

China in Europe Research Network (CHERN) - CA 18215

Ports in a storm: the spatial, political economy of Chinese-backed port investments

Basics

Host Organization: The Open University (United Kingdom)

Host Organizations's representative: Prof. Giles Mohan

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The tentative length of the STSM: 6 weeks between May and September 2023

Call's description and objectives

Ports provide an interesting lens to explore China-Europe relations and while they share many features of all infrastructure, they are unique in important ways. Ports are visible infrastructures lying in or close to major cities (Apostolopoulou 2021, Van den Berghe et al 2023) and link to wider logistics networks (Verschuur et al 2022). They also function as spaces of exception where neoliberal security logics apply and where borders are contested (Easterling 2014), are symbolic and material instantiations of geopolitical power (Noorali et al 2022), and – critically - operate as chokepoints in global trade.

Chinese State-Owned Enterprises, notably COSCO, and some private firms are seeking more investment in European ports through the Belt and Road Initiative and beyond. Recent data show China has invested in over 100 ports in 63 countries (Xie 2021), which is physically redrawing the map of global trade and political influence (Foreign Policy 2018) with many causing controversy in a way that other infrastructure, such as roads, do not (Koop 2019).

It is these political 'storms' that inform the title and work of this STSM. To help analyse such debates, we draw on Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez's (2018:251) 'controversies approach' which 'involves directing our attention towards moments of contestation and controversy around the technologies and regulations that supposedly govern (through) logistical infrastructure'. Such thinking can assist in

understanding the agents, finance, governance, and technology involved in port infrastructure. Given the variegated nature of port development in the European context, we see the need for a political economy wherein politics at intersecting scales is key (Brenner 2019).

The STSM is linked to the European Research Council funded [REDEFINE project](#) based at The Open University (OU). REDEFINE examines Chinese-backed infrastructure investments in Europe and its case studies cover a range of infrastructure sectors, five of which are port developments. In all cases we have seen controversies surrounding them:

- Duisburg (Germany) - COSCO recently withdrew from the deal in uncertain circumstances
- Hamburg (Germany) - COSCO has recently been forced to reduce its stake following intervention by the Federal Government
- Piraeus (Greece) – COSCO’s involvement caused labour unrest, while planned new developments stalled but are now moving slowly
- London (UK) – a large-scale ‘Gateway’ project failed and ABP - the Chinese developer - was removed
- Trieste (Italy) - China Communication Construction Co. was interested in a logistics hub which fell through amidst mis-placed concerns about it being a ‘new’ Piraeus.

The STSM sits squarely in CHERN’s WG1 but has overlaps with WG3 (finance) and WG5 (labour and migration).

Objectives. The STSM will address *how – and why – political actors and interests have shaped both the genesis of these port developments, but equally how politics has conspired to disrupt them.* In turn, we want to ask *what do these dynamics tell us about the role of infrastructures in wider China/Europe/global relations.* REDEFINE has desk research on the above cases but is keen to work with a visiting scholar to deepen our analysis in the following ways:

- Gather data from secondary data on Chinese investments in European ports
- Co-develop a theoretical framework for analysing ports

Call’s specific requirements

In addition to COST requirements (see **Practical details** below), the applicant should meet the following criteria:

- Someone with a good social sciences background and preferably with an interest in ports and/or major infrastructure.

Results

In addition to COST requirements (scientific report) the STSM will results in:

- Database on Chinese port investments developed with REDEFINE colleagues
- Outline draft of a co-authored paper aimed at a leading geography or political economy journal
- One blog to be cross-posted on the [CHERN](#) and [REDEFINE](#) websites
- Webinar as part of the OU/CHERN/York [seminar series](#)

In addition, the Fellow will build links with the REDEFINE team which could lead to future bids and research projects that extend the project's lifespan.

Practical details

All applicants must carefully read the [STSM basic facts](#) on CHERN's website before applying.

Initial meetings and activities would be done remotely, and the successful Fellow would join REDEFINE's online reading groups and be mentored by Professor Mohan. We envisage a 2-week visit to The OU's campus in June 2023 to work on outputs.

Deadlines

Deadline for applications to be submitted: **May 8th 2023**

Notification of application outcome: **May 20th 2023**

Period of STSM: Exact dates to be determined together with the host

Submitting the reports: **30 days** after completing the STSM (and no later than October 15th)

Accepting/ rejecting the reports: **within 2 weeks** after submission of the report

Execution of the payment of the grant: **within 4 weeks** after submission of the report

More information

For more information please contact:

STSM Coordinator Martina Bofulin (martina.bofulin@zrc-sazu.si)

References

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