

## Grand Strategy and the (Re)Shaping of Greece–China Relations

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### Abstract

This paper assesses China–Greece relations since 2006, examining them as part of China’s Grand Strategy, and Greece’s perception of them. The first aim of the paper is to provide an overview of China–Greece relations in connection with its long- and short-term goals. In essence, it focuses on understanding whether a Chinese Grand Strategy towards Greece exists. Second, it aims to examine the perception of Greeks over China’s foreign policy towards Greece. The intended contribution of the paper is to illustrate the response of national discourses over China’s increased presence in both the global sphere and specific countries. By offering the Greek perspective, we ultimately seek to provide a more balanced foundation for the ongoing scholarly and policy debate.

### Keywords

China; Greece; Grand Strategy; BRI; COSCO; Piraeus port; Mediterranean.

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## 1. Introduction

China's increasing hard and soft powers have for the past decades been a starting point for numerous analyses and theories on the implications of its ever-increasing influence on the world and regional stage for the dynamic balance of world power. Since 1978, when it started reforming its economy and opening up to the world, China has become the second-largest economy, maintaining still a positive momentum. At the same time, China has succeeded in establishing and bolstering its diplomatic, economic and security relations with countries across the globe.

As regards Europe, and Greece in particular, China has, much abandoning an initial approach focusing on the regional level, succeeded through a series of bilateral economic agreements launching a series of policies targeting the creation of stronger ties with several EU states. As a result, a number of questions have arisen about the extent and type of China's impact at the global and regional levels.

This paper assesses China–Greece relations since 2006, examining them as part of China's Grand Strategy, and Greece's perception of them. The first aim of the paper is to provide an overview of China–Greece relations in connection with its long- and short-term goals. In essence, it focuses on understanding whether a Chinese Grand Strategy towards Greece exists. Second, it aims to examine the perception of Greeks over China's foreign policy towards Greece. The intended contribution of the paper is to illustrate the response of national discourses over China's increased presence in both the global sphere and specific countries.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the theoretical foundations of the argument that China–Greece relations form part of a Chinese Grand Strategy. Subsequently, we focus on China–Greece relations since 2006, on how these have been impacted by the rise of China and on China's policy directions this has led to in recent developments. This is followed by the analysis of Greece's perception of China–Greece relations. Finally, our conclusions are presented.

This paper is based on qualitative analysis of secondary data as well as a thorough primary research scheme based on semi-structured interviews. The study made use of official Chinese government documents like policy papers as well as academic journal articles and books. Local news outlets like newspapers provide data and news surrounding Greece's perception of China–Greece relations were also included.

Moreover, several interviews of Greek officials, academics, journalists and businessmen were conducted.

## **2. Conceptual Framework and Its Applications Regarding China**

### *2.1. Grand strategy as a theoretical concept*

To understand how China–Greece relations are formed and to examine whether they form part of China’s wider strategic planning, this paper uses the concept of Grand Strategy. While there is no general agreement on a precise definition of what Grand Strategy is, there seems to be unanimity that it entails the use of all available means towards a state’s political goals.

The term “Grand Strategy” was historically linked with war. It was the art of how to best mobilize and coordinate forces and resources to attain the political objective of war (Hart, 1967). Liddell Hart’s almost classic definition of the term was an attempt to integrate a military heritage dating back to Clausewitz. Morgenthau’s definition of Grand Strategy consists of a critical turning point through its shift of focus from the coordination of military resources to the coordination of different elements of national power (Morgenthau, 1973).

Another critical point has been Paul Kennedy’s work on Grand Strategy. Kennedy included in his definition not only the overall political, economic, and military aims to preserve the long-term interests of a state but also to add a correct “balancing of priorities within those interests on the part of the state” (Kennedy, 1991). Building on Kennedy’s work defines a Grand Strategy as the ultimate objectives of a state, by integrating military, political, and economic means to pursue its objectives within the international system (Biddle, 2015).

For our analysis, we define Grand Strategy as an articulated statement of national strategic objectives, a broad strategic action that guides policies in pursuing and implementing those priorities and provides a consistent and rational framework, for political decision-making over an extended period of time. As such, it may also include a geographical focus, sub-regional, regional or global. A Grand Strategy would also require an authoritative statement from the highest political authority, which will command the political power necessary to implement it.

### 3. China's Grand Strategy

While the need for a balanced, understanding of China's strategy has never been more important it seems that it is almost impossible for scholars to avoid mainstream analytical approaches which overemphasize certain aspects of China's Foreign Policy consistently failing to produce unbiased reviews of China's intentions and actions (Shaun and Pan, 2021; Lynch, 2009). This comes as a result of their theoretical tools as most of them rely on Western-dominated perspectives about China and international politics in general (Can and Chan, 2020).

Historically, the foundations of modern Chinese Grand Strategy had been laid by Deng Xiaoping who was the founding father of the "twenty-four characters" strategy and the reform policy known as the "four modernizations". Deng was a visionary statesman. He pioneered the return of China to the global stage within the frame of the Sino-American rapprochement. According to Jiang Zemin this has been the "period of strategic opportunity" (zhànlüè jī yùqī 战略机遇期) in which China achieved an unprecedented level of development in all four key sectors set by Deng's policy (Cristopher, 2014).

Since then, development became essential to Chinese strategy planning (Hu and Men, 2004). A review of the latest official Chinese policy papers "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" and "China and the World in the New Era" highlights this crucial argument: development does not supersede strategy; it is indispensable to China's growing "comprehensive national power" (zōnghé guó lì 综合国力). China uses development as the core concept of balanced power building policy, a long-term strategy initially set by Deng Xiaoping. In Deng's own words: "In measuring a country's national power, one must look at it comprehensively and from all sides" (Zhang, 2010, p. 386).

When Xi Jinping assumed office the "period of strategic opportunity" was replaced by the "period of historical opportunity" [历史机遇期]. In Xi's own words "time and momentum are on our side" (Xi, 2021). China surpassed the US as the world largest economy in 2013 on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis. The "old" West seems in search of a new strategy just as China seems to accept the fact that part of the world is considering Beijing as a global actor, and this obligates China to rise to the challenge. China's Grand Strategy is also adapting to provide the necessary tools. Consequentially, the research concerning China's global intentions and the need of interpretation of China's Grand Strategy gradually became a top priority.

While a master document containing all of Chinese Grand Strategy does not exist, its outline can be found across a wide corpus of texts (Buzan, 2014). In September 2011, a policy paper titled “China’s Peaceful Development” has been issued by the Information Office of the State Council (2011). This policy paper refers to what China considers “core interests”. According to this paper those can be summarized in the four-fold of national security, economic development, securing the *status quo* and international influence. At the core of all stands, the vision of China as a fully developed, modern country that is also one of a few great powers. This vision, reflected in President Xi’s speeches about the “China dream” (Zhōngguó mèng 中国梦), is what consolidates real political power.

What is important to note is that despite the recent arguments considering the infamous “Thucydides Trap”, from the Chinese perspective, Beijing does not seek to replace the position of the US as a hegemonic state in the world. (Can and Chan, 2020). The latest policy paper “China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era” emphasizes the cultural legacy of China as an international actor who actively pursues universal harmony, has sense of responsibility as a major country and repays kindness with kindness. According to the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (2021a), China’s mission includes promoting a global community of shared future as part of international development cooperation (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a; 2021b).

Contrary to China’s arguments, many western scholars make the case that China defines its Grand Strategy as a strategy of maintaining a balance between conflicting priorities aimed at maintaining momentum in its national economic growth and maintaining favorable trends in the security environment in which this economic strategy can take place (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006). China has indeed developed a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it is establishing various types of partnerships, intending to make China a very important actor whose interests the great powers cannot ignore. On the other hand, it seeks to build trust and improve its credibility to reduce the severity of the security dilemma (Goldstein, 2005). In other words, China’s Grand Strategy now aims to increase its international influence without activating an opposing balancing reaction. In this context, the rhetoric/strategy of “peaceful rise” was developed, while a debate on soft power (ruǎn shíli 软实力) developed within China.

In 2008, China launched what many western scholars called a “charm offensive” to reverse its negative bad image (Shambaugh, 2013) and while developing its influence within existing international institutions, it is creating new China-centered institutions or initiatives. China is rebalancing its diplomatic strategy to include not just maintaining good relations with major powers, but also enhancing ties with countries worldwide, a strategy that traces its roots in China’s Confucian heritage. Imperial China has reached its peak under a system of governance which has been latter known as the “Kingly Way” |(Wang Dao” 王道) It was a system based on meritocracy and moral values blended with pragmatism and economic awareness in a balanced “mix”|. Contemporary China seems to have been reconnected with this political heritage. The new “mix” is more complicated, reflecting the needs of a more complex international environment. Enhancing political control and maintaining social stability, balancing diplomacy and economics and restructuring its national defense constitute key policy instruments in achieving its grand strategic goals (Scobell *et al.*, 2020). What really makes this strategy “grand” is President’s Xi “Belt and Road Initiative” which aims to bring China back to its historical place in global hierarchy as a major actor who does not promote the use of hard power but instead prefers the use of soft power, both cultural and economic. This could be the revival of historical, almost 2500 years old, “Wang Dao” as a Chinese Grand Strategy.

Economic diplomacy, both bilateral and multilateral, has been a major part of China’s Grand Strategy since the early 2000s. Economic diplomacy has been a part of its attempt to establish a network of partnerships with the key countries in its foreign policy framework. It joined the WTO in 2001, which improved its ability to integrate its economy into the international environment. It hosted the 2008 Olympics. China and the ASEAN countries begun the process of creating a free trade zone. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization put the PRC’s relations with the Central Asian states on a new footing (Ye, 2011). Moreover, China has adopted higher-profile roles in bodies such as the United Nations Security Council and the G-20 and the forum on Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and leading roles in bodies such as BRICS; the Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and the SCO (Scobell *et al.*, 2020). Lately, the two major initiatives of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (“BRI”), namely, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk



Road have formed part of China's economic diplomacy towards a great number of states both in its periphery and worldwide ([The National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2013](#)).

Part of China's Grand Strategy can be traced to its public diplomacy, a form of diplomacy based on Nye's concept of Soft Power was introduced into China in 1993 by Wang Huning ([Xiao, 2017](#)). Wang presented a very "Sinocentric" interpretation which gradually became particularly important for the high-ranking policymakers of CCP. As a result, a new definition of power was made available for use: "comprehensive national power (zōnghé guóli - 综合国力)" which, in turn, was translated into "cultural soft power", replacing both "peaceful development" and the famous 90s-00s Chinese moto "soft power with Chinese characteristics" ([Glaser, 2009](#)). President Xi Jinping institutionalized its use by using it himself "To build a solid foundation for the nation's cultural soft power, China needs to deepen the reform in its cultural system, promote socialist core values and push forward the cultural industry" ([Xinhua, 2014](#)). Conclusively, since 2013, culture became a core term of China's Grand Strategy, Cultural Industry became of high importance and cultural diplomacy became a field of fierce antagonism ([Kong, 2015](#)).

China's "Mask Diplomacy" during the Global Pandemic SARS COVID-19 Crisis, in the first quarter of 2020 is one relevant example ([Wong, 2020](#); [Chen and Molter, 2020](#)). At the time, many European politicians raised concerns over Beijing's narrative regarding the management of the COVID-19 crisis. Reacting to that criticism, China decided to use the crisis to make political capital out of it ([Legarda, 2020](#); [Mardell, 2020](#)). It was not an instantaneous decision. [Campbell and Doshi](#) argued that "[President] Xi {...} spent the last several years pushing China's foreign policy apparatus to think harder about leading reforms to "global governance", and the coronavirus offers an opportunity to put that "theory into action" ([Campbell and Doshi, 2020](#)). China had a plan and the means to realize it: it was the major producer of surgical masks, it produced half of the N95 respirators and most of the active pharmaceutical ingredients necessary to make antibiotics.

On 18th May 2020, President Xi delivered a speech citing China's emphasis on global public health at the 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) titled "Fighting COVID-19 Through Solidarity and Cooperation - Building a Global Community of Health for All" ([Xinhua, 2020](#)). A few days later Beijing issued a paper titled "Fighting COVID-19:

China in Action” introducing another Chinese–style motto: “a community of common health for mankind - 人类卫生健康共同体” (China’s State Council Information Office, 2020).

#### **4. China’s Engagement with Greece: Part of a Strategic Plan or a Scattershot Approach?**

Although Greece and China established diplomatic relations in 1972, these are generally considered to be of minor importance till 2006, when a Joint Communiqué between China and Greece on the Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was issued, marking the beginning of a period of rapid strengthening of economic and political relations.

The second milestone of China – Greece relations was 2009, the year of the COSCO flagship investment in the Port of Piraeus. In October 2009, China COSCO Shipping leased for 35 years part of the Port of Piraeus, the largest port in Greece and one of the largest in Europe, with the cargo level two years later being three times higher than before. China became the port’s majority owner in 2016. China views the port of Piraeus as a gateway to EU markets, with a strategic role in the region’s trade routes thanks to its proximity to Asia, Europe and Africa.

The third milestone was 2013 when China announced for the first time the launch of its strategic plan entailing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (now known as Belt and Road Initiative - BRI), of which Greece forms an important part. Greece is currently a member of two China initiatives, namely, the “Belt and Road Initiative” (“BRI”) and the “Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries” (“CEEC” or “17 + 1”), joining the latter in 2019, Greece officially joined the then “16 + 1”, becoming the 17th European country to join and thus rendering the initiative “17 + 1”.

The next major investment move came in 2017, when State Grid Europe Limited, a subsidiary of State Grid Corporation of China, became a strategic investor of Greece’s Independent Power Transmission Operator, investing 320 million euros and thus acquiring a 24% stake. In 2019, the Bank of China opened its first branch in Greece.

The two countries’ leaders frequently express their wish to promote cooperation in several sectors. Between the years 2013–2019 one Greek President and two Prime Ministers, accompanied by Ministers and



businessmen, visited China. From the other part, the most high-level visit to Greece has been President Xi Jinping's 3-day official visit to Athens in November 2019.

Moreover, in 2019, an updated economic cooperation framework for 2020–2022 was signed by China and Greece. This Memorandum of Understanding includes an open invitation to Chinese companies to expand their presence in Greece in several sectors, such as energy (wind farms) and waste management.

Regarding the famous “Mask Diplomacy”, data show that it was mostly successful towards Greece. China had already a solid 51% of positive opinion among Greeks since 2019 (Silver, 2019). In the first quarter of 2020, China has sent medical supplies to Greece, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and hundreds of thousands of surgical and protection masks. The Greek government expressed its gratitude towards China (ANA-MPA, 2020).

In terms of cultural diplomacy, Greece and China have limited but stable exchanges between them in the fields of economy and people-to-people relations. Tourism and cultural events are the pillars of Chinese Public Diplomacy in Greece. It is estimated that some 170,000 Chinese people visit Greece each year, mostly off-season. Furthermore, 2021 was named cultural year by China and Greece.

As regards Greece, China has two goals that correspond to its major strategic goals. The first one is for Greece to continue adhering to the “one-China policy”. Several official documents issued by both China and Greece, the Greek government reiterates its adherence to the one-China policy and opposition to “Taiwan independence”, a policy choice in which it has not wavered, and which does not present any major challenges given the position of the United States on the issue.

The second major goal of China with regard to Greece is for Greece to act as a moderating actor towards China within the EU. In 2016, Greece, under the then Prime Minister, Mr. Alexis Tsipras, was reluctant to join a resolution on the arbitration of the South China Sea (Gotev, 2016; Horowitz and Alderman, 2017). In 2017, Greece also prevented the European Union from issuing statements condemning China's human rights record (Cumming-Bruce and Sengupta, 2017). Both moves were widely attributed as a response to Chinese investment in the Port of Piraeus and were testifying to China's influence (Robin, 2016). An EU tough stance towards China in

response to China's policy in Hong Kong was also reportedly resisted by Greece in 2020 (Robin, 2020).

As regards its investment policy, China is seeking to expand the COSCO investment in the port of Piraeus, to increase its stake in Greece's power grid operator (Independent Power Transmission Operator) by State Grid Europe Limited and possibly to find a way inside the European Union, utilizing Greece, for its 5G technologies.

The COSCO investment in the port of Piraeus has over the years and especially during the last couple of years turned into a headache for the Greek government and into a puzzle to be solved by both parties. COSCO, already the majority owner of the Athens Stock Exchange-listed Piraeus Port Authority requests to acquire a further 16% of the stake (additional to its 51%), as dictated by the concession contract, under the condition of the implementation of additional investment on its part. This condition has not been met, with the two parties arguing on the legal ramifications of the delay of the issuing by the Greek authorities of several permits and approvals pertaining to the required additional investments. At the same time, a lot of local and national opposition to several planned COSCO investments has arisen (Glass, 2020). Nevertheless, at the level of high politics there is, from both sides, the willingness to maintain the close ties and further enhance them.

China's strategic choices are aiming at promoting connectivity and economic cooperation, either by promoting investment in a variety of sectors or by promoting its regional initiatives. From China's point of view, Greece was intended to become a logistics hub that would provide connectivity with the European Union and the Middle East markets. This view seemed to adjust over time and become more moderate towards the goals, given the limitations arising from Greece being tied to US interests and a member of the EU. A strategic choice by China that is indicative of this change in direction was not to invest in the Greek rail network, which was originally part of China's logistical roadmap in Greece, reportedly because it would mean that it would hold a dominant market position in Greece, according to EU law.

## **5. The Greek Perception of Chinese Strategic Choices Concerning Greece**

To examine Greece's perception of Chinese strategic choices affecting bilateral relations, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted,

during the period between October 2020 and February 2021. Two of these interviews were conducted in person, with the rest through video calls, mainly due to the restrictions imposed because of the COVID pandemic. The interviews aimed to establish how Greek officials, academics, journalists, and businessmen view China's importance for Greece and Greece's importance for China, as well as their assessment of the different policy sectors of the relations and their evolution over time.

The interviews have highlighted the existence of different “schools of thought” on the relative importance of China – Greece relations and their prospects, while there is a, more or less, consensus on other aspects, such as the main sectors of the relationship that are of major importance.

The perception of China as a *long-term and strategic planner* (Simon, 2015) proved to be common among interviewees, as did the perception that the Chinese state plays a major role in the investment decisions of Chinese companies. Ms. Bleta, President of the Athens-Beijing Financial and Trade Center, stressed that China is always making long-term plans, which span at least 5–10 years (Bleta, 2020). This reality however is not necessarily reflected in their perception of whether China's strategic choices towards Greece form part of a broader strategic approach and on whether this strategy is closely connected to the BRI initiative and its priorities, on which there are diverging/opposing views.

All interviewees stressed that the major field of China – Greece relations is the economic one and most specifically investment (Tzogopoulos, 2020; Kostis 2020; Stergiou 2020; Bentis 2020). Moreover, the case of COSCO investment in the port of Piraeus arose, either organically, as a major issue of bilateral relations, or as a reply to a question on major China policies in Greece (Tsardanidis, 2020; Kostis, 2020; Stergiou 2020). Several economic sub-sectors were highlighted during the interviews, namely, shipping, logistics and energy. However, Chinese investments in Greece other than the COSCO one were almost unanimously considered as of relatively minor importance, with the possible exception of the State Grid investment. The perception that Chinese companies' investment policy is closely guided by the Chinese state seemed also to be common ground among interviewees.

During the interviews, the political sector arose as another field of cooperation, especially during the years 2016–2017, with the then perceived economic dependence of Greece on certain Chinese investments leading to non-economic spillover effects upon Greece's stance towards

China in the context of the EU. More specifically, as mentioned above, Greece indeed acted as a moderating actor towards China in the EU, on issues ranging from human rights to China's assertion over the South China Sea.

Apart from the economic and political relations, the importance of culture was also mentioned by several interviewees. [Tonchev \(2021\)](#), Head of Asia Unit at the Athens - based Institute of International Economic Relations (IIER), mentioned characteristically that Cultural Diplomacy is a key element of Beijing's "customized" approach to Greece and is systematically instrumentalized. However, while the narrative of a "spiritual kinship" between the two nations with glorious antiquity is persistently promoted by China, Beijing's priorities remain economic and possibly geopolitical.) Three Confucius institutes operate in Greece and the China-proposed cultural initiative titled "Ancient Civilizations Forum" was adopted in 2017 and embraced by the then-Greek government ([Tonchev et al., 2018](#)).

One relatively common perception among interviewees is that Greece holds a special place in China's strategy, as compared to other countries in its region. This special place was attributed mainly to Greece's EU membership and its geographical position, as two elements that, combined, offer a comparative advantage for Greece to act as a gate to Europe. A small number of interviewees also mentioned the common element of being an ancient civilization as the basis of a special relationship between China and Greece. Nevertheless, Greece's former Finance Minister and Foreign Minister Mr. [Venizelos \(2020\)](#) stressed that China is a rational actor that makes realistic strategic choices, and that Greece does not hold a special place in China's strategy, as China claims the same relationship with most countries, seeking access to their markets, cooperation in developing networks, etc.

The relative importance of Greece derived from (a) EU membership and (b) geographical position is for some of the interviewees closely connected to Greece as an important piece of China's BRI strategy. However, for the most part, BRI did not come up as part of the open-ended discussion part of the interviews. When questioned on whether China's strategy towards Greece is interrelated with its BRI strategy the interviewees' opinions diverged. While a lot of them argued that China's strategy towards Greece is independent to BRI, which they considered more of a loose policy framework than a rigid action plan, some interviewees argued that BRI forms an important part of China's strategy and therefore Greece's importance for

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Type	Has China formulated a GS over Greece	Economic Dimension of C–G relations	Cultural Dimension of C–G relations	Political Dimension of C–G relations	Are Chinese investments orchestrated by the Chinese State?
A	Yes	Strong	Rather Strong	Rather weak, besides one China policy	Yes
B	Yes as part of a GS towards Europe		Rather weak		Yes
C	No		Weak		Partially yes

Fig. 1. Typology of Greek stakeholders views on China’s Foreign Policy over Greece.

China is, at least to some extent, related to its course. The second China-led initiative of which Greece is a part, 17 + 1, was more of a side note and did not feature in the interviews as an important part of China’s strategy in connection to Greece, other than the occasional mention that China-valued Greece’s participation as a way to increase the initiative’s clout.

There seems to be no common perception on whether the importance of Greece for China is increasing or decreasing, with some participants replying that it is increasing or potentially increasing and others arguing that it is diminishing (Fig. 1). When discussing the importance of Greece for China’s Grand Strategy, the issue of expectations arose organically in a significant number of the interviews, with most of the participants claiming that after the era of great expectations that began with the 2006 Joint Communique and peaked with the COSCO investment and during the economic crisis, continuously diminishing expectations have characterized

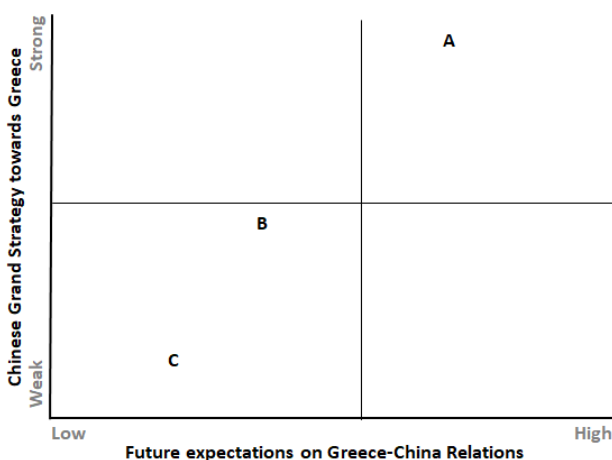


Fig. 2. Future expectations of Greece–China relations.

bilateral relations, resulting in them being now based on more realistic foundations (Fig. 2). According to Professor Huliaras (2020), the financial crisis marked the end of an era of high expectations (1st period). A period of greater pragmatism followed (2nd period). The last two years (3rd period) constitute a period of low expectations on the part of both China and Greece. There seems to be a consensus that China realizes that Greece is part of the West and that it knows that certain limitations are arising from this.

## 6. Public Opinion

Over time Greeks have a positive view of China. They view China as a global superpower and the relations between China and Greece as “friendly”. The Greek public has relatively high expectations of Greece–China relations and they view China as an important partner even if neither the relevant trade deficit numbers nor Chinese direct investments towards Greece support such a position. They view the expansion of bilateral relations as a moderately positive development. Nevertheless, the issue of China, in a negative sense, was first partially raised during the 2005 textile industry crisis (which was part of the relevant European crisis) as Greeks were seeing their textile industries being pressured by huge flows of Chinese imports. Again, Greek public opinion was changed to “mainly positive” over the enhancement of Greece–China relations during the Greek debt crisis of 2010–2015. News articles highlighting the possibility of China providing loans to public debt-ridden Greece (e.g. FT 27 Jan 2010) were widely welcomed by Greeks. Likewise, when Wen Jiabao stated in front of the Greek parliament during October 2010 that China will buy Greek state bonds when there are issued again Greeks were praising the strengthening of relations with the emerging (economic) superpower (Bloomberg, 2010; Willis, 2010).

This view has not changed even during the period of the global pandemic and displays “immunity” concerning bilateral disagreements, like the recent friction concerning COSCO’s investment in Piraeus Port, as it seems such debates have small or no effect on the public opinion towards how they would expect Greece–China relations to further evolve. The most recent poll, which was carried out by PEW Research Center, shows that a solid 51% has mostly favorable opinion towards China (Graph 1). Greek public views on the relationship have also been affected by, mostly positive,



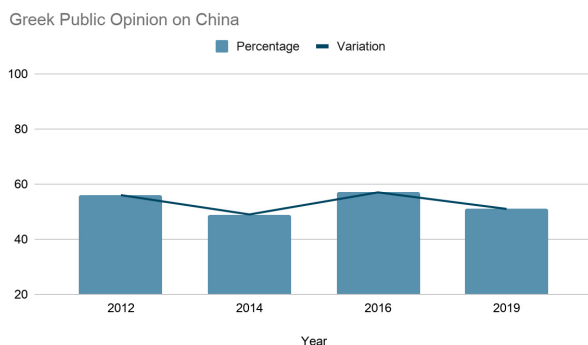


Fig. 3. Greek Public Opinion on China

media articles on the Greece–China relations and support received in Greece from China: from talking to Angela Merkel for not pushing Greece out of the euro to highlighting the number of masks received from China as part of its “mask diplomacy”. As most nation-wide newspapers delivered a positive image of China this has supported the maintenance of a positive view of Greek–Chinese relations from the Greek side – the main narrative being two of the most admired ancient civilizations are cooperating and the new emerging economic giant is supporting Greece’s renaissance after the debt crisis of 2010–2015 (IIER, 2021).

Interestingly, according to the findings of the Institute of International Economic Relations, an Athens-based research Institute, this solid favorable opinion towards China stands in contrast with the general opinion that Greeks have towards the Chinese political system and the quality of life in China (Tonchev *et al.*, 2018) while China is viewed as a developing country with an authoritarian regime, Greek citizens display a somewhat “transactional” attitude in the hope that the Asian giant can be a source of investment capital. Hence, irrespective on how the view China *per se*, they are positive on further developing the Greece–China relations.

This persistent attitude of Greece’s public affects, to a certain extent, EU states’ opinion towards Greece as a China-friendly state that is differentiated from the EU’s growing skepticism concerning the future path of China–EU relations.

## 7. Conclusion

The period that began with the 2006 Joint Communiqué between China and Greece on the Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has

been one of rapid strengthening of bilateral economic and political relations and frequent high-level visits. China's strategic choices are aiming at promoting connectivity and economic cooperation, either by promoting investment in a variety of sectors or by promoting its regional initiatives.

The major investment goals of China regarding Greece, as they most characteristically came to life with the COSCO investment in the port of Piraeus and by the State Grid investment in the Independent Power Transmission Operator of Greece, seem to align with China's pursuit of increasing its international influence in the region. The COSCO investment is also closely aligned with the BRI and its main goals, as China views the port of Piraeus as a gateway to EU markets, with a strategic role in the region's trade routes.

The major policy goals of China's strategy towards Greece are in line with its major strategic goals. Especially, China's goal to keep using Greece as a moderating actor within the EU as regards the latter's China policy is indicative of China's pursuit of increasing its international influence without activating an opposing balancing reaction. China's cultural diplomacy and more recently its "Mask Diplomacy" during the Global Pandemic SARS COVID-19 crisis seem to be working towards the same aspiration.

Other than the two aforementioned major investment policies of China in Greece, there have been a number of bilateral agreements covering a wide range of sectors that are not public and therefore cannot be assessed against China's presumed Grand Strategy. Energy, 5G technology and transport seem to be the three sectors that are of the greatest importance for China, however, they are pursued at a different pace and with varied intensity, which indicates that China is cognizant of the limitations that arise from Greece being tied to US interests and a member of the EU.

Against these elements of a potential Grand Strategy, the Greek discourse on whether Athens is actually experiencing the application of a Chinese Grand Strategy towards Greece as well as the future of Greece-China relations seems rather inconclusive. Research results indicate the existence of different "schools of thought" on the relative importance of China - Greece relations and on their prospects, while there is a more or less consensus on other aspects, such as the economic sector of the relationship being of major importance. There are diverging/opposing views on whether China's strategic choices towards Greece form part of a broader strategic approach and on whether this strategy is closely connected to the

BRI initiative and its priorities. There also seems to be no common perception on whether the importance of Greece for China is increasing or decreasing. Nevertheless, this inconclusiveness, much embedded in the full spectrum of Greek relevant stakeholders, seems to be serving Beijing interests. Though the high expectations of the 2010–2013 period have been dissolved (Institute of International Economic Relations, 2020), the relevant Greek discourse does not portray China as a threat and thus no “defensive” mechanisms have been created or are expected to be created in the near future. Hence, the very inconclusiveness could be a success of China’s peaceful rise policy, its cultural soft power strategy, or of an actual grant strategy in application, with only time being able to potentially provide more data on the subject matter.

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