's poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis will be applied to supplement securitisation theory. Thus, through the discourse analysis, the epistemological approach will be a combination of constructivism and poststructuralism. The main difference between the two theoretical approaches lies in their analytical focus. While constructivists adopt a causal epistemological approach, concerned with establishing cause-and-effect relationships, poststructuralist argue that knowledge is historically and politically embedded, meaning that knowledge is not neutral but reflects particular power relations and social constructs at a specific moment in time (Hansen, 2006, s. 9).

Constructivism views the EU's identity as a relatively stable social construct that shapes how the EU perceives the world, including actors like China. From this perspective, the EU's worldview is grounded in shared meanings and norms embedded in discourse, which provide a consistent standpoint from which causal relationships between identity and foreign policy outcomes can be explained. In contrast, poststructuralism argues that it is precisely this discourse that shapes the EU's identity, meaning that the EU's point of view is not fixed or given but is continually subject to change.

The reason for incorporating poststructuralism is that it adds a critical dimension to the analysis by highlighting how EU's securitisation discourse not only constructs threats but also actively establishes the EU's identity through spatial, temporal, and ethical frameworks.

Limitations

Thematical limitations

This study focuses on ports as a sector of strategic infrastructure rather than exploring other sectors such as telecommunications, energy, or critical digital infrastructure. This focus was chosen because ports are a clear example of China's increasing presence in European infrastructure through SOEs like COSCO, making them particularly relevant to the analysis of securitisation discourse.

Geographical limitations

The study centres on Piraeus Port as a primary case rather than other ports like Hamburg. This choice is based on Piraeus being one of the most prominent examples of Chinese investment in European ports, particularly COSCO's acquisition of a majority share in 2016, which sparked significant debate within the EU. While the case of Hamburg is briefly mentioned, the focus remains on Piraeus.

Temporal limitations

This study focuses on EU discourse around the time of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, aiming to identify the most relevant narratives for examining the extent to which the EU securitised Piraeus Port following COSCO's acquisition.

It is important to note that when COSCO took ownership of Piraeus Port in 2016, the EU's FDI screening regulation had not yet been implemented. By the time the stakeholder interviews

were conducted, six years had passed since the adoption of the regulation, with further revisions made just last year. As a result, Svend Roed Nielsen and Jonas Parello-Plesner now embody two distinct approaches to Chinese investments. Nevertheless, as they are both concerned about the potential risks associated with Chinese FDI, it must be assumed that their perspectives aligned more closely before the screening regulation. This temporal difference may influence the insights gained from the interviews, as they capture how EU perceptions of Chinese investments and regulatory measures have changed over time.

Methodological limitations

Single case study

The aim of this thesis is to provide an in-dept case study explaining EU securitisation discourse regarding Chinese FDI. By conducting a qualitative case study, it becomes possible to explore various structures and specific factors influencing the development of this discourse, offering insights which might be applicable to other cases. Consideration was given to conduct a comparative case study, however, due to the aim of going into dept with the structures and dynamics of EU securitisation discourse, as well as page and time constraints, the study ultimately focus on a single case study rather than a comparative approach.

Stakeholder interviews

The purpose of the participant selection process was to capture distinct perspectives from expert groups on Chinese investments and the EU's discursive and legislative responses. Thus, the two stakeholder interviews provide an understanding of the underlying dynamics shaping these competing approaches and essentially political responses. Jonas Parello-Plesner from Rasmussen Global takes on a security-oriented approach, where Svend Roed Nielsen from Think tank Europa focusses more on economy. While this enhances the understanding of how epistemic communities influence EU discourse, the insights are limited to the perspectives of these specific stakeholders. Thus, other perspectives could have provided further depth to the study.

Theoretical limitations

The study is grounded in securitisation theory of the Copenhagen School, developed by Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap De Wilde. Other theories, such as neo-realism or neo-mercantilism, could have proven useful for exploring the concrete realities of European policy

responses to Chinese FDI, focussing less on perceptions and more on tangible strategic interests. Additionally, discursive institutionalism could have complemented the analysis. While securitisation theory and the concept of epistemic communities help explain how threats are constructed and how expert knowledge shapes policy, they offer limited insight into how these ideas gain traction within institutional settings. Discursive institutionalism highlights how ideas are debated and embedded in EU institutions, providing a wider perspective on the role of both ideas and institutions in the securitisation process.

Economic statecraft and party-state capitalism, although representing a different epistemological approach than securitisation theory, are relevant to this study, as they help contextualise COSCO's strategic interests in Piraeus Port. EU discourse is very concerned with issues such as financial support, competition distortion, and political influence exerted by foreign SOEs, practices closely associated with China, which can be explained through these two theories.

Theory

Economic statecraft

David Baldwin is one of the best-known scholars engaged with economic statecraft. He defines economic statecraft as “influence attempts relying primarily on resources that have a reasonable semblance of a market price in terms of money” (Norris, 2016, s. 15). His definition of statecraft refers to the collection of instruments and policies that a state can employ to further its interests in the international system as activities that can be quantified and assigned a monetary value (Norris, 2016, s. 15). These instruments among others include sanctions, trade restrictions, and industrial policies.

Economic statecraft can be divided into offensive tools – e.g., sanctions and investments – and defensive tools – e.g., trade barriers and screening mechanisms. Offensive tools aim at projecting external influence, whereas defensive tools are focused on protecting national interests. This distinction helps clarify how states tailor their strategies based on whether they seek to expand influence or protect themselves from external risks (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023). Investments of Chinese SOE’s in European sectors can thus be seen as offensive tools of economic statecraft, projecting Chinese influence in Europe.

William J. Norris, in his book “Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control” (Norris, 2016), examines how David Baldwin’s definition of economic statecraft can be developed to provide a more accurate view on the specific strategic goals driving states to expand its economic and political influence in the modern international system. Norris describes economic statecraft as “state manipulation of international economic activities for strategic purposes” (Norris, 2016, s. 3) and seeks to analyse how states actively leverage and apply their economic power to accomplish political strategic goals.

Norris emphasises the importance of making a distinction between state actors and commercial actors, such as COSCO. Furthermore, he points to a common misinterpretation that states are the primary actor facilitating economic relations between states. He clarifies that economic activity is conducted by commercial actors. A commercial actor can be defined as firms and enterprises that engage in economic activities such as trade and investment (Norris, 2016, s. 11).

He criticises previous work on economic statecraft, because it often merely assumes that state actors can control the behaviour of commercial actors. In this regard, he introduces the term 'state control', which explains a state's ability to control the behaviour of commercial actors to achieve its desired strategic objectives (Norris, 2016, s. 14). Norris argues that scholars often assume that communist states can control commercial actors merely because they are communist. In the case of China, he highlights that while it does have a significance that many multi-national companies are state-owned, this alone does not determine the Chinese state's ability to influence the behaviour of its commercial actors (Norris, 2016, s. 41).

Norris asserts that "the state must be able to control or direct the activities of commercial actors to harness economic power into an effective tool to realize foreign policy objectives" (Norris, 2016, s. 222). He introduces five key factors determining a state's ability to control the behaviour of commercial actors, divided into three categories: economic actor variables, relational variables, and state variables. Each of these variables is crucial to determining the state's ability to control a commercial actor.

The most crucial factor is state unity, and Norris asserts that without it, the state cannot effectively exert control over commercial actors. State unity refers to the coherence and strong coordination across the political system, which enables the implementation of a consistent strategic vision (Norris, 2016, s. 29). Thus, the more unified the state is, the easier it becomes to exercise control. Besides state unity, Norris mentions 'alignment of objectives,' 'reporting relationship,' 'balance of relative resources,' and 'commercial market structure,' as factors that impact the effectiveness of state control and, ultimately, economic statecraft (Norris, 2016, s. 7). This study will be focusing on the relational variables and state variables, examining the close ties between commercial activity and state objectives. Alignment of objectives refers to the extent to which the interests of the commercial actor align with those of the state. In the case of SOEs, this alignment is often stronger than with private companies, making it easier for the state to direct their behaviour. The reporting relationship is closely linked to this, as it reflects the formal or informal mechanisms through which the state monitors and influences the actions of commercial actors, thereby reinforcing alignment (Norris, 2016, s. 28). These factors are particularly relevant in the context of Party-State-Capitalism, which is explored in

the following section. Party-state capitalism can be used to explain the relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese SOE's, a dynamic that is at the core of EU scepticism towards Chinese FDI.

Norris's emphasis on state control assumes that states with strong state control have an advantage in applying economic statecraft compared to liberal market economies, where commercial activities are directed by market dynamics. Norris further argues that while many Chinese companies are state-owned, it is not a given that SOEs automatically follow the wishes of the Chinese state (Norris, 2016, s. 41). Based on this argument, a consequence is that the EU overestimates the Chinese state's control over its commercial actors. There is a risk that China's strategical behaviour is miscalculated, entailing the belief that all Chinese foreign investments are political motivated even when commercial actors merely act based on economic interests. This phenomenon is explained by securitisation theory, as a process when a politicised issues is securitised through speech acts (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 174).

Economic statecraft has throughout history been a tool that states have employed to achieve political and strategic goals. However, as globalisation accelerated in the late 20th century, economic interdependence deepened. Market-driven economies became more dominant, reducing the reliance on direct state-controlled economic interventions, and many countries prioritised free trade over state-led economic influence. In the past decade, economic statecraft has regained momentum. This is especially evident with China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013. Additionally, the US and the EU have increasingly used sanctions, trade restrictions, and industrial policies as protectionist measures (Rafih et al., 2024).

China's use of strategic investments as an offensive tool is by the EU viewed as a potential threat. The EU's FDI Screening Regulation is a defensive tool of economic statecraft aiming at securing strategic assets thus enhancing European autonomy. When Jean-Claude Juncker, former president of the European Commission, in 2017 introduced the initiative of developing a screening mechanism, he indirectly referred to COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port the year before as one of the main threat scenarios that emphasised the need for such legislation

(Juncker, 2017). EU's FDI Screening Regulation thus becomes a prime example of how the EU has acted defensively towards Chinese influence in European strategic infrastructure.

As argued by Norris, the reporting relationship and alignment of objectives are crucial factors in ensuring effective state-control. The close tie between the Chinese state and Chinese SOEs can be explained by party-state capitalism, serving as a baseline for understanding the EU's scepticism towards Chinese FDI in European strategic infrastructure, particularly regarding COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port.

Party-state capitalism

In relation to economic statecraft, party-state capitalism offers valuable insights into how China employs SOEs as economic tools within a system where economic decisions are not solely market-driven but also politically motivated.

Party-state capitalism is a concept that describes the economic and political system of China, characterised by strong central leadership and an economy that mixes market capitalism with government-driven development plans (Grünberg, 2021). The Chinese economy is centred around and directed by the state (Beck, 2021, s. 25). Scholars argue that China under Xi Jinping has shifted from a state capitalist system to a party-state capitalist system, where economic activities are primarily driven by politics and serve the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political survival (Leutert & Eaton, 2021). Margaret Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai explain the difference between state capitalism and party-state capitalism as follows:

“If state capitalism and “market socialism with Chinese characteristics” were characterized by familiar conceptual dyads—state versus capital, public versus private—party-state capitalism displays a novel blending of state power and firm organization, funding, and activities, a mixture that renders such dyads increasingly irrelevant” (Pearson, Rithmire, & Tsai, 2022).

They, thus, argue that party-state capitalism goes beyond traditional state capitalism by integrating party control directly into all enterprises, not just through ownership but through organisational and operational influence, making traditional distinctions, such as public/private and state/capital inadequate for describing China's system today. The CCP has

demonstrated that its priorities are the central driving forces behind the rise of party-state capitalism, thus positioning the party-state as the key solution to China's internal and external challenges (Pearson, Rithmire, & Tsai, 2021). This relates to William Norris's definitions of state unity, arguing that more unified the state is, the easier it becomes to exert state control over commercial actors.

State ownership plays a fundamental role in China's economic model, aligning closely with the core principles of Communism and the CCP's control over the economy. Before the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China's entire economy was largely state-owned (Beck, 2021, s. 41). Today, SOEs continue to play a vital role, comprising a significant proportion of China's economy. The size of China's SOE-sector is significantly higher than for other countries, accounting for around 40% of China's GDP (Batson, 2021, s. 10).

SOEs are not merely economic entities but are also a significant part of the strategic goals of the CCP, serving as extensions of state policy and ensuring the CCP's dominance across multiple sectors. SOEs are key instruments in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to expand Chinese economic and geopolitical influence. These enterprises are central to financing, constructing, and operating infrastructure projects across the BRI-countries, giving China significant leverage in shaping global trade routes and regional economies (Leutert & Eaton, 2021, s. 21). COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port is a project under the Belt and Road Initiative, and due to the strategic position of Piraeus Port, connecting different parts of Europe through railway systems, it serves as the flagship project of the BRI in Europe. This illustrates how the objectives of the Chinese state and COSCO are closely aligned. The governance structure of Chinese SOEs reinforces this by ensuring full alignment between commercial activities and state objectives.

Within William Norris's framework of economic statecraft, state unity, alignment of objectives, and a clearly structured reporting relationship between the state and commercial actors are critical for upholding effective state control. In the case of Chinese SOE's, the entire management system and the involvement of different authority levels in hiring personnel, promoting SOE executives, and holding veto power in important corporate decisions emphasise the level of state control that the CCP has. The Chinese state oversees centrally

owned SOEs through a network of departments and party committees, maintaining influence at every level of management. This complex structure enables the state to effectively direct and control the behaviour of SOEs, such as COSCO.

Chinese SOEs are governed by political entities that oversee their leadership, strategic direction, and compliance with state objectives (Jin, Xu, Xin, & Adhikari, 2022). SOEs are either centrally owned or owned by local governments (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 5). COSCO is centrally owned and managed by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), an agency under China's central government responsible for managing state assets, corporate affairs, and personnel. This creates a formal reporting relationship in which COSCO is accountable to SASAC for both economic performance and adherence to state priorities.

The CCP, through its Organisation Department, oversees executive appointments and is among others in charge of the cadre management system, through which the CCP recruits, trains, and promotes SOE executives. This ensures that corporate leadership is politically loyal and ideologically aligned with Party objectives. Furthermore, all SOEs are required to establish internal party committees within the organisations. These committees directly influence corporate decision-making, ensuring that SOEs operate in accordance with the interests and directives of the CCP. Party committees furthermore have veto power over important corporate decisions (Jin, Xu, Xin, & Adhikari, 2022).

SOE managers must follow both political guidelines from the CCP Constitution and commercial regulations under China's Company Law, – SASAC manages SOEs registered under this law – reinforcing party control over corporate decision-making. This dual structure reinforces the CCP's strategic influence, enabling a tightly integrated reporting relationship where commercial activity is continuously assessed from both economic and ideological perspectives. Additionally, Discipline Inspection Committees embedded in the state sector further strengthen this control by enforcing party discipline and ensuring compliance with internal CCP rules (Jin, Xu, Xin, & Adhikari, 2022). Together, these mechanisms ensure that SOEs function not only as commercial entities but also as instruments of state policy. This highlights the complex relationship between economic management and political control in

the Chinese state sector, shaping both domestic governance and international business relations.

Party-state capitalism represents a significant shift from traditional state capitalism by enhancing the role of the Chinese Communist Party in both Chinese SOEs and private enterprises. Rather than simply overseeing economic activity, the CCP now embeds itself directly within corporate governance structures, and loyalty to the party-state has become a key criterion for business leaders (Pearson, Rithmire, & Tsai, 2022). This shift suggests that China's economy is no longer just state-led, but increasingly party-led, reflecting a broader trend under Xi Jinping towards centralising authority and aligning economic actors with party priorities. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, institutional reforms demonstrate a strategic effort to enhance party control over the economy. One of these initiatives is the repositioning of SASAC, placing it directly under party authority and the appointment of new leaders across SOEs. Furthermore, the Xi administration has required a formalisation of party committees within company operations (Leutert & Eaton, 2021, s. 21). This shift represents a broader reflection of a deeper ideological commitment to aligning economic performance with party authority.

Securitisation theory

Securitisation theory is a framework within international relations and security studies that explores how certain issues are constructed as security threats by political actors. Some of the main scholars of this theory is Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap de Wilde, where especially Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan have contributed with several publications on this modern view of security studies (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 175).

Before exploring securitisation theory and its relevance to this thesis, it is important to first examine the concept of security. Historically, security was primarily understood in terms of state survival and interstate conflict. As Wæver writes: "Security is, in historical terms, the field where states threaten each other, challenge each other's sovereignty, try to impose their will on each other, defend their independence, and so on" (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 3). Wæver, however, encourages the analysis on how issues become security concerns in the first place, rather than assuming them as given. Wæver further argues that "a conservative approach to security is an intrinsic element in the logic of both our national

and international political organizing principles. By taking seriously this "unfounded" concept of security, it is possible to raise a new agenda of security and politics" (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 8). In this sense, Wæver argues for not dismissing security as a constructed concept, but rather to engage with it critically and use that engagement to rethink how security is framed and used politically. This is especially relevant for this study exploring how the EU securitises COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port by connecting it to China's global political and economic objectives. Wæver discusses the evolution within security studies, moving from concerning national security to regarding security of people. This shift allowed scholars to look at security beyond military terms and analyse how different sectors can be securitised. Wæver identifies five key sectors: military, economy, environment, societal, and politics (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 2), which was further developed in his work with Barry Buzan and Jaap de Wilde.

Securitisation theory was developed during a time when constructivism found its way to the study of international relations, placing securitisation within a constructivist framework. Securitisation theorists for the first time described the social construction of security problems (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 174). One can distinguish between non-politicised issues, politicised issues, and securitised issue, where the process of securitisation "lifts some issue above ordinary politics in order to assign it a special urgency and necessity" (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 174). Securitisation theory is part of the broader framework developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and was originally directed towards European security issues (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 183). Wæver's analysis suggests that Europe's approach to security is uniquely framed as a tool for state building and the protection of societal order, which makes it distinct from other parts of the world where security is primarily about protecting the state itself:

"In the European version of order/security, there is a statebuilding logic at play. "Security the speech act" is, at present, mainly a tool for "Europe." The separate units primarily engage in societal security. All of this could be seen as an indication that, at a deeper level, the Euro-state has arrived: It uses state security logic even as its constituent countries have begun to act as almost-stateless nations using the logic of societal security" (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 20).

The EU is as a securitising actor focussed on strengthening internal coherence and creating unity. This becomes evident when examining EU discourse on Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure, where the EU's self-representation constitutes a unified bloc with shared rules and norms in contrast to China, representing the opposite. This type of discourse establishes a perception that the EU shares a common strategic agenda in responding to Chinese foreign investments. As Wæver argues, this discourse represents a "state security logic." However, the FDI regulation does not give the EU competences to reject foreign investments, and it is the member states that have the last say in whether or not they wish to welcome FDI, which in the end leads to fragmentation of the EU's decision-making capacity.

Generally, there are two views on security studies. The traditional way of viewing security issues as a means of military threats and the more nuanced view referring to security issues in terms of the "wideners" (the five levels of analysis and the five sectors) (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 1). The emergence of new global concerns after the Second World War made scholars widen the definition of security beyond its narrow military focus, arguing that security is multidimensional.

Wæver warns against treating security as an inherently positive thing, arguing that it can be misleading and even dangerous. While the widening of security has been a beneficial development within security studies, Wæver for example argues that "too much economic security is destructive to the workings of a market economy" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 4). Wæver argues that not all problems should be handled through the lens of security, however, instead, many securitised issues should be desecuritized. Thus, according to Wæver, one must be careful when framing certain issues as threats, as it can exaggerate certain issues thus leading to excessive state interventions.

Security as a speech act

Wæver defines security as a speech act (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 1), arguing that "the utterance itself is the act. By uttering "security," a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it" (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 7). Thus, Wæver argues that security is not merely objective threats but rather a study on how

an issue is presented and accepted as a threat through discourse. His approach thereby shifts the analytical focus from threats themselves to the process through which something becomes a threat. Political discourse is central to this process. By presenting an issue as an existential threat, political actors can justify emergency measures or bypass normal democratic procedures. On the other hand, this also means that security claims can be contested or even resisted through a desecuritisation process.

Desecuritisation refers to the process of moving an issue out of the realm of security and back into normal political discourse (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 29). It can be understood as the “politization of security” (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 175). Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde defines desecuritisation as “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 4). While securitisation frames an issue as an existential threat requiring urgent and extraordinary measures, desecuritisation seeks to deescalate such framings and reintegrate the issue into standard democratic procedures. However, Wæver also cautions that influential figures may attempt to instrumentalise securitisation, as “by definition, something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so” (Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1995, s. 6). This highlights how desecuritisation is not only a normative ideal but also a political challenge within contested security discourses.

Referent object, securitising actor, and the audience

Securitisation theory highlights three central components essential for the securitisation process: the securitising actor, the referent object, and the audience (Thomson & Baele, 2021, s. 177). These elements are essential to understanding how issues are framed as existential threats. The securitising actor is the individual or group that presents an already politicised issue as an urgent threat to a referent object. The referent object is the entity or structure being targeted by the threat. The audience refers to those who must be convinced of the existential threat in order for the securitisation process to be successful. In this context, Wæver, further argues that “if by means of an argument about the priority and urgency of an existential threat the securitizing actor has managed to break free of procedures or rules he or she would otherwise be bound by, we are witnessing a case of securitization” (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 25). Thus, securitisation is achieved when a speech act, emphasising the urgency of

an issue, allows the securitising actor to bypass normal procedures or rules. The securitising actor frames a certain issue as a security risk through discourse, referred to as a speech act, which is then either accepted or rejected by the audience. If accepted, the issue moves from being a politicised issue to becoming a securitised issue. The process of desecuritising an issue is explained as the opposite process, moving an issue from the realm of security back into the realm of politics.

In the case of Chinese FDI in European strategic infrastructure, specifically COSCO's engagement in and acquisition of Piraeus Port, the EU functions as the securitising actor, framing Chinese investment as an existential threat to its economic sovereignty and strategic autonomy, being the referent object. The audience in this case is EU member states, whose support and approval are crucial for the success of the securitisation process. By framing these investments as existential threats to European sovereignty and autonomy, the EU aims to build support for regulatory tools like the FDI Screening Regulation, which functions as a means to reassert control over foreign investments and protect key strategic sectors in Europe.

The five levels of analysis

Levels of analysis is a common way of analysis within international relations theory and is used to "provide a framework within which one can theorize" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 6). The aim of levels of analysis is "to locate the actors, referent objects, and dynamics of interaction that operate in the realm of security" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 5). Wæver, Buzan and de Wilde criticise neorealism's state centric approach for "picturing subunits as within states and subsystems and systems as made up of states" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 6-7). Thus, emphasising the importance of putting more focus on "greater diversity of security units" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 6-7). The five levels of analysis are: International systems, international subsystems or regional subsystems, units, subunits, and individuals.

The EU is generally understood as a subsystemic actor in this framework, operating regionally to influence EU member states and mediate between national and global dynamics. International subsystems are described as "groups of units within the international system that can be distinguished from the entire system by the particular nature or intensity of their

interactions with or interdependence on each other” (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 6). Regional subsystems, such as the EU, is categorised as being “territorial coherent”. In 2007, the EU commissioner for regional policy, Danuta Hübner, initiated a discussion on the definition of territorial cohesion. She emphasised that territorial cohesion involves enabling all regions to develop their potential and ensuring that geographic or economic disadvantages do not hinder access to opportunities, integration, or development (Hübner, 2007). Ultimately, strong territorial cohesion is crucial for the EU, as it reinforces the EU’s capacity to act coherently on the international stage. Thus, distinguishing the EU from being merely a collection of nation states to a unified regional subsystem with strong strategic autonomy. From the perspective of securitisation theory, the EU’s role as a subsystemic actor is reinforced by its ability to construct and project shared security narratives across its member states.

The five sectors

The Copenhagen School of Securitisation Theory distinguishes between the five following sectors: the military sector, the political sector, the economic sector, the societal sector, and the environmental sector (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 7-8). According to Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde, “the European Union can be existentially threatened by events that might undo its integration process” (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). In the economic sector, the referent object is the liberal economic order and the rules and norms that constitute the EU. The political sector focus on instances where investments are framed as threats to the EU’s strategic autonomy and institutional authority, particularly when individual member states bypass EU-level coordination, as was the case with COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port.

The economic sector

The EU, as an economic bloc, can be threatened by factors that undermine the rules, norms, and institutions that constitute the union (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). According to Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde “in the economic sector one finds a range of referent objects ... of which the most important seem to be the state and the [liberal international economic order]” (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 103), and by extension, the EU itself, which functions as a regional pillar of the liberal international economic order.

The control of European strategic infrastructure by non-EU actors presents vulnerabilities in areas that are essential for economic functioning, trade, and security. The EU's securitising

narrative regarding Chinese foreign investments is shaped by the perception that such engagements could disrupt the liberal economic order, creating dependencies that might be exploited for geopolitical leverage. EU discourse specifically highlights the nature of Chinese investments, viewing them as challenging the rules and norms of the EU's economic framework. For instance, by portraying China's state-capitalist model and investments as deviating from the EU's "common rulebook", EU securitising actors frame these investments as threatening the ground pillars of the EU system.

According to the Copenhagen School, focusing exclusively on economic arguments is inadequate for fully understanding economic securitisation within a liberal economic context (Schilder, 2022). This perspective implies a connection to military securitisation, where threats to economic security are reinforced by threats to the EU's survival. The EU faces threats to its strategic capabilities, due to the growing presence of Chinese commercial actors in strategic sectors. This concern applies to both the political and the economic sector of securitisation, reflecting a broader tendency within the EU of rising internal division, fundamentally threatening what makes up the union: collective support for its rulebook and governing authority.

The political sector

Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde note: "In the political sector, sovereignty can be existentially threatened by anything that questions recognition, legitimacy, or governing authority" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). For the EU, this translates into challenges to its supranational legitimacy and governing capacity. Threats may come in the form of member states rejecting EU authority, external actors undermining its policy coherence, or internal divisions weakening its decision-making processes. The EU's FDI Screening Regulation can be understood as a securitising move that seeks to protect the EU's political sovereignty, particularly regarding what EU officials have framed as threats to European strategic autonomy: Chinese investments.

The case of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port can be used to illustrate how the EU's political authority has been perceived as under threat. Greece's decision to engage with COSCO without EU-level coordination highlighted the potential for such investments to undermine EU authority and create internal divisions. The EU's FDI screening mechanism can

thus be seen as a securitising move aimed at restoring control and asserting its authority over strategic economic decisions. The EU's FDI Screening Regulation is ultimately challenged by divisions among member states on how to balance economic interests with security implications. Despite the EU's advisory role, member states retain the final say in approving investments, and this fragmentation within the EU weakens its ability to act cohesively, as different states pursue different agendas.

Epistemic communities

Peter M. Haas is one of the main scholars behind the concept of epistemic communities. He defines the term as follows: "An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas, 1992, s. 3). Haas further defines four characteristics of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992, s. 3), which will be used to structure the analysis on the role of epistemic communities in shaping EU securitisation discourse: Shared normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and common policy enterprise.

Normative and principled beliefs

Normative and principled beliefs, as defined by Goldstein and Keohane, refer to "normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust" (Blanken, 2023, s. 91). In relation to approaches on Chinese foreign investments, such principled beliefs can differ on whether an expert community welcomes Chinese FDI or aims to restrict it. Furthermore, normative and principled beliefs can be related to how an epistemic community view China in general, either as a security threat or as an economic partner to the EU.

Causal beliefs

Causal beliefs are about cause-and-effect relationships (Blanken, 2023, s. 91), thus referring to why something happens and predict what will happen as a result. Such beliefs are critical in decision-making because they influence choices based on predicting expected outcomes of actions. When EU politicians let their political decisions on Chinese FDI be influenced by how expert communities construct the cause-and-effect relationship, they are influenced by predictions which are part a broader normative and principled belief system.

Shared notions of validity

Shared notions of validity within an epistemic community ensure that the group has a common understanding of what valid knowledge is. Essentially, it is the internal acknowledgement within an epistemic community of what is viewed as valid knowledge that gives the group authority to the outside world and enables them to influence political decisions-making (Haas, 1992, s. 17).

Common policy enterprise

Common policy enterprise can be translated into shared commitment among community members to apply their collective expertise to address specific policy problems in order to enhance overall conditions. In other words, common policy enterprise refers to a shared community vision.

The concept of epistemic communities will be used as a framework in the discursive analysis with focus on examining the impact of expert groups on EU securitisation discourse. The analysis will be based on the two stakeholder interviews with representatives of distinct epistemic communities: Svend Roed Nielsen and Jonas Parello-Plesner. They use their distinct understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship – what impact do Chinese FDI have on European strategic infrastructure – to influence EU policymakers. Thus, they each, based on their separate approaches to assessing valid knowledge, attempt to guide political decision-making based on how they view the world.

Haas explains the process of interaction between epistemic communities and policy-makers as follows: “Members of transnational epistemic communities can influence state interests either by directly identifying them for decision makers or by illuminating the salient dimensions of an issue from which the decision makers may then deduce their interests” (Haas, 1992, s. 4). According to Haas, policymakers are often more willing to consult epistemic communities during times of uncertainty, particularly in their search for knowledge on the cause-and-effect relationship (Haas, 1992, s. 15). Beyond simply providing knowledge, epistemic communities can actively shape the interests of the policy-makers, as “the process of elucidating the cause-and-effect relationships of problems can ... lead to the redefinition of preconceived interests or to the identification of new interests” (Haas, 1992, s. 15). Finally, epistemic communities can also influence policy formulation, sometimes by providing

technical guidance, and, in other cases, by offering information that can justify politically motivated decisions.

The power of epistemic communities relies on their expertise and the lack of knowledge of policymakers. Haas describes this as follows:

“If decision makers have no strong preconceived views and beliefs about an issue-area in which regulation is to be undertaken for the first time, an epistemic community can have an even greater impact in shaping their interpretations and actions in this case and in establishing the patterns of behavior that they will follow in subsequent cases regarding the issue-area” (Haas, 1992, s. 29).

Haas emphasises the importance of the notion of “uncertainty”, both in relation to crises and to policymakers’ limited knowledge on specific political issues. In these situations, policymakers turn to epistemic communities to gather information that can guide political decisions. Thus, in times of uncertainty, epistemic communities have the strongest possibility of influencing political decisions.

Haas reflects upon an issue similarly to what Ole Wæver discusses regarding the securitisation of politicised issues. Wæver cautions about the issue of excessive securitisation, arguing that too much securitisation might have negative consequences to an extent where desecuritisation of issues becomes needed (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 4). In relation to this, Haas argues that “misperceptions of the nature of the international setting, as well as misperceptions of others' intentions and actions, are most likely to occur under conditions of uncertainty” (Haas, 1992, s. 14). In this statement, Haas again emphasises the notion of “uncertainty”, arguing that in times of uncertainty or due to lack of knowledge on specific issue, policymakers risk making hasty decision based on the impact of epistemic communities. As epistemic communities interpret cases based on their belief system, which is not necessarily equivalent with the normal direction of political interests, policymakers thus risk making decisions based on misperceptions, grounded in normative and principled beliefs.

This can be projected onto the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation, with which the EU went from representing openness and diversity to introducing protectionist measures. COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port, and a general increase in Chinese FDI in European

strategic infrastructure, represented a time of uncertainty, which by the EU was perceived as an existential threat. The EU's response to Chinese investments has been marked by internal divisions, reflecting a lack of a shared understanding among member states. As Haas points out, "even the international context in which problems are to be resolved is not equally transparent to all actors. Factors such as these can contribute to the breakdown of cooperation" (Haas, 1992, s. 28). This disparity is evident in the way EU member states perceive Chinese investments. Some view them as opportunities for economic growth, while others see them as threats to security and strategic autonomy. Essentially, this is what the EU fears: internal division entailed by the distinct views of member states on Chinese investments.

In the EU, division among member states over Chinese investments is not just a matter of national interests but are also shaped by conflicting perspectives of epistemic communities. As Haas explains, epistemic communities influence policy decisions by interpreting international issues based on their normative principles. This is reinforced by the debate between Jonas Parello-Plesner, who frames Chinese investments as a security threat, and Svend Roed Nielsen, who views them through a pragmatic lens. These contrasting views among experts mirror the division among EU member states, where countries like Greece, focused on economic benefits, support openness, while others like France advocate for stricter security measures. Thus, the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation can be seen as the outcome of both expert-driven debates and a political compromise between member states.

Analysis

Contextualising Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure: The case of Piraeus Port

COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port can be seen as a milestone in China's Belt and Road Initiative and a key example of Chinese SOEs expanding abroad. This section examines the strategic, economic, and political dimensions of the acquisition, revealing how commercial activities align with China's geopolitical ambitions.

In 2016, COSCO acquired a 51% stake in Piraeus Port Authority (PPA), the company managing and operating the important maritime hub in Greece, for 280.5 million euros. However, COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port had been in the works for a long time before 2016 (Calatayud, 2023, s. 4). In 2008, COSCO and PPA entered into a 35-year concession agreement, giving COSCO operational control of Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT) to manage Pier 2 and later Pier 3 for an annual fee of 100 million euros. Today, COSCO owns 67% of the shares in PPA and has full ownership of PCT, making the Chinese shipping company the majority shareholder of the port, while controlling management and operation of the port (Jackson, Li, & Masino, 2024).

In 2016, the leadership of COSCO, along with Chinese and Greek officials, expressed satisfaction with COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port. The president of COSCO at the time, Wan Min, emphasised the economic advantages of the cooperation that would benefit both China and Greece. He also marked the beginning of a new era of trade collaboration and cultural exchange between the East and the West (China Daily, 2016). The agreement has been named the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe. Xi Jinping during a visit to Greece in 2014, meeting the Greek prime minister, Antonis Samaras, stated that COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port was "an important bridgehead and transit point" (China Daily, 2016). Following COSCO's acquisition, Piraeus Port experienced a rise in revenue, and the investment was met with approval from the Greek government and the shipowners' lobby, who viewed it as beneficial to the economy (Calatayud, 2023, s. 3). The Greek Prime Minister at the time, Alexis Tsipras, also argued that the agreement provided an opportunity for both countries to develop a growth trajectory that would benefit all parties involved. Additionally, Tsipras stated that "the

agreement sends a strong message to the global economic community for the recovery of the Greek economy” (China Daily, 2016). This statement most likely served as a message to the EU, as Greece had felt that the EU did not adequately support the country during their financial difficulties (Cassidy, 2015). It can be argued that this indicates a sign of internal division within the EU on foreign investments that to an extent undermines the EU’s governing authority, which will be further examined later on within the framework of political securitisation.

Division was also present within Greece, where local communities and organisations expressed concern over the negative consequences of COSCO’s acquisition. Small businesses argued that COSCO had established a monopoly, making it difficult for them to compete, while labour unions raised issues regarding job instability and declining wages (Calatayud, 2023, s. 3). This furthermore reinforces the concern of EU policymakers that China is challenging the rules and norms set up by the EU by not competing on fair terms, given the amount of state subsidies and preferential access to public procurement provided to Chinese SOE’s by the Chinese government.

As mentioned, Chinese investments in Piraeus Port had in 2016 been long underway. Already in the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese government was particularly interested in investing in Piraeus due to its strategic important position, and the CCP appointed COSCO’s CEO at the time to secure a deal with the Greek Government (Calatayud, 2023, s. 6). Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative is an expansion of then-president Jiang Zemin’s “Going Out Policy”, initiated in 1999 and aimed at encouraging Chinese companies to place investments abroad. In 2009, the Chinese prime-minister, Wen Jiabao, stated: “we should hasten the implementation of our ‘going out’ strategy and combine the utilization of foreign exchange reserves with the ‘going out’ of our enterprises” (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 89). This demonstrates the significant role of Chinese SOEs in carrying out overseas investments and highlights the state’s involvement in providing financial support to benefit political goals (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 90). From 2003 to 2015, it is possible to detect a massive increase in Chinese FDI in non-financial sectors from 3.6 billion USD in 2003 to 141.2 billion USD in 2015 (Eisenman, 2018, s. 9). Chinese investments in infrastructure projects accelerated significantly with the launch of the BRI in 2013 (Eisenman, 2018, s. 2). The surge inevitably raised awareness

among EU officials, a concern that became more pronounced following COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port in 2016.

The framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is composed of two main components: a continental part, under Belt, and a maritime part, under Road. Piraeus Port, strategically located in the Mediterranean, serves as an important maritime hub, well-connected to continental Europe via railway networks to Hungary with Budapest serving as a key continental hub (Calatayud, 2023, s. 5). As a result, COSCO holds a crucial position within the Chinese economy, controlling Piraeus Port, a significant logistics hub in Europe.

The key objectives of the BRI is “extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits” (2023). The BRI favours win-win cooperation and emphasises the need to enhance multilateral governance through global cooperation. Thus, being a response to Western-led unilateralism: “certain countries have practiced unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism, hampering economic globalization and threatening a global economic recession” (2023). China aims, with the BRI, to break away from the unilateral, western-led economy by strengthening policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade relations, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds between countries engaged in the Belt and Road Initiative (Yuzhu & Shicheng, 2022, s. 111-112). This is exactly what the EU fears, namely the weakening of the liberal world order, which has led to growing security discourse in the wake of increasing Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure.

In 2021, the EU launched the Global Gateway project, which arguably seeks to provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, the EU's Global Gateway has not generated the same level of interest from countries around the world as the BRI. Criticism of the EU initiative points to its high level of shared values, sustainability, anti-corruption measures, and transparency, which has made the project less attractive. In contrast, China's more centralised approach allows for faster project execution and less bureaucracy, which has contributed to the widespread interest in the BRI. Furthermore, the BRI had existed for eight years at the time the Global Gateway was launched, allowing China to establish strong partnerships with many countries and become the largest trading partner for many of them.

These circumstances make it difficult for the EU to compete with Chinese investment projects (García-Herrero, 2024).

COSCO plays a significant role in China's Belt and Road Initiative by enhancing global trade connectivity. As one of the largest shipping and logistics companies in the world, COSCO supports the infrastructure development of ports, shipping routes, and logistics networks that are central to the BRI. COSCO helps facilitate trade between China and other countries involved in the initiative, reinforcing China's influence in global trade relations and in advancing the BRI's goals of fostering economic cooperation and connectivity (Yifan, 2022).

Piraeus Port is strategically significant, serving as a key gateway to Europe as part of the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line, which is also a BRI project. As a multimodal transport corridor, it combines rail and maritime transport, linking China to Europe via Southeast Europe. Piraeus Port serves as a connection hub between the maritime transportation route that connects Piraeus to Chinese coastal ports and the railway line, connecting Piraeus to Budapest in Hungary (Li, 2022, s. 496). Su Xudong, president of COSCO Shipping Group Piraeus Port Co., highlights the increased efficiency that the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line has entailed: “containers can be shipped from a river port in Changsha, transported via the Yangtze River to Shanghai, then shipped to Piraeus. After unloading at Piraeus, they are transported by rail to Prague” (Zeya, 2024). The new route thus cuts transit times by 7-10 days compared to traditional routes, offering a more direct and efficient route, with over 30 trains weekly connecting Piraeus to nine European inland stations, serving countries like Greece, Hungary, and Spain, benefiting 71 million people along the way.

COSCO's expansion into the Mediterranean via Piraeus Port was facilitated by the structural advantages of operating as a SOE, having access to cheap financing, diplomatic support, and coordination with other SOEs along the value chain. These advantages reflect China's broader use of economic statecraft, where SOEs act as tools of geopolitical influence (Banach & Gunter, 2023). State support from the Chinese government played a crucial role in COSCO acquisition of Piraeus Port, surpassing among others the Danish shipping giant Maersk. Maersk could not offer the same long-term support and engagement as COSCO, ultimately presenting the Chinese SOE as the strongest candidate (Banach & Gunter, 2023).

COSCO's acquisition and expansion of Piraeus Port exemplifies Norris's definition of economic statecraft as state manipulation of international economic activities for strategic purposes (Norris, 2016). By integrating Piraeus into the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line, China strengthens its trade position in Europe while increasing regional dependence on Chinese-controlled infrastructure. This not only enhances China's logistical dominance but also provides the CCP with greater economic leverage in foreign policy. As a key SOE, COSCO plays a central role in achieving the objectives under the BRI by expanding China's maritime trade network. China's leadership, including former Premier Li Keqiang, has actively facilitated cooperation with European countries to develop key infrastructure, such as the Hungary-Serbia Railway and the expansion of Piraeus Port, reinforcing COSCO's strategic role. Through these initiatives, COSCO not only expands its commercial reach but also advances the CCP's goal of reshaping global trade dynamics under the BRI.

David Baldwin defines economic statecraft as the use of economic resources to exert influence, a concept that closely aligns with how China integrates commercial actors, such as COSCO, into its broader geopolitical strategy. Baldwin's focus on economic resources as a means of exerting influence can be seen in the way China uses infrastructure investments and control over vital trade hubs to expand its global influence, particularly in regions central to the BRI. However, as William Norris argues, economic statecraft is not simply about state control over commercial actors but depends on state unity, alignment of objectives, and the reporting relationship between the state and commercial actors (Norris, 2016, s. 7). COSCO, as a major SOE, exemplifies this dynamic within the BRI. While COSCO operates as a commercial entity, its actions reflect a high degree of alignment with China's BRI-objectives and demonstrate how China strategically uses economic investments to strengthen trade connectivity and enhance its influence in Europe. This fits with Norris's argument that states with strong control mechanisms can more effectively direct commercial actors to serve national interests. Through its engagements in Piraeus Port, COSCO not only expands its market presence but also serves as an instrument of China's economic statecraft, reinforcing the CCP's ability to shape global trade routes and economic dependencies.

In the case of COSCO and the CCP, party-state capitalism can be a tool to break down the dynamics of the Chinese SOE framework, uncovering COSCO's role within the Chinese system.

Essential parts of the system that govern Chinese SOEs are the Organisation Department of the CCP and SASAC.

From 1988 to 1998, state ownership in China was controlled by the State Assets Administration Bureau, however, when it was abolished, it led to fragmented authority control over SOEs. In 2003, SASAC was created, thus again centralising ownership over SOEs, and the control was strengthened in the following years (Naughton, n.d.). In 2006, SASAC's introduced the classification of industries into strategic and pillar industries, which directly influenced how COSCO was prioritised in the economic strategy of the CCP. By categorising shipping as a strategic industry, COSCO received preferred access to state resources, including capital and loans (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 33-34). Furthermore, the categorisation also meant that COSCO's operations were highly aligned with China's long-term geopolitical strategies, which especially became evident with the Belt and Road Initiative. COSCO and the Chinese government began showing interest in Piraeus Port in 2008, just a few years after the establishment of SASAC and the classification of industries. Arguably, this timing suggests that the restructuring of the system around SOEs was a deliberate effort to align SOEs more closely with China's economic and geopolitical goals, empowering them to pursue foreign investments while furthering China's strategic objectives. According to William Norris, this highlights the critical role of state unity. Between 1998 and 2003, ownership of SOEs was fragmented, however, the creation of SASAC, strengthened the state's ability to exert stronger and more effective authority over SOEs (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 33-34). As Norris argues, the more unified the state is, the easier it becomes for the state to exercise state control.

The Organisation Department is responsible for the cadre management system, which plays a central role in appointing top executives within SOEs (Jin, Xu, Xin, & Adhikari, 2022). This centralised control ensures that SOE leadership remains politically reliable and aligned with party objectives. This was the case with COSCO's former president Wan Min, who oversaw the acquisition of Piraeus Port in 2016 (Calatayud, 2023, s. 5). Besides ensuring a strong financial performance, SOE executives must ensure that the SOE's performance is in alignment with state objectives, thus it can be said that they operate within a dual accountability structure. On one hand, SOE executives are expected to deliver strong financial results, and on the other hand, their careers are closely tied to their ability to serve the CCP's strategic priorities

(Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2011, s. 3). In this light, COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus can be understood not only as a commercially strategic decision but also as an expression of alignment with China's global infrastructure and influence ambitions under the BRI. This is further backed by Piraeus Port being part of the BRI, thereby cementing the connection to the CCP. Essentially, the cadre management system ensures that executives like Wan Min are not merely business leaders, but political actors serving political ambitions of the party-state, reinforcing the idea that SOEs are instruments of economic statecraft rather than purely market-driven entities.

Another example is Wei Jiafu, who was president of COSCO from 1998 to 2013. During this period, COSCO expanded its presence on foreign markets, among others with its engagements in Piraeus. In an interview reflecting on entrepreneurship, Wei Jiafu stated: "try to become a politician. A mature entrepreneur has to learn to do things from a political angle, both in terms of solving problems and in terms of managing the enterprise" (Yang, n.d., s. 95). This quote exemplifies the dual role of SOE executives, not just as corporate leaders but as political actors operating under the strategic vision of the CCP. According to Norris, the reporting relationship between the state and the commercial actor is strong when the state has huge influence on the strategy, agenda setting, and daily operations of the SOE (Norris, 2016, s. 28). SOE executives are appointed for their loyalty to the party and not merely based on their ability to foster economic results. Many of these executives are also CCP members, reinforcing a strong reporting relationship between the state and the commercial actor. Based on the theoretical framework of economic statecraft, the CCP has strong control over its SOEs based on its influential role explained by party-state capitalism.

According to a study by Yuan Ma and Peter J. Peverelli (2019), there are two key events highlighting how COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port stemmed from diplomatic meetings between both commercial executives and political representatives. This first was in 2005, when the Greek vice-minister of foreign affairs for economic development, Mr. Evripidis Stylianidis, visited China. He wanted to enhance relations with China at a time where Greece looked to expand its relations towards the East. Afraid that the Italians would ensure a better deal with China, the Greek prime minister urged the government to act fast on reaching out to Chinese officials, and in 2005 Mr. Stylianidis visited China. Mr. Stylianidis has described Wei Jiafu,

president of COSCO, as “a key person in creating the contract”, among other mentioning the influence that Wei Jiafu had due to his position in the CCP. The second key event occurred in 2006, when the Greek prime minister, Costas Karamanlis, made an official visit to China. He was accompanied by the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Chairman of the Greek Ship Owners Association, and the President of the Port of Piraeus. On the other side of the table, the Chinese government had invited Wei Jiafu to attend.

Norris argues that it is commercial actors, rather than states, that drive economic relations, which these events reinforce. The intention of these two meetings were to strengthen relations between China and Europe. The participation of the president of Piraeus Port as well as the president of COSCO indicates that they intended to increase collaboration through the Greek maritime trade hub. Xi Jinping has described Piraeus as “an important bridgehead and transit point” (China Daily, 2016) for cooperation between China and Europe. His characterisation is notable, as it directly connects COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port to China-Europa collaboration, highlighting Piraeus Ports’s strategic role as a key transition hub between maritime and rail routes in Europe.

Wei Jiafu was both a CCP member and held the role of conceptual vice-minister, allowing him to represent the government at certain occasions, while being president of COSCO (Ma & Peverelli, 2019, s. 55). As Evripidis Stylianidis described, Wei Jiafu was a very influential person initially responsible for establishing contact between the two parties. His presence at both the 2005 and 2006 meetings underscores his role as a politically embedded actor in China’s foreign economic engagements. As a politically embedded SOE executive, Wei Jiafu acted not just as a business leader but as a strategic actor aligned with Chinese state objectives, reflecting the dual accountability structure of Chinese SOEs. Viewed through the lens of party-state capitalism, COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus was not merely a commercial decision, but a politically coordinated move serving China’s broader geopolitical agenda.

The main differences between Chinese SOEs and European SOEs are related to corporate governance and sectoral coverage (García-Herrero & Xu, How to handle state-owned enterprises in EU-China investment talks, 2017, s. 1). Chinese SOEs maintain close ties to the Chinese state and the CCP: executives are political appointed, strategic goals set by the CCP

are often prioritised over economic profitability, and these enterprises benefit from state subsidies and preferential access to public procurement.

“Most Chinese SOEs, even now, are not established on the basis of correcting market failure, but more to carry out government objectives (García-Herrero & Xu, How to handle state-owned enterprises in EU-China investment talks, 2017, s. 6) ... State-owned enterprises in the EU are of a very different nature. They are generally smaller than Chinese SOEs. They are typically found in sectors affected by potential market failure and externalities, such as utilities” (García-Herrero & Xu, How to handle state-owned enterprises in EU-China investment talks, 2017, s. 7).

Thus, in contrast, European SOEs typically focus on improving market efficiency in situations where the free market fails to deliver optimal results. Within the EU, economic interest and political objectives can intersect, however, the same top-down management and loyalty to the party state do not exist to the same degree as in China. EU officials take a critical stance towards foreign SOEs that benefit from extensive state subsidies and preferential access to public procurement, arguing that this leads to distorted competition and gives these foreign companies an unfair advantage. Furthermore, they criticise SOEs that operate as part of a declared government strategy, but fail to comply with EU rules and standards, reflecting also a lack of transparency. The focus of EU discourse points to several factors that, from the EU Commission’s viewpoint, set foreign SOEs apart from European SOEs. Thus, in contrast to Chinese SOEs, European SOEs are portrayed as adhering to rules on fair competition and transparency, while prioritising economic goals over political interests.

COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port exemplifies how Chinese SOEs are employed as strategic statecraft of China’s broader geopolitical objectives, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. The case of Piraeus illustrates the intersection of economic statecraft and party-state capitalism, where SOE activities are deeply embedded in the political ambitions of the CCP. The significant state backing behind COSCO’s expansion has raised questions within the EU about unfair competition, economic dependency, and loss of strategic control. This case laid the foundation for the EU’s growing apprehension towards Chinese FDI, especially in strategic infrastructure, and set the stage for a shift in discourse from viewing Chinese FDI as

an economic opportunity to a potential security threat. Contextualising Chinese investments as not only commercially motivated but also geopolitically significant sets the stages for examining the EU's securitisation of Chinese FDI.

How has the EU securitised Chinese foreign investments? The case of Piraeus Port

The EU's discourse, framing Chinese investments as a threat aligns with the political and economic sectors of securitisation theory. As Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde argue, "the European Union can be existentially threatened by events that might undo its integration process" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). Through speech acts, the EU can thus present certain actors or developments, such as Chinese investments, as existential threats to its economic autonomy and political cohesion.

Within this framework, the EU is the securitising actors, presenting Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure as existential threats, particularly through political discourse of EU commissioners. The referent object of this securitisation process is the EU's institutional authority and the liberal international economic order, while the audience is the EU member states, particularly Greece. The success of the securitisation depends on the audience's acceptance, which is reflected in policy measures like the FDI screening mechanism.

Economic securitisation: Constructing Chinese FDI as a threat to the EU's rule-based, economic order

The EU establishes a perception of Chinese investments as a threat by differentiating China and the Chinese economic system from the EU's and the traditional European investment partners (Schilder, 2022, s. 7). According to Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde, when the EU frames certain developments as threats to its rules, norms, and institutional integrity, it legitimises the securitisation of those issues (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22). Thus, by portraying China and Chinese investments as an opposite to the EU, challenging European political and economic structures, the EU creates a basis for presenting China as a threat to the EU as an institution.

European commissioner for trade between 2014-2019, Cecilia Malmström at a public hearing in 2018 stated:

“Traditionally, our investment partners have been countries with similar economic values as ours: using the same rulebook. However, global markets have changed and there are new powerful players emerging who do not always have the same standards, not always have the same rules, and who do not always play fair [...] This is the background that we need to have when we talk about the Commission’s proposal on investment screening” (Schilder, 2022, s. 7).

She uses a ‘them and us’ narrative when talking about the EU’s traditional investment partners and the common rulebook. She uses words such as “our” and “we” to highlight this divide. This type of discourse can according to Lene Hansen’s approach to poststructuralist discourse analysis be categorised as a spatial construction. By contrasting the EU’s economic system and rulebook with China’s, the EU discursively separates itself (the self) from “new powerful actors” (the other). This spatial separation is not just geographical but also economic and regulatory.

When referring to “new powerful players”, it is likely that she refers to China. When examining investment flows into the EU, China is one of the key non-EU investors, particularly during the 2016-2018 period when this statement was made (European Commission, 2017). Moreover, China has for decades been an emerging economy that challenges the EU and its Western allies (Song, 2015, s. 146), thus making it easy to interpret Malmström’s statement as describing China. Her discourse suggests that over time, the investment landscape of the EU has shifted from partnerships with trusted allies to a new era where powerful actors, playing by different rules, challenge the EU’s established norms. The phrase, “global markets have changed,” reflects a temporal construction. Furthermore, there is also an ethical narrative in the suggestion that these new players may not “play fair.”

This threat image is reinforced by Violeta Bulc, EU commissioner for transport from 2014-2019:

“The EU welcomes any kind of investment of money, but there is a big “but”. If that money is related to transport in the EU, European standards must be respected, otherwise the member state will have a problem. That is the only obstacle. If an investor respects the

European standards, he has to respect the rules on state aid, public procurement and the like” (Matijašević, 2017).

Her reference to “rules on state aid” and “public procurement” again emphasises the EU rulebook and the expectation that foreign investors must adhere to it. This discourse aligns with concerns about Chinese SOEs, as “state aid” most likely refers to Chinese state subsidies, and “public procurement” can be interpreted in relation to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and associated FDI flows.

Violeta Bulc’s reference to rules on “state aid” and “public procurement” reflect a concern about the Chinese economic model marked by state control and politically driven commercial actors. This supports the EU’s concern that investments, such as COSCO’s acquisition of the Piraeus Port, are not merely economic, but also politically and strategically motivated. The EU’s discursive responses can thus be interpreted as a reaction to China’s party-state capitalism, where the distinction between state and enterprise becomes increasingly blurred. Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde argues that the liberal international economic order is the most important referent object in the economic sector of securitisation theory (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 103), and the EU can be threatened by factors that undermine this economic order. In this light, the EU’s securitisation of Chinese investments can be seen as an attempt to defend the liberal economic order against the Chinese state-capitalist model in which political control infiltrates economic decision-making.

Violeta Bulc with this statement draws a clear boundary between the EU (the self) and external investors (the other), reflecting a spatial discourse. The EU discursively establishes itself as a region with a distinct set of values and rules, separate from external actors like China. This statement also reveals an ethical discourse. By insisting that foreign investors respect European standards, the EU not only protects its economic interests but also reinforces a self-representation of the EU as a region that upholds ethical principles.

Jyrki Katainen, then vice-president of the European Commission and Commissioner for jobs, growth, investment, and competitiveness, further underscored these points at a press conference in September 2017:

“The EU is and will remain one of the most open investment regimes in the world ... Foreign direct investment is an important source of growth, jobs and innovation. However, we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that in certain cases foreign take-overs can be detrimental to our interests” (Apelblat, 2017).

Katainen’s statement, “foreign take-overs can be detrimental to our interest”, reflects the core elements behind the FDI screening legislation. It reflects the growing recognition that certain foreign investments, particularly take-overs like COSCO’s takeover of Piraeus Port, pose a risk to European security. His remark thus signals a securitising move framing FDI as a security issue, essentially justifying protective measures, such as the FDI screening regulation. By specifically referring to “foreign take-overs” rather than simply “investors”, it immediately brings to mind COSCO’s acquisition of Piraeus Port, as a takeover is the act of gaining control of a company by buying more of its shares than anyone else (Kenton, 2020), which was what happened in Piraeus. Like Malmström, Katainen uses a “us vs. them” discourse to establish a threat perception of “foreign take-overs.” This again reflects a spatial discourse, where the EU positions itself as a globally open investment regime while asserting that foreign actors undermine European interests. Additionally, this statement has a temporal dimension, where Katainen acknowledges a shift from a past of unrestricted openness to a present where foreign investments could potentially pose strategic risks. This reflects a recognition that global economic dynamics are changing, requiring the EU to balance openness with protection.

In line with Wæver’s securitisation theory, EU commissioners such as Malmström and Katainen act as securitising actors. By presenting Chinese investments as a deviation from “our rulebook” and a threat to “our interests,” they present a clear referent object: the EU’s economic sovereignty and institutional integrity. This discourse by EU officials is a securitising speech act. They do not merely present certain factors as objective threats stating that China and Chinese investments pose a risk. However, without mentioning China or Chinese investments as such, they use discursive measures to alienate foreign FDI as undermining the rules, norms, and institutions constituting the EU. It is possible to link these statements directly to being about COSCO’s investment in Piraeus, especially when considering the time period and the nature of the Chinese system, including the close ties between the Chinese government and its SOEs.

The securitisation process is only successful when the audience acknowledges the presented issue as a genuine threat. The implementation of the FDI Screening Regulation in 2019, and the revision of it in 2024, demonstrates audience acceptance, especially as screening became mandatory with the revision. The EU, however, can only offer guidance and does not have the authority to make binding decisions on whether to block an investment. This limitation poses a potential challenge to the EU's governing authority.

Political securitisation: Framing Chinese FDI as a threat to EU strategic autonomy

Although China is not explicitly mentioned in many of these statements, the discourse presented by the EU Commission surrounding the FDI Screening Regulation, and broader concerns about FDI, reveals a clear subject. Given China's role as a major investor in European strategic infrastructure, it can be argued that the generalised warnings presented by the EU Commission is a reference to Chinese investments. In this context, EU discourse illustrates a process of political securitisation, which according to Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde include "sovereignty [being] existentially threatened by anything that questions recognition, legitimacy, or governing authority" (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 22).

The FDI Screening Regulation was introduced by, then Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker in his 2017 State of the Union speech:

"If a foreign, state-owned, company wants to purchase a European harbour, part of our energy infrastructure or a defence technology firm, this should only happen in transparency, with scrutiny and debate. It is a political responsibility to know what is going on in our own backyard so that we can protect our collective security if needed" (Juncker, 2017).

Although China is not mentioned directly, the phrase "a foreign, state-owned, company" seeking to purchase "a European harbour" strongly suggests a reference to COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port in 2016. Furthermore, it can be argued that "our own backyard" refers to Greece "given its geographical location that is not in the heart of Europe but at the southern border of the Union, that is, the backyard of the EU" (Schilder, 2022).

Juncker's statement reflects a spatial construction, drawing a clear line between European sovereign territory, saying "our own backyard", and external actors seeking access to

this European territory. By emphasising the need for transparency, scrutiny, and debate, Juncker establishes an idea of the EU as a protected and regulated region, distinct from foreign actors whose actions potentially threaten European security. Furthermore, this statement also reveals an ethical dimension, where Juncker by insisting that foreign investments in strategic sectors must be transparent and subject to public debate, reinforces the EU's identity as a protector of European values and principles.

In his speech, Juncker uses discourse such as “collective security” and “transparency with scrutiny” to justify the introduction of extraordinary measures that would otherwise be politically unacceptable. Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde argue that the purpose of securitising a politicised issue is because when something becomes a security concern, it becomes a matter of urgency and survival, essentially allowing for exceptional actions (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 25). The FDI Screening Regulation can therefore be seen as the outcome of a successful securitisation process. The introduction of the FDI screening legislation furthermore reflects a temporal dimension, where Juncker, as Commission president, acknowledges a shift in the investment landscape from a period of economic openness to one where protective and restrictive measures are increasingly viewed as a necessity to protect European strategic sectors from potential security threats.

Furthermore, in a Commission communication report on “welcoming foreign direct investment while protecting essential interests” (European Commission, 2017), foreign SOEs are again presented as a threat to European autonomy:

“In some economies State-owned Enterprises undertake a significant share of outward foreign direct investment, in some cases as part of a declared government strategy. Beyond direct state ownership in enterprises, we also witness situations whereby certain companies are directly or indirectly influenced by the state through various means, or where the state facilitates foreign take-overs by national companies, notably through facilitating access to financing below market rates” (European Commission, 2017).

The Commission raises concern that certain states actively use SOEs as instruments of strategic foreign policy. Although China is not explicitly mentioned, this statement reflects

concerns about the close ties between Chinese SOEs and the CCP, thus echoing William Norris' economic statecraft theory, arguing that states with a high amount of state control uses commercial actors as economic tools to gain political leverage (Norris, 2016, s. 7). When the Commission highlights a concern over "state ownership" and securitises cases where "the state facilitates foreign take-overs by national companies", it is based on the assumption that Chinese SOEs, such as COSCO, act on behalf of state interests. Based on William Norris' framework on economic statecraft, the EU fears that China employs its commercial actors as instruments in a strategic foreign policy agenda. By highlighting the problematic nature of some foreign SOEs, the Commission establishes a spatial boundary between the rules and norms of the European market and those of foreign state-owned commercial actors. The statement also reveals an ethical construction, where the Commission implicitly contrasts its commitment to fair competition and market transparency with foreign SOEs that benefit from preferential financing, such as state subsidies.

The EU's response can thus be interpreted as an attempt to counter Chinese economic statecraft. However, this is precisely where Norris warns against overestimation, arguing that not all Chinese investments are necessarily directed by the state, and the EU's threat perception may risk being an instance of excessive securitisation.

Research reports and expert group studies might further reinforce the EU's securitisation of Chinese investments by explicitly linking Chinese SOEs to the Chinese government. A report requested by the TRAN committee of the European Parliament, examining "Chinese Investments in European Maritime Infrastructure" (Ghiretti, et al., 2023) echoes the European Commission's concerns by highlighting the risks associated with Chinese SOEs:

"The fact that many Chinese enterprises investing abroad are state-owned raises questions about their autonomy from the government and their integration within the broader system" (Ghiretti, et al., 2023, s. 12).

This framing aligns with the Commission's perception of Chinese SOEs as extensions of the Chinese state, lacking independence, and potentially serving strategic state interests. Such narratives contribute to the construction of China as an "other" in EU discourse, emphasising a spatial distinction between the EU's market-oriented economy and China's state-driven

model. Furthermore, the report particularly highlights the case of Piraeus Port as underscoring concerns about unfair competition and the distortion of market dynamics due to severe financial backing in the form of state subsidies (Ghiretti, et al., 2023, s. 19). This supports the EU's ethical discourse, which emphasises transparency, fairness, and adherence to established rules.

The influence of such research reports on EU policymaking is emphasised in a study by Professor Francesco Duina (2021), examining the extent to which EU policymakers actively engage with academic and research-based evidence. The study highlights that nearly 75% of EU officials reported using academic research in their work, with more than 50% of them finding it “very valuable.” This engagement underscores the role of research reports in shaping policy narratives and legitimising securitisation measures like the FDI screening mechanism. This connection might indicate that reports, such as the one referred to earlier, are significantly influential as to shaping policy interests and decisions. It can be argued that such reports have contributed to the heightened awareness of risks associated with Chinese investments among EU politicians. Notably, the negative perception of China’s foreign infrastructure projects has grown in most EU member states following the intensification of EU securitisation discourse.

In a working paper conducted by the thinktank Bruegel, they present research that shows perceptions of the BRI in different regions of the world in 2017 and in 2021/2022 (García-Herrero & Schindowski, 2023). Their research concludes that Europe is the region in the world where the most significant differences in perceptions can be detected. Most EU member states had a more negative perception of the BRI in 2021/2022 than in 2017, including Denmark, which is the EU country with the largest shift away from a positive sentiment. Also, Greece has shifted from being one of the more positively oriented countries to viewing the BRI negatively. The researchers from Bruegel argue that this shift is a direct reaction to the way the EU has framed China, particularly through their negatively charged discourse on Chinese investments in Europe (García-Herrero & Schindowski, 2023, s. 13).

Audience acceptance and limits of EU securitisation: Greece’s divergence

The EU is challenged on its unified external posture due to internal fragmentation entailed by differentiating attitudes towards Chinese investments and the risks associated with this FDI.

COSCO's engagements in Piraeus Port has increased Greece's economic dependence on Chinese capital, which is problematised by the EU, as it diverges from the unified front that the EU aims to build (Banach & Gunter, 2023). This concern is mirrored in the EU Commission's rhetoric on the FDI Screening Regulation, highlighting the political dimension of the issue and the need for coordinated EU action. The regulation is positioned as a defensive measure not just to protect markets, but to enhance the EU's unity, strategic autonomy, and institutional legitimacy to heighten protection from external threats. This framing exemplifies a move from a politicised issue to a securitised issue, ultimately legitimising the FDI Screening Regulation as an extraordinary legislative measure.

Despite this shift in the EU's discourse, implementation across member states has been uneven, suggesting a limit to successful securitisation. Greece, together with Croatia and Cyprus, has not yet implemented the FDI Screening Regulation. With the revision of the regulation in 2024, it became mandatory for member states to adopt a FDI screening regime, as well as investment screening became mandatory in certain sectors, among other in strategic infrastructure (Kratz, Zenglein, Brown, Sebastian, & Meyer, 2024). This legislative update represents an attempt by the EU to enforce greater alignment across member states and reduce vulnerabilities arising from uncoordinated national policies.

Greece's hesitation towards implementing the EU's FDI Screening Regulation might partly be explained by its dependence on Chinese investments. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, Greece sought to enhance its strategic economic position and actively sought foreign investment to stimulate economic growth. Greece has maintained a more open stance towards China and Chinese investments than many EU member states, which may explain its reluctance to adopt restrictive measures that could discourage future Chinese investments (Banach & Gunter, 2023). This position reflects a broader tension within the EU, where national economic dependencies complicate efforts to formulate a unified and coherent security policy regarding foreign direct investment. From a securitisation perspective, such divergence among member states represents a key challenge to the EU's ability to protect its collective interests, reinforcing the framing of Chinese FDI not only as an economic concern but as a political and institutional threat to EU cohesion.

Even before Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union speech and the introduction of the FDI Screening Regulation, there was a fragmentation within the EU on attitudes towards FDI. 13 countries already had a national screening mechanism in 2017, leaving 15 member states that did not. Thus, when France, Germany, and Italy also in 2017 argued for implementing a collective EU mechanism, they were faced with significant resistance from other EU member states. The resistance towards an investment screening mechanism at the time was related to concerns of the protectionist characteristic of such a regulation. However, many member states agreed to a model that allowed the EU to review foreign investments while granting member states the authority to manage FDI at the national level (Sapir & García-Herrero, 2017). This critique suggests that distinct national interests, based on among others the level of economic dependence on foreign investments, is a challenge for the general cohesion of the EU and its ability to hold a unified external posture. This was the case before the introduction of the FDI Screening Regulation and it continues to be an issue.

Greece was one of the countries leading the opposition against the original proposal by France, Germany, and Italy (Valero, 2018). Greece has become very dependent on COSCO due to the increase in turnover and job creation that has happened since COSCO took ownership of Piraeus Port (Banach & Gunter, 2023). As a result of the 2008 financial crisis, Greece experienced great economic difficulties, leading to the 2015 'Bailout Agreement' that Greece signed with the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. With this agreement, Greece agreed to privatise several of its state-owned assets, including Piraeus Port, to raise money and reduce debt, which created an opportunity for COSCO to increase its ownership of the port in 2016 (Calatayud, 2023, s. 9). The Greek government, across political parties, welcomed COSCO's engagement, seeing it as a way to restore Greece's economy, while promoting China as a partner for trade and economic growth. While there have been concerns about the labour and environmental risks associated with COSCO's presence, the Greek government has remained loyal to the agreement with COSCO, even extending COSCO's stake in 2021 (Calatayud, 2023, s. 10-11). There are examples of Greece vetoing decisions in the EU regarding China on issues on human rights and Hong-Kong, possibly due to the economic benefit that COSCO has had on Greek economy (Emmott & Koutantou, 2017). Thus, showing how economic dependence shapes political behaviour. This

undermines the EU's ability to act as a coherent security actor, thus validating the EU Commission's concern over lack of unity on security issues, undermining the EU's governing authority.

Greece was in opposition to introducing a foreign investment screening from the beginning and has not yet fully implemented the mechanism after it became mandatory with the 2024 revision. This demonstrates that Greece has not accepted the securitising move of the EU. Due to its post-crisis economic vulnerability and dependence on Chinese capital, Greece sees COSCO as an economic partner and not a threat. This shows that the process of securitisation is not automatic but only successful if accepted by the audience, and in this case, Greece has rejected the EU's security framing of Chinese investments as a threat, as it clashes with national economic interests.

In line with the concept of excessive securitisation, it can be argued that the EU's framing of Chinese FDI risks portraying all Chinese investments as existential threats, despite that not all Chinese investments are necessarily directed by the state. This may result in exaggerated threat perceptions that hinder beneficial economic cooperation. In a whitepaper published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China in October 2023, marking the 10-year anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, China presents its view on the BRI project and its results. In the paper, it is stated that "the principle of joint contribution highlights that the BRI is not one of China's international aid programs or geopolitical tool, but a collaborative effort for shared development" (2023). This statement can be seen as a direct counter-narrative to the securitisation discourse presented by the EU, explicitly rejecting the idea that the BRI functions as a "geopolitical tool". The paper furthermore presents favourable results, such as the case of Piraeus Port: "The annual cargo throughput of the Port of Piraeus in Greece has increased to above 5 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), making it the fourth largest TEU port in Europe and a leading TEU port in the Mediterranean" (2023). Additionally, the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line is mentioned as a route that has enhanced trade efficiency and reduced transit time drastically. These examples suggest that EU security discourse might be exceeded. By framing Chinese investments as potential security threats, the EU narrative may hinder rational policy debate on issues regarding China and possibly disregard the potential benefits from cooperation, such as through the BRI.

Securitising discourse of EU stakeholders often focusses on a “us vs. them” rhetoric, framing China as a threat to the rules, norms, and institutions that constitutes the EU. This framing can be misleading, particularly given that EU member states are not unified in the perception of Chinese investments, as some member states have actively welcomed BRI-related projects due to their economic benefits. This divergence highlights internal division within the EU and undermines the notion of a coherent and collective threat perception, further supporting the argument that EU discourse may be excessively securitised. This is relevant regarding the EU’s concern that its governing authority and internal cohesion is threatened. However, while the real source of fragmentation might actually come from within and be based on internal fragmentation, China is often framed as the primary source of this division. Thus, the EU’s emphasis on protecting strategic autonomy and shielding strategic infrastructure could be seen as extending the security logic beyond necessity, leading to a situation where beneficial initiatives are met with deep suspicion, leading to distrust and retaliatory policymaking.

By portraying China as a threat, claiming that the Chinese party-led investment model is incompatible with EU rules and norms, the EU has justified extraordinary policy response in the form of the FDI Screening Regulation. This securitisation is primarily led by the EU Commission aiming to reinforce unity and protect liberal economic values, despite underlying divisions among member states. The process demonstrates how economic concerns can be turned into security issues through discourse and identity construction, setting the stage for a closer examination of how epistemic communities further shapes and reinforces these securitising narratives within the EU.

Economy vs. security: How do epistemic communities influence EU securitisation of Chinese foreign investments?

The relationship between the EU and China has evolved significantly in recent years, characterised by a growing tension between economic cooperation and security concerns. According to a study by Kaveshnikov and Lupaltsova (2024), the development of European experts' interests in China has experienced a dramatic surge since 2017. European experts have increasingly portrayed China as a “rival” to the EU. A significant portion of this coverage has gone even further, framing China as an “enemy.” From this study, it is plausible to establish

a connection between increased engagement from EU expert communities and their negative framing of China as a “rival” and “enemy,” to the change in EU discourse on Chinese investments during the same time period. This may indicate that EU politicians have been influenced by epistemic communities advocating for stronger protectionist measures and a more balanced or independent relationship with China.

As previously mentioned, research reports conducted by for example think tanks can have a great impact on EU policymaking (Duina, 2021). Think tanks, consultancy firms, NGO’s etc., can function as securitising actors, as defined by Ole Wæver, where actors frame an issue as an existential threat to justify extraordinary measures (Wæver, Buzan, & Wilde, 1998, s. 25). By labelling China as a “rival” or “enemy,” such expert communities have effectively securitised EU-China relations, influencing EU policy decisions.

Building on a different study, examining the impact epistemic communities had on the formulation of the EU Security Sector Reform (Faleg, 2012), this study will examine the role of epistemic communities in shaping EU securitisation discourse. It will also explore whether the division between prominent epistemic groups may have contributed to the disagreements among EU member states, resulting in the flexible scope of the FDI screening regulation. Epistemic communities in the sense defined by Peter M. Haas can have significant influence by providing policy-relevant knowledge to EU policymakers. According to Haas, policymakers, especially in times of uncertainty, tend to rely on epistemic communities to guide their decisions. The EU's adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation in 2019 can be seen as a direct response to the securitising discourse advanced by these communities.

To explain the division between EU member states on the issue of Chinese FDI, it can be viewed within a framework of an economy-security nexus, a concept that can be used to explain how the EU seeks to balance economic interests and security concerns. The FDI Screening Regulation embodies this balancing act, as it aims to maintain an open investment environment while protecting strategic sectors from potential threats. With this regulation, it is demonstrated how the EU integrates security considerations into its economic policymaking. Ultimately, the rise in negative assessments of China as an “enemy” and “rival” among EU

expert communities, and the entailed division between economic and security perspectives, may indicate a significant impact on EU policy.

In the following section, this dynamic will be explored and discussed based on interviews with two stakeholders, drawing on Peter M. Haas's four characteristics: normative and principled beliefs, causal beliefs, notions of validity, and policy enterprise. The interviewees represent two contrasting perspectives: Svend Roed Nielsen from Think Tank Europa represents economic pragmatism, and Jonas Parello-Plesner from Rasmussen Global views Chinese FDI through a security lens.

Competing normative and principled beliefs – From realpolitik to securitisation

Svend Roed Nielsen adopts a pragmatic view, emphasising the potential benefits of Chinese investments, as long as these investments are effectively monitored and regulated. He states, “we need to conduct a much more pragmatic and less idealistic foreign policy.”¹ His comment addresses those EU leaders, including Denmark's prime minister Mette Frederiksen, and other prominent figures, who advocate for a decoupling strategy from China as a preferable alternative to Ursula von der Leyen's de-risking strategy. His argument rests on the fact that we cannot, as long as the global world is as unstable as now, afford to have a debate on principles and values. Instead, Roed Nielsen argues that “we have a de-risking policy, we have the tools, now we need to try to use them as effectively as possible.”² Thereby, he states, “this is realpolitik. We have to live with it.”³ This highlights Roed Nielsen's pragmatic normative belief that the EU should favour economic engagement with China despite security concerns, as long as adequate regulatory tools exist. His emphasis on “realpolitik” suggests a focus on practical outcomes over ideological principles. This clashes with the focus of EU securitisation discourse where ethical dynamics, such as upholding ethical principles and protecting European values, are emphasised.

Jonas Parello-Plesner emphasises security concerns, warning that Chinese investments, particularly in strategic infrastructure, pose a risk to the EU due to the potential for state

¹ “Vi er nødt til at føre meget mere pragmatisk og mindre idealistisk udenrigspolitik” (Appendix 1, s. 5).

² “Vi har en de-risk politik, vi har redskaberne, nu må vi prøve at bruge de redskaber bedst muligt” (Appendix 1, s. 4).

³ “Det er realpolitik. Det er vi nødt til at leve med” (Appendix 1, s. 4).

influence through Chinese SOEs. He begins the interview stating, “broadly speaking, I believe that Chinese state-owned investments in critical infrastructure are problematic.”⁴ He believes that the EU has been too naive towards the risks coming from letting Chinese SOE’s invest unregulated in European strategic infrastructure.

Parello-Plesner has held advisory roles in similar debates, among others concerning the risks associated with Huawei as a 5G provider and has actively advocated for the development of the FDI Screening Regulation. He refers to the EU as “klassens flinke dreng” by which he means that while the EU has made efforts to be tough and protect critical sectors, such as through the introduction of the FDI Screening Regulation, it has proven ineffective in enforcing adequate protection. He sees this regulation as a hesitant move by the EU, acting reactively, and he questions “whether we still have all the tools to actually address [the threat].”⁵ Consequently, he remains sceptical towards the extent to which the FDI Screening Regulation can protect European infrastructure against external threats, among others from Chinese FDI. To the question on whether the current FDI screening mechanism is sufficient, he answered as follows:

“There is definitely more that can be done. I mean, the FDI screening at the European level is somewhat of a lowest common denominator, and it’s also very much up to the individual countries. Denmark, for example, has only recently introduced its own investment screening mechanism. So, that could definitely be strengthened and made more detailed.”⁶

Here, he among others point to the fact that it is up to each member state to welcome or reject foreign investments, which he emphasises as problematic. This underlines Parello-Plesner’s normative belief that security concerns should be prioritised over economic benefits,

⁴ ”Jeg mener sådan over en kam at kinesiske statsejede investeringer i kritisk infrastruktur er problematiske” (Appendix 2, s. 7).

⁵ “... om man så stadigvæk har alle værktøjerne til faktisk at kunne adressere det” (Appendix 2, s. 8).

⁶ “Der kan godt gøres mere. Altså FDI-screeningen, her på europæisk plan er jo lidt sådan en laveste fællesnævner, og det er jo meget også landene selv, Danmark har jo også lige over de senere år fået en investerings screenings mekanisme. Så det kunne man helt sikkert godt styrke og gøre mere finmasket” (Appendix 2, s. 8).

highlighting a more sceptical view of Chinese investments and the EU's capability to manage associated risks within the current framework.

Divergent causal beliefs – Pragmatic engagement vs. security-orientation

Svend Roed Nielsen and Jonas Parello-Plesner differ in their understanding of the causal dynamics of Chinese investments. Their causal beliefs are directly linked to their normative principles, advocating for respectively economic pragmatism and security-orientation. Svend Roed Nielsen views Chinese investments primarily as an economic opportunity that can be balanced with legislative measures. He argues that investments like COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port can be beneficial if it is managed with caution, and he is generally positive towards EU measures to reduce the risks from Chinese foreign investments. His rationale is to trust the current screening mechanism:

“We now have frameworks in place. We have introduced tools that address, at least, the top risks, and I would say, as I see it, if we trust the reports from screening and export controls, there isn't much risk beyond the top risks we have removed with investment screening and export controls.”⁷

From his perspective, the implementation of EU frameworks, such as investment screening, will reduce the risks associated with Chinese foreign investments. During the interview, we discussed whether the current legislation can effectively protect against risks associated with approved FDIs, such as COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port. Specifically, we considered the possibility that an investment initially approved under seemingly legitimate and beneficial conditions could later become a threat, for instance, if the company merges with another entity or undergoes restructuring. Roed Nielsen acknowledged this concern but argued that “more and more stringent rules are being put in place regarding what you should screen, how you should screen, and how you should report to the Commission. So, it works much better now, but it's not foolproof.”⁸

⁷ “Vi har nu rammer. Vi har indført nogle redskaber, der tager i hvert fald i toppen af risiciene, og jeg vil sige, der er ikke som jeg ser det, hvis vi ellers stoler på de rapporter fra screening og eksportkontrol, så er der ikke meget risiko under den top som vi har fjernet med investeringsscreening og eksportkontrol” (Appendix 1, s. 4).

⁸ “Man får også mere og mere stringente regler for hvad er det I skal screene, hvordan er det I skal screene, hvordan skal I rapportere ind til Kommission. Så det fungerer væsentligt bedre nu, men det er ikke vandtæt” (Appendix 1, s. 3).

The FDI screening legislation is a product of compromise, where EU member states have fundamentally different priorities. Whereas some seek economic openness, which has been the case with Greece, others are more security-oriented, which we have seen with France, Germany, and Italy in an earlier example.

Svend Roed Nielsen touch upon the concern of internal cohesion as a consequence of taking a too tough stance on Chinese investments: “At the moment, most countries want stability. So, I believe it is very intentional to say that we might have the optimal situation now. We have a framework that member states have learned to live with and are comfortable with.”⁹ He emphasises that most EU countries want stability and are comfortable with the screening mechanism in place. This indicates that EU member states have reached a compromise, accepting the current framework without pushing for stricter measures. This again points to a lack of internal cohesion, resulting from the challenge of the diverse threat perceptions and economic priorities of member states. His viewpoint reflects a pragmatic approach, where a less strict policy is preferred to avoid internal conflict and maintain collective unity. EU member states have different priorities, where some prioritises economic benefits, others prioritise security concerns. Thus, to avoid internal conflict and maintain collective unity, the EU ended up adopting a less strict FDI screening policy.

As discussed previously, the compromise can be seen as an example of successful securitisation by EU policymakers. The efficiency of the current regulation can however be discussed. Roed Nielsen asserts that the outcome of COSCO’s acquisition would most likely have turned out differently if it had happened after the adoption of the FDI Screening Regulation. This statement can however be challenged, as COSCO bought a 24,99% share in Hamburg Port in 2023 regardless of concerns raised by the EU on the issue. This case raises an important question about the limits of the EU’s authority when colliding with national interests, as the screening regulation does not grant the EU power to block investments. Thus, when Germany allowed the deal to go through despite opposition, it illustrates that internal division, reflecting national sovereignty, can limit the regulatory impact of EU securitisation measures.

⁹ ”For øjeblikket ønsker langt de fleste lande ro på. Så jeg tror det er meget bevidst, at man siger, vi har måske den optimale situation nu. Vi har nogle rammer, som medlemslandene har lært at leve med og er komfortable med” (Appendix 1, s. 4).

Thus, while the regulation represents a discursive and institutional success in framing foreign investment as a potential security threat, its practical implementation reveals uneven commitment among member states. This suggests that the biggest challenge may not be the lack of regulatory tools, but rather the lack of consensus and political will to apply them uniformly across member states.

Jonas Parello-Plesner sees these investments as a risk, stressing that Chinese SOEs, due to their connection to the Chinese state, can be used as tools of geopolitical influence, compromising European strategic autonomy. He argues, “the main point is that the People’s Republic of China is governed by the Chinese Communist Party, which has a completely different vision of where they want the world to move.”¹⁰ During the interview, we discussed whether the EU is forced to rely more heavily on China as a result of Donald Trump’s policies to which he stated:

“To me, these are two somewhat independent issues. The fact that the Americans are shifting, wherever they are heading under Trump, is of course deeply concerning and very unfortunate, but it is somewhat separate from the fact that we have a fundamentally different system, the Chinese one, which is led by an authoritarian party and also a leader, Xi Jinping, who has a clear vision of where he wants China to go.”¹¹

His concern aligns with the theoretical perspective of party-state capitalism and economic statecraft, explaining why Chinese investments, such as COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, have become a focal point of EU security concerns. The concept of economic statecraft reveals how states use economic tools to achieve strategic goals. In the case of China, investments in European strategic infrastructure arguably serve as instruments of geopolitical influence, aligning with the principles of party-state capitalism. Chinese SOEs like COSCO are not merely commercial entities but are embedded within a broader party-led strategy. This understanding strengthens the arguments of stakeholders like Jonas Parello-Plesner, who view Chinese

¹⁰ ”Hovedessens er at Folkerepublikken Kina er styret af det kinesiske kommunistparti, der er en helt anden vision for, hvor de gerne vil have verden til at bevæge sig hen” (Appendix 2, s. 7).

¹¹ ”Jeg synes for mig at se er det to lidt uafhængige spørgsmål og det at amerikaneren svinger, hvor de nu svinger hen under Trump, er selvfølgelig dybt bekymrende og superærgeligt, men ligesom lidt noget andet end det at vi har et fundamentalt anderledes system, som er det kinesiske som er ledet af et autoritært parti og også er en leder, Xi Jinping, som har sådan en klar vision for hvor han gerne vil Kina” (Appendix 2, s. 8).

investments as a threat to EU security. There is a risk, however, that security-driven normative arguments, which consistently adopt a critical stance towards Chinese FDI, may become blind to potential benefits of such investments. By pushing issues into the realm of securitisation, such arguments can undermine the conditions necessary for a balanced policy debate. Essentially, this is what the Copenhagen School defines as excessive securitisation practice.

Like Svend Roed Nielsen, Parello-Plesner touches upon the ongoing debate over internal divisions, regarding how to manage Chinese investments: “I believe there will be voices saying, as we have already heard from the Spanish foreign minister, that we must be careful not to alienate the Chinese right now.”¹² The reference to Spain being more cautious about alienating China further highlights the internal divisions within the EU on this issue. Thus, as long as there are member states being cautious about alienating China due to economic or diplomatic interests, it contributes to internal division within the EU on how to handle Chinese investments and relations with China in general. Arguably, the narrative of Jonas Parello-Plesner contributes to reinforcing this divide.

Contrasting notions of validity – Trust in EU data vs. security-driven scepticism

The two epistemic communities under analysis also differ in how they validate knowledge. There is a clear difference in their approaches, illustrating a broader tension between Svend Roed Nielsen’s pragmatic, trust-based approach to EU mechanisms and Jonas Parello-Plesner’s security-driven, sceptical approach that highlights the need for a stronger defensive strategy.

Svend Roed Nielsen emphasises the significance of EU data, particularly data derived from the annual reports detailing the outcomes of the FDI screening mechanism, as the foundation of his understanding of this specific security risk. He perceives these EU reports as legitimate and reliable sources of knowledge when arguing that there are not any immediate threats to European autonomy “if we trust the reports from screening and export controls.”¹³ For Roed Nielsen, the key to ensuring European security lies in continuously improving these existing

¹² ”Jeg tror der vil være stemmer der vil sige, vi har hørt det allerede med den spanske udenrigsminister, at de siger at vi skal passe på ikke at støde kineserne fra os nu her” (Appendix 2, s. 8).

¹³ ”...hvis vi ellers stoler på de rapporter fra screening og eksportkontrol” (Appendix 1, s. 4).

frameworks, rather than fundamentally questioning them. His trust in EU data reflects a belief in the EU's capacity to self-regulate and protect its interests, even if the process is not flawless.

In contrast, Jonas Parello-Plesner validates knowledge through a security lens, where his point of view, or principled belief, is sceptical towards Chinese intentions. His view on validity is built on knowledge of China's legal system, the geopolitical ambitions of the CCP, and a critical assessment of the EU's historical approach to Chinese investments. Parello-Plesner's understanding is grounded in the belief that the nature of the Chinese political system inherently makes Chinese investments risky. He is sceptical of the EU's ability to manage these risks, viewing the existing screening mechanism as insufficient.

While both stakeholders are in favour of a FDI screening mechanism, they disagree on the effectiveness of the current framework. This has great relevance to how they support a security strategy going forward. Whereas Roed-Nielsen trust the current tools available and trust member states to oversee investments, Parello-Plesner does not trust the current framework to the same extent, arguing for stronger EU control and a more comprehensive security strategy. He views Chinese investments as inherently risky due to the authoritarian nature of the CCP and its strategic goals, which he believes the current screening mechanism does not fully account for. From his point of view, knowledge is valid if it incorporates geopolitical realities and systemic risks beyond what current EU data reveals.

On one side, it can be argued that in order for the EU to rebuild a general trust among member states in its capacity to govern, it must first restore confidence in EU-generated data, particularly data derived from EU regulatory frameworks. On the other side, however, Parello-Plesner rightly emphasises the importance of addressing the fundamental differences between the Chinese and the European economic and political systems. Acknowledging these differences could enhance trust among more sceptical member states across the EU in EU data. As previously noted, EU member states have become more sceptical towards Chinese infrastructure projects, thus, it is not unrealistic that such changes could be implemented within the existing legislative framework sometime in the near future.

Policy enterprise – Competing strategies for EU-China investment policy

The contrasting perspectives of respectively Svend Roed Nielsen and Jonas Parello-Plesner examined above lead to two different visions of EU policy. Svend Roed Nielsen supports a balanced approach, where the EU can benefit from Chinese investments while mitigating associated risks through regulatory measures. His perspective aligns with a more open and flexible EU investment policy. Jonas Parello-Plesner advocates for a more restrictive approach, emphasising the need for the EU to limit Chinese access to strategic infrastructure to maintain strategic autonomy. To the question on whether the EU should welcome or restrict Chinese investments, he replied: “restrict them. That would be my short answer.”¹⁴

These distinct visions reflect the shared mission that defines their respective epistemic communities. Each community rely on a shared notion of validity of what constitutes knowledge. This foundation allows them to develop a cause-and-effect understanding based on that knowledge and determine how to achieve or limit certain outcomes, guided by normative and principled beliefs. These complex structures are crucial for understanding the core issues faced by stakeholders involved in this debate. Both stakeholders offer contrasting perspectives on Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure. Svend Roed Nielsen adopts a more open-minded approach, emphasising the importance of collective agreements and the economic benefits of such investments. In contrast, Jonas Parello-Plesner expresses caution, directly recommending that the EU restrict Chinese investments in critical sectors.

Jonas Parello-Plesner’s focus on security and potential risks align with securitisation theory. On the other hand, Svend Roed Nielsen’s approach can be viewed as supporting desecuritisation, advocating for discussions on Chinese investments within the existing political-economic framework, without automatically treating them as security threats. These two stakeholders represent distinct epistemic communities with opposing views on Chinese investments, highlighting the range of arguments the EU must consider when making decisions on FDI regulation.

Both stakeholders highlight the EU’s internal lack of cohesion regarding how to manage risks associated with Chinese investments. As previously discussed, this internal division

¹⁴ ”Begrænse dem. Det vil være mit korte svar” (Appendix 2, s. 9).

weakens the EU's ability to present a united front on Chinese investments, which directly affects how effectively the FDI screening mechanism can function. When France, Germany, and Italy initially introduced the need for a FDI screening mechanism, the majority of EU member states opposed the idea. The compromise that was made when the FDI Screening Regulation was adopted left decision-making power with the member states rather than the EU, making it up to the member states to determine whether or not to accept foreign investments based on a risk assessment. The consequence of this framework is that the EU cannot prevent risky foreign investments in strategic sectors if a member state favours economic benefits over security concerns, such as with the case of Hamburg Port in 2023.

Jonas Parello-Plesner appears as a securitising actor framing Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure as a threat, in alignment with the EU's securitising discourse. Similarly, Svend Roed Nielsen can also be seen as a securitising actor, as he supports EU securitising measures in the form of the FDI Screening Regulation. He, however, wishes to desecuritise Chinese FDI, arguing that the mechanisms in place are efficient to protect European autonomy. Roed Nielsen reinforces EU discourse and regulatory measures through pragmatic securitisation and desecuritisation. By advocating for this mechanism and trusting EU data and frameworks, he legitimises the EU's approach to balancing economic openness with security concerns. While he accepts the securitisation of Chinese FDI through regulatory measures, Roed Nielsen's current stance leans towards desecuritising Chinese investments by emphasising pragmatism and economic benefits. By emphasising the effectiveness of current tools, he implicitly challenges narratives pushing for stricter controls, such as Jonas Parello-Plesner's approach.

Parello-Plesner challenges EU discourse and regulatory measures through his security-centric approach. He is critical towards the EU's existing FDI Screening Regulation, viewing it as reactive, insufficient, and a "lowest common denominator," failing to protect European strategic autonomy from Chinese state influence. His scepticism calls for stronger, more centralised EU controls, directly questioning the efficiency of the current regulatory framework. He frames Chinese investments, especially by SOEs, as security threats tied to the CCP's geopolitical ambitions, thus taking a more assertive securitisation narrative that calls for restrictive measures and less economic openness.

EU policymakers have clearly been influenced by perspectives of epistemic communities, such as the community that Jonas Parello-Plesner represents. His framing of Chinese investments as significant security threats contributed to the push for the FDI Screening Regulation in 2019. However, due to the complex organisational structure of the EU, which involves balancing the interests and sovereignty of its member states, the final regulatory framework reflects a compromise. This compromise leans more towards the pragmatic, economically focused approach advocated by Svend Roed Nielsen. As a result, while security concerns shaped the initial discourse and policy agenda, the scope of the actual regulation remains relatively flexible. This outcome underscores how EU policymaking is shaped both by competing epistemic communities and by institutional constraints that encourage balancing security priorities with economic interests.

Drawing upon Lene Hansen's concept of identity-building, Svend Roed Nielsen supports a pragmatic and economically open EU, representing an identity characterised by a liberal and open investment market. In contrast, Jonas Parello-Plesner reinforces the narrative of the EU as a protector of security and strategic autonomy, reflecting a security-oriented and defensive EU identity. The analysis of EU discourse reveals that the EU portrays itself as a region characterised by an open investment regime, fair and regulated competition, and a market-oriented system rooted in ethical principles. Among the two perspectives, the approach of Svend Roed Nielsen aligns most closely with the EU's self-representation. However, the EU's open investment framework is dependent on that foreign actors adhere to EU regulations, reflecting the regulated and protective nature of the EU.

Furthermore, the EU adopts a cautious stance towards China and Chinese investments, being particularly critical towards the Chinese SOE framework, state subsidies, and the close ties between Chinese SOEs and the CCP. This indicates that the perspectives of an epistemic community, represented in this study by Jonas Parello-Plesner, seeing the world through a security lens, has a huge impact in shaping EU political interests. His securitisation narrative is echoed by the EU Commission in speeches and written reports, indicating that security concerns may outweigh economic benefits. Thus, it is likely that the FDI Screening Regulation will become stricter if this narrative comes to be more influential in the future. In the Bruegel working paper (García-Herrero & Schindowski, 2023), it was demonstrated that EU member

states in general has a more negative perspective on Chinese infrastructure projects now than they did around the time of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, suggesting that the EU's securitisation discourse, most likely influenced by security-concerned epistemic communities, has had an impact on member states.

Epistemic communities have played a crucial role in shaping the EU's response to Chinese FDI by framing the issue through competing lenses of economic pragmatism and security-oriented risks. The distinct perspectives of Think Tank Europa and Rasmussen Global illustrate how expert communities influence policy by embedding normative beliefs and causal assumptions into political discourse. These communities not only inform but actively impact securitisation or desecuritisation dynamics. Their influence is particularly pronounced in moments of uncertainty, where policymakers rely on expert authority to define legitimate policy responses. This shows that the EU's changing approach to Chinese investment is shaped by both shifts in strategy and the distinct perspectives of epistemic communities.

Conclusion

When COSCO took majority ownership of Piraeus Port in 2016, it was met with strong support from Greek and Chinese officials. Greece was facing severe financial difficulties resulting from the global financial crisis. While the EU offered financial assistance with strict conditions, China, through COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port, gave Greece a substantial financial injection, leading to a significant increase in the port's revenue. This, however, reflected the beginning of internal divisions within the EU, challenging its governing legitimacy. Furthermore, concerns emerged over the unfair advantages of Chinese SOE's, which were seen as distorting competition and violating fundamental EU rules and norms.

Through the theoretical framework of economic statecraft and party-state capitalism, it becomes clear that COSCO functions as a part of China's broader geopolitical strategy, carried out through the Belt and Road Initiative. As part of the BRI, Piraeus port reinforces COSCO's strategic position within China's geopolitical ambitions. Through a unified state, a strong reporting relationship, and alignment of objectives, the Chinese state maintains strong control over COSCO. This enables the CCP to direct COSCO's activities in order to serve national interests. Party-state capitalism further explains how such control is exercised, emphasising centralised leadership and SOE oversight. The dual accountability structure of Chinese SOEs is one of the primary arguments cementing this control.

In the years around 2016, EU securitisation discourse became more prominent, eventually culminating in 2019 when the FDI Screening Regulation was adopted. This legislative move was the result of a successful securitisation process. Although, EU officials have been cautious in explicitly naming China in the criticism towards foreign investments, it is clear that investments originating from Chinese SOEs are viewed as the main threat to European strategic infrastructure. Jean-Claude Juncker, in his 2017 State of the Union speech, laid the groundwork for the criticism that led to the launch of the FDI screening mechanism. His framing of COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port illustrates the securitisation of the issue, as he discursively presented it as a strategic threat.

Based on the analysis grounded in securitisation theory, EU perceives Chinese investments as threats to economic and political dynamics. First of all, EU officials raise

concern that the nature of Chinese SOEs, characterised by significant state subsidies, threatens the rules and norms that constitutes the EU by distorting competition. Second of all, there are concerns about the EU's governing authority, which EU officials perceive as undermined by internal division entailed by China's expanding influence. This division further reflects disagreements among member states over whether to prioritise economic gains or security concerns.

The evolving securitisation of Chinese FDI is deeply tied to the EU's self-representation. Lene Hansen establishes a connection between policy and identity, which is further supported by this study, arguing that the EU's self-representation is closely linked to its policy responses. Viewed through the lens of securitisation theory, the perceived threats of Chinese FDI reveal the EU's self-representation as an open investment regime grounded in fair, regulated competition and a market-oriented system underpinned by ethical principles.

The debate that emerged within the EU following COSCO's acquisition of Piraeus Port was intensified by the distinct perspectives of stakeholders of epistemic communities engaged with the issue. From around 2017, there was a notable rise in expert communities' interest in China and their framing of China as an "enemy" and a "rival." This surge is closely linked to the evolution of EU securitisation discourse, and stakeholders of epistemic communities have thereby functioned as securitising actors, influencing the securitisation of EU-China relations. Epistemic communities particularly tend to exert significant impact during times of uncertainty, providing policy-relevant knowledge to policymakers who may lack sufficient information. These communities thus have the possibility to influence the debate based on their distinct normative and causal belief systems. In the context of Chinese FDI, this distinction reflects a tension between pragmatic economic interests and security-oriented concerns. Ultimately, the key debate today is concerned with whether the current legislative framework is sufficient to protect from emerging security risks.

This thesis sets out to answer the research question: *How does the EU securitise Chinese investments in European strategic infrastructure, and what factors drive this securitisation, particularly in the case of COSCO's acquisitions of Piraeus Port?* The analysis has shown that COSCO's takeover of Piraeus Port marked a turning point in the EU's perception of Chinese

foreign direct investments in strategic infrastructure. This shift has been driven not only by concerns over unfair competition and governance authority, but also by the influence of epistemic communities during periods of uncertainty. As a final remark, the aim of this study was to explore whether EU officials securitise Chinese investments, particularly in Piraeus Port, based on concerns over the close ties between COSCO and the CCP. However, it ultimately concludes that the biggest threat relates to internal division within the EU on how to approach relations with China more broadly, risking undermining EU cohesion and evoke memories of a fragmented and volatile European past.

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