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China in the Security Conundrum of Europe's Southeastern Periphery

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Abbreviations

BiH	Bosnia-Herzegovina
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CEEC	Central and Eastern European Countries
CMC	Central Military Commission
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
DSR	Digital Silk Road
ESEP	Europe's Southeastern Periphery
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
ETF	Escort Task Force
EVs	Electric Vehicles
GSI	Global Security Initiative
LNA	Libyan National Army
MCP	Military Cooperation Programme
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPS	(PRC) Ministry of Public Security
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
OHR	Office of the High Representative
OIMC	(CMC's) Office for International Military Cooperation
PAPF	People's Armed Police Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
RAN	Radio Access Network
RS	Republika Srpska
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missiles
SCEZ	Suez Canal Economic Zone
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SIPG	Shanghai International Port Group
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNFICYP	United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNGA	UN General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Introduction & Acknowledgements

In recent years the People's Republic of China (PRC) has actively sought to spread its influence worldwide amid shifting global dynamics and intensified great power competition. Although the Indo-Pacific, Central Asia and Africa are habitually framed as the standard geographical arenas of China's power projection, another theatre - as vital to the transatlantic interests as it is overlooked – is also home to brisk, albeit cautious, Chinese activity. The contiguous area running from the Western Balkans to the Black Sea basin down to the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean is steadily gaining traction in Beijing's foreign policy agenda. While so far China's presence in this region has been mainly economic, anchored in its much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is increasingly extending into the security realm, too - from military-to-military contacts to deeper cooperation in critical areas, such as joint naval drills, dual-use infrastructure and technologies to arms sales.

Europe's southeastern periphery (ESEP) is not an established entity in geography or area studies, and the term could easily be confused with the Balkans. Here it is used for the sake of convenience, but this is a deliberate choice as well. Not only does it cover countries on the edge of Europe, but also its 'near abroad' (Figure 1). This broader region is of particular interest to China, as a meeting point of the Maritime Silk Road and the Middle Corridor through the Caucasus. Europe, too, is increasingly preoccupied with developments to its east and south, and this is what renders the ESEP region a meaningful notion and a much-needed area of research.

Figure 1

Map of Europe's Southeastern Periphery

However, while there is no shortage of studies of China's presence in the Western Balkans, the Black Sea basin and the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe's southeastern periphery has been under-researched as one single region. It is duly acknowledged that, sprawling from the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea and the plains of Ukraine and southwestern Russia down to the Red Sea and the sand dunes of northern Africa, the ESEP region is anything but homogeneous. Its diversity, either in terms of climate, demography, economic challenges or forms of government, is truly intimidating. Yet, a look at the big picture allows for some broader trends and patterns to be identified as to China's pursuits in the region.

At the same time, this research has some inherent limitations to its scope, as its contours are the littoral states of Europe's southeastern periphery. Thus, the report does not cover significant developments in the

broader Middle East, such as the Israel-Iran 12-day war, the Houthis' attacks on shipping in the Red Sea or the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This paper seeks to address four specific research questions related to China's growing security influence in the ESEP region, namely:

a) *What are the drivers behind China's engagement in the ESEP region?*

b) What are the main tools in China's playbook of engagement in the realm of security in Europe's southeastern periphery?

c) What are the constraining factors of China's security involvement in the region?

d) What considerations condition the regional partners' engagement with China in the domain of security?

Given the ever-expanding concept of security, which now goes beyond traditional military and state-centric concerns to encompass a wider range of issues and actors, the paper assesses China's engagement with countries in the region on the basis of the following indicators: military-to-military cooperation, naval visits, peacekeeping, arms sales, infrastructure security, telecommunications and surveillance systems, and the broad domain of law enforcement. The study covers developments largely within the timeframe from 2010 to mid-2025 and includes the Arab Spring (2011), the creation of the 17+1[i] cooperation format (2012) and the launch of the BRI (2013), as well as the war in Ukraine since 2022 and hostilities in Israel since 2023. Through this scope, the report aims to contribute to a better understanding of China's security ambitions in Europe's southeastern periphery and the broader geopolitical consequences of its presence in the region over the past 15 years.

The methodology of this research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigating the multifaceted nature of China's security engagement with the region. The research team used publicly available data from Chinese, ESEP and global sources. The analysis relies on a comprehensive review of bilateral agreements and security cooperation documents, official government statements, academic literature and related media reports, which help trace the evolution of China's military and security relations with countries in Europe's southeastern periphery.

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Executive Summary

By exploring China's evolving role in the security landscape of Europe's southeastern periphery, a region encompassing the Western Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean, this paper reveals a complex and growing Chinese presence that challenges traditional Western security paradigms without overtly resorting to military means. Historically dominated by Euro-Atlantic institutions since World War II, notably NATO and the EU, as well as individual European powers, such as France, Germany, and Russia, this region is witnessing a recalibration of influence as China seeks to increase its strategic footprint in the security realm by wading into uncharted waters.

Key findings indicate that:

❖ Military-to-military cooperation includes high-level meetings, bilateral agreements, defence forums and consultations, study visits and goodwill gestures, as well as joint training courses and functional exchanges. These forms of engagement, most often the product of Beijing's initiatives, point to China's military diplomacy pursuits. Joint military and counterterrorist exercises are a significant part of Beijing's playbook in the region, though for the most part they are conducted with select ESEP countries, such as Russia, Serbia and Egypt. On the other hand, military interactions with NATO members and Israel lack

strategic depth, as these countries have toned down their military-to-military cooperation with China over the past few years, not least due to their pro-western allegiances amid the intensified Sino-American rivalry.

❖ Port calls of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels in the ESEP region are more symbolic than substantive, as they serve primarily as diplomatic signals of China's expanding blue-water capabilities, as well as part of its soft power toolkit. Notably, naval visits have been more frequent to ports in the Eastern Mediterranean than in the Adriatic Sea or the Black Sea. Furthermore, since 2019 and particularly amid the war in Ukraine and hostilities around Israel this form of China's military diplomacy appears to enjoy a lower degree of acceptance across the region.

❖ Being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China is called upon to participate in peacekeeping initiatives in the region, though its level of engagement is marked by a highly selective attitude, with Beijing being remarkably vocal in some cases and conspicuously silent in others. The staple of its approach remains the policy of avoiding confrontation with other security actors, while China is largely in lockstep with Russia.

❖ After several decades of relying on weapons from other suppliers, China has now turned into an arms producer itself and is competing with traditional exporters for markets, including in Europe's southeastern periphery. Sales of Chinese arms to Egypt and Serbia, in particular, signal Beijing's intent to test the waters of the European defence landscape. The provision of military aid, in the form of donations and grants, is yet another form of public diplomacy in the toolkit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). At the same time, a number of sources suggest that Chinese weaponry is making its way into conflict-torn ESEP countries via third parties and clandestine channels, and may fuel further flare-ups in a region that is already quite volatile.

❖ Chinese investments, often under the BRI label, enhance Beijing's leverage over critical infrastructure and policymaking in countries with weaker governance or ambivalent geopolitical orientation. This research suggests that the presence of Chinese companies increasingly intersects with security interests in the region, whereby economic dependency on Beijing may translate into strategic vulnerabilities of ESEP nations, mostly in transport infrastructure and energy networks.

❖ At the same time, China has been fairly consistent in promoting its telecommunication and surveillance systems across the ESEP region. Potentially dual-use technologies are being deployed not only in 'smart city' projects and infrastructure that is being built by Chinese companies, but in the vicinity of military facilities as well. There are indications that the use of Chinese surveillance technologies deviates from international norms in relation to human rights and the rule of law.

❖ Beijing is increasingly pursuing cooperation with the police forces and other law enforcement agencies in Europe's southeastern periphery, either to protect its investments and citizens in the region or to combat organised crime often originating in China itself. Once again, the notion of law enforcement in the PRC differs a great deal from internationally accepted standards and many controversial cases have been recorded in the ESEP region.

While China is seen primarily as an economic actor, military diplomacy has become a vital tool of Beijing's statecraft. Over the past two decades or so, the PLA has significantly enlarged its international military engagement in support of China's foreign policy objectives. The ESEP region is not as important to the PRC as the Indo-Pacific, but Chinese presence certainly offers a glimpse into the underlying calculus of the PRC as a rising global power using an ever-expanding playbook.

For the time being, China is likely to remain a transactional extra-regional power that stands aloof from substantively enmeshing itself in the ESEP security architecture. It is worth noting, however, that some ESEP countries themselves view Beijing as a counterweight to other actors in the complex patchwork of the region. Therefore, China's role as a security quasi-actor in Europe's southeastern periphery calls for a careful study of Beijing's pursuits, and a well thought-out response from governments in the region and western institutions alike.

Military-to-Military Cooperation

According to China's state news agency *Xinhua*, Xi Jinping stated in 2015 that foreign military relations should serve to promote the overall diplomacy of the PRC and safeguard national security. Sources from the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences further emphasize these pursuits by describing foreign military relations in the context of both 'Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy' and 'Xi Jinping Thought on a Strong Military', which contain guidance on foreign affairs and military development, respectively.

The PRC institution primarily responsible for formulating and coordinating relations with foreign militaries is the Office for International Military Cooperation (OIMC) of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Its mission is to manage foreign military exchanges and cooperation, and to supervise the international relations of China's armed forces. The PRC's military diplomacy playbook includes the following main forms of engagement: senior-level visits and dialogues, naval port calls, joint military exercises, functional exchanges, and non-traditional security operations. In the framework of this strategy, China has systematically sought to maintain and even enlarge its presence in Europe's southeastern periphery through high-level contacts and, when possible, institutionalise it.

Institutional Arrangements

Russia has had by far the closest and most profound military-to-military cooperation with China, even though Moscow and Beijing do not speak of a military alliance. Since February 2022, they have announced their 'no limits partnership' and have indeed acted in concert as a strategic tandem. China's tacit support to Russia during the war in Ukraine has confirmed the two partners' shared vision in their crusade against the western liberal world order. Tellingly, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Brussels in July 2025, and reportedly stated to EU officials quite explicitly that Beijing did not want to see a Russian defeat in Ukraine.

Serbia, too, has developed a close military relationship with the PRC, particularly since the 2018 visit of its minister of defence to Beijing. This is when the two countries formalised their defence cooperation and further deepened their political ties. In 2021, then minister of defence of the PRC Wei Fenghe paid another visit to Serbia, during which the two sides reaffirmed their willingness to expand their strategic partnership and defence cooperation.

In other cases, exchanges between China and ESEP countries are not necessarily based on formal institutional arrangements. The 2021 four-leg tour of the Chinese minister of defence included Hungary, Serbia, **North Macedonia** and **Greece**, as a display of diplomatic activism aiming primarily to underscore China's presence in the region. In Skopje the Chinese defence minister had meetings with the president and the prime minister of the country, as well as with his counterpart. North Macedonia's engagements with PLA officials were regular in the 2010s, particularly on the heels of a previous visit by China's defence minister in 2013. However, North Macedonia joined NATO in 2020 and exchanges on issues related to military cooperation have become shallow and merely symbolic.

This seems to confirm a more general pattern. The 2010s were marked by many frequent exchanges between top military officials of China and a number of ESEP countries. For instance, **Moldova**'s defence minister travelled to Beijing in September 2012 to meet his PRC counterpart who stated that China stood ready to provide military assistance to Chisinau. An agreement was concluded by the two defence ministries in June 2013, and notably, China has given Moldova grants worth 15 million yuan (some $2 million) for technical assistance.

On the other hand, high-profile visits do not necessarily lead to the signing of military cooperation agreements and other institutional arrangements. Thus, the defence minister of **Slovenia** travelled to China in June 2011, while the Chinese defence minister reciprocated and visited Ljubljana in January 2013, but there is no formal agreement on military cooperation between the two sides. Similarly, despite the fact that the defence minister of BiH visited Beijing in October 2013, a bilateral defence agreement between the two countries has not been signed to date.

Egypt enjoys ever-closer military ties with China, even though this is not enshrined in a specific bilateral agreement. Sino-Egyptian relations literally took off in 2014 in a wide range of domains, including military-to-military cooperation. This can be attributed to the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohamed Morsi the previous year by then commander-in-chief and later on president of the country Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi. His military-backed government ushered in what has aptly been called 'the golden decade' of partnership between Egypt and the PRC.

In the framework of China's military diplomacy, the defence attachés in nearly all the PRC embassies across the ESEP region are very active and contribute to defence dialogues and relationship-building on a day-to-day level. Through this layered approach, combining formal cooperation, soft power outreach, and putting forward proposals for joint initiatives, China seeks to strengthen its presence in the ESEP region, while adhering to a low-profile, non-confrontational posture in line with Beijing's foreign policy priorities.

Every year, PRC embassies across the ESEP region host receptions to commemorate the establishment of the PLA on 1 August 1927, and do not miss the opportunity to portray China as a rising military power and a responsible global actor. Thus, in 2024 the PRC ambassador in Sofia presented China's commitment to international peace and security to office holders in the national parliament and members of the military attaché corps in Bulgaria. On the same occasion, the PRC embassy in Zagreb hosted a reception for leading local politicians, the Croatian top brass and military attachés from many other countries, and the Chinese ambassador presented the PLA as a reliable force in maintaining world peace. At the respective reception in Turkey, the PRC military attaché pointed out that China was striding towards the status of a 'first-class army' on a global scale.

China's strategy to leverage military-to-military contacts and strengthen bilateral ties with ESEP countries became particularly discernible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the PLA provided personal protection equipment to armed forces of many ESEP countries in the framework of its global 'mask diplomacy' campaign. While framed as humanitarian assistance, these deliveries also served as goodwill gestures, aiming to reinforce China's image as a reliable partner and thus subtly deepen its footprint across the region. However, since 2020 willingness to cooperate with the PRC on defence-related matters has visibly diminished in NATO members and Israel.

Military Cooperation with NATO Members

NATO members have become increasingly cautious, if not reluctant, in their military cooperation with the PRC. In June 2021, the NATO summit in Brussels yielded a joint communiqué which noted that China's ambitions and assertive behaviour presented 'systemic challenges to the rules-based international order' and to areas relevant to the security of the Alliance.[ii]

Thus, in **Bulgaria** and **Romania**, both NATO members, military engagement with China is now minimal, restricted to occasional dialogues and military attaché-level interactions. Romania has hosted Chinese military delegations engaging in minor exchanges, such as in 2019, when the two countries held a bilateral defence consultation. However, these interactions lack strategic depth, as both Bulgaria's and Romania's national security interests lie with the Euro-Atlantic institutions, and neither would risk crossing western red lines by forging closer defence ties with Beijing.

While there is a history of military cooperation between China and **Albania**, including a bilateral defence agreement signed in 2005, over the past two decades Tirana has prioritised its partnership with NATO and the EU. The same can be said of **Slovenia** and **Montenegro**, NATO members since 2004 and 2017, respectively. Similarly, military-to-military engagement between China and **North Macedonia**, yet another NATO member since 2020, remains limited, and there is no consistent pattern of military cooperation between the two countries.

Greece, a NATO member since 1952, is an intriguing case. In 2016, the anti-western Greek government in power at the time accepted Beijing's proposal for a military cooperation programme which is still being implemented, the last functional exchange taking place in November 2024. The agreement includes a range of activities in training and joint exercises. However, it is not quite clear to what extent this programme is

substantive and mutually beneficial. During his visit to Athens in 2021 the former PRC defence minister Wei Fenghe met with the Greek president and his counterpart, but these exchanges yielded no tangible outcome.

China's military engagement with **Turkey** ebbs and flows largely depending on Ankara's kaleidoscopic partnership with the West. Ankara's relationship with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner since 2012 has further enabled engagement with China within a multilateral framework. While arms trade volumes have been relatively modest compared to NATO-aligned suppliers, Chinese defence firms are exploring options for technology transfer and defence-related investment in Turkey, such as potential joint development or manufacturing of drones or missile systems. In addition, it is noted that in Turkey's case China has used a format based on the fusion of cultural and military diplomacy: in March 2020, the PRC embassy in Ankara and the Confucius Institute at the Middle East Technical University launched the first Chinese language training course for the Turkish Armed Forces.

Military cooperation with non-NATO members

Once again, China and **Russia** stand out as the closest partners in terms of military cooperation, including training of PLA staff on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine. Security analysts point out that Beijing could apply these lessons in an invasion of Taiwan, despite obvious differences between the two theatres. Moscow and Beijing have significantly deepened their military cooperation through joint exercises, technology sharing, and strategic coordination. They regularly conduct large-scale drills focusing on naval, air, and anti-submarine warfare, and have carried out joint bomber patrols. Russia has assisted China in developing an early missile warning system, marking rare high-level technology transfer. The two countries also cooperate in satellite imagery and patrols in the Arctic, as well as in multiple naval drills in East Asia and, together with Iran, in the Gulf of Oman. This growing defence partnership reflects their shared strategic aim to counterbalance U.S. influence and promote a multipolar global order. At the same time, the comprehensive Sino-Russian military cooperation in other parts of the world is in stark contrast to their relatively limited interaction in the ESEP region.

So far, Chinese engagement in **Georgia** has been limited to discussions about military cooperation and currently does not translate into substantive joint actions. Although Georgia officially maintains its NATO aspirations, recent policies of the Georgian Dream government indicate a growing divergence from Euro-Atlantic integration. Notably, some security discussions, including visits by Chinese delegations and exchanges focusing on law enforcement and national defence cooperation, took place before the 2024 protests in the country. While these talks signal a potential shift towards closer security ties with China, no specific military agreements or joint exercises have yet been confirmed.

NATO members and pro-western governments in the ESEP region have significantly curtailed their military contacts with China in the 2020s

In **Ukraine**, defence relations with China were much closer before 2014, with significant technology transfers, such as the sale to Beijing of the Liaoning aircraft carrier in 1998. However, military cooperation has sharply declined since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, Beijing does not wish to cause a rupture in its relations with Russia and, on the other, Kyiv does not want to send a wrong signal to its western backers. Before 2022, China's military engagement with **Moldova** focused on educational exchanges, non-combat technical training, particularly in areas such as logistics and cybersecurity, and occasional visits by defence attachés. However, since then Chisinau has become considerably more cautious in its contacts and exchanges with the PLA.

It is clear that NATO members as well as pro-western governments in **Ukraine and Moldova** have curtailed their military contacts with China and reduced them to a merely symbolic level in the 2020s, particularly since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the Hamas attack in October 2023.

Joint Military and Counterterrorism Exercises

Joint military exercises with the PLA cover the areas of humanitarian assistance, noncombatant evacuations, disaster relief, peacekeeping, anti-piracy and counterterrorism. These exercises, invariably proposed by Beijing, remain limited and highly selective in Europe's southeastern periphery, reflecting China's cautious approach to defence engagement in a region marked by the presence of other powerful security actors.

China's military cooperation with **Russia** is steadily deepening and includes a growing strategic alignment between the two powers, with large-scale joint drills in other regions such as the Baltic Sea and the Sea of Japan. However, joint Sino-Russian military exercises in the Black Sea have not been recorded to date. Notably, the sole visit by Chinese warships to a Russian Black Sea naval base, the one in Novorossiysk, took place in 2015, before the two navies carried out joint drills in the Mediterranean Sea. This was widely seen as a sign of solidarity with Moscow a year after Crimea's annexation by Russia in 2014.

Conversely, China's military engagement with **Egypt** has been intensifying. In 2019, a Chinese destroyer conducted what was officially described as a four-day technical stop at the port of Alexandria. 'Technical stops' in the Chinese military parlance involve, *inter alia*, refuelling, resupply, and maintenance ensuring the Chinese navy can sustain long-range missions, especially in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. However, the port call in question was followed by joint training activities focusing on methods of combating terrorism and piracy, and terrorist threats from missile boats in particular. In August 2024, the PLA Navy conducted another joint exercise with the Egyptian Navy in the Mediterranean. This was followed a few months later by a joint air force exercise in Egypt codenamed 'Eagles of Civilization 2025'. Conducted at an Egyptian Air Force base near the Gulf of Suez, the drills featured advanced Chinese aircraft, including J-10C fighters, KJ-500 AEW&C systems, YY-20 tankers, and Y-20 transports, alongside Egypt's F-16, Rafale, and MiG-29 fighter jets. The exercise focused on air superiority, suppression of enemy air defences, search and rescue, and mixed formation tactics.

The increasingly close military ties between **Serbia** and China are illustrated by joint training activities carried out by armed forces of the two countries. In November 2019, Chinese special police forces took part in joint training drills with Serbia's elite anti-terrorist unit and local police. Notably, Chinese and Serbian special police forces have conducted counter-terrorism drills on both Serbian and Chinese soil. In July 2025, joint military drills with the codename Peacekeeper 2025 and the participation of PLA and Serbian units were held in China.

In September 2018, Chinese forces participated in the multinational 'Steel Storm' exercise in **Lebanon** under the UNIFIL framework. By operating within a UN mandate, China preserved its neutral image while quietly expanding its regional footprint. Overall, these efforts illustrate China's calibrated military engagement in the ESEP region. Rather than adopting an overly assertive posture, Beijing favours low-profile initiatives that align with its rhetoric about non-alignment and non-interference.

Joint military exercises with NATO members have been very few and on a smaller scale. The first recorded one was in 2010 when Chinese and **Turkish** air forces conducted joint aerial drills at Konya Air Base in central Anatolia. The exercise was timed just before Chinese premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Turkey, during which he pledged to triple bilateral trade under a new 'strategic partnership'. NATO did not react to this development until 2013 when then NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, voiced concerns over Turkey's intent to co-produce a missile defence system with a Chinese firm within the framework of the two countries' strategic partnership. In July 2017, a port call by the PLAN Task Group 150 to the port of Piraeus in **Greece** was followed by a largely symbolic one-day joint military exercise. Intriguingly, at about the same time a PLAN flotilla carried out live-fire drills in the Mediterranean Sea, en route to a joint exercise with the Russian navy in the Baltic Sea.

Figure 2 shows the joint exercises that have taken place in the ESEP region with the involvement of the PLA and Chinese counterterrorist forces.

Figure 2

Exercises with the PLA and Chinese Counterterrorist Forces

2010-2025

Country	Time	Format	Remarks
Turkey	September 2010	Bilateral Air Drills	Mock dogfights
Russia	May 2015	Bilateral Naval Drills	In the Mediterranean Sea
Egypt	August 2019 August 2024 April 2025	Bilateral Naval Drills Bilateral Naval Drills Bilateral Air Drills	Counterterrorism, Anti-piracy Maneuvering, replenishment Mission planning, joint air sorties
Greece	July 2017	Bilateral Naval Drills	Naval cooperation, mutual understanding
Lebanon	September 2018	In the UNIFIL framework	Counterterrorism exercise
Serbia	November 2019 July 2025	Bilateral, Counterterrorism Bilateral, Special Operation Forces	Exercise conducted in Serbia Exercise conducted in China
Int'l waters	July 2017	PLAN alone	Live-fire drills in the Mediterranean Sea

Source: Institute of International Economic Relations

Naval Port Calls

Naval visits are a significant, if largely performative, part of Beijing's military diplomacy. On the one hand, they are meant to enhance China's visibility and to reassure other countries about the purportedly benign nature of its naval buildup. On the other hand, these visits mark a significant expansion of China's maritime presence beyond the Asia-Pacific region. By making port calls in countries along Mediterranean, Adriatic and Black Sea shores, China uses military diplomacy as a way to deepen its ties with the region. These visits are frequently viewed as being merely symbolic, but they actually relate to Beijing's broader ambitions to influence key global trade routes, support its Belt and Road Initiative, and position itself as a major player in regional security dynamics traditionally dominated by western powers or Russia.

PLAN's involvement in counter-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia since late 2008 provided opportunities for port calls in the ESEP region. PLAN warships on escort task force (ETF) missions typically conduct two types of port calls. Replenishment visits, usually lasting two to five days during which the vessels receive fuel, fresh water, and food supplies, are not open for public display. Friendly visits generally last two to four days, with the crew usually meeting with the Chinese ambassador and military attachés, as well as host-country government and naval officials.[iii]

Egypt, a critical BRI partner due to its control of the Suez Canal, has hosted several PLAN ETFs. In July 2010, a destroyer and a frigate from PLAN docked at Alexandria following escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. A more elaborate picture emerged in September 2015, when Fleet 152 visited Egypt to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. This visit featured joint maneuvers, mutual warship tours, and exchanges on anti-terrorism strategies. More recently, in August 2024, two Chinese warships returned to Alexandria, combining performative diplomacy with high-level meetings.

In the summer of 2012, ships of the PLAN 11th ETF visited the ports of Constanța and Varna in **Romania** and **Bulgaria**, respectively. At about the same time, the *Qingdao* destroyer visited the Crimean port of Sevastopol, which was controlled by **Ukraine** at the time. Subsequently, these Chinese military vessels docked at Istanbul in **Turkey** and subsequently at **Israel**'s port of Haifa, thus remaining in the eastern Mediterranean for close to a month. In 2015, the 19th Chinese ETF, comprising two advanced missile frigates and a replenishment supply ship, arrived at the port of Rola in Split, **Croatia**, for a five-day visit, coupled with public and cultural diplomacy activities. This visit took place within the broader context of China's increasing engagement in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly under the framework of the China-CEEC (17+1) cooperation mechanism (now 14+1, following the withdrawal of the three Baltic states). Notably, **Romania**, **Bulgaria** and **Croatia** hosted 17+1 summits in 2013, 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Further south, four recorded naval port calls to Piraeus in **Greece** underscore China's intertwined economic and strategic ambitions, particularly through the state-owned shipping giant COSCO's investment in the port. For instance, in February 2015, a Chinese naval escort fleet arrived in Piraeus and was welcomed by the president of Greece. In July 2017, a Chinese naval fleet returned to Piraeus for a four-day visit. Both visits occurred during the tenure of Greece's radical government (2015-2019), which was often at loggerheads with western partners over economic and foreign policy issues. Since then, Athens has been more circumspect on this issue, e.g., in early 2025, it rejected Beijing's request for Chinese warships to visit and berth in Greek ports.

After the visit of the 11th PLAN escort fleet in 2012, **Turkey** welcomed another Chinese naval delegation in May 2015, when two guided-missile frigates and a supply ship arrived in Istanbul for a five-day visit. Subsequently, three Chinese warships docked at the port of Istanbul in July 2017. Hosting these visits of Chinese warships presumably allowed Turkey to signal a degree of strategic autonomy from its western allies.

It is noted that one of the most visited ESEP country by PLAN vessels has been **Greece** (see Figure 3). This clearly relates to COSCO's presence in the port of Piraeus. Another interesting finding is that China's naval visits to ESEP ports were considerably more frequent in the 2010s. This could, partly at least, be attributed to the disruption caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as well as to the hostilities in Ukraine since February 2022 and the Eastern Mediterranean since October 2023. However, growing awareness of China's geopolitical agenda has also played a part, and this is particularly visible in the behaviour of NATO members and Israel.

Figure 3

Number of PLAN Port Calls to Littoral ESEP Countries, 2010-2025

Country	Number of Port Calls
Greece	4
Turkey	4
Egypt	4
Ukraine	2
Russia*	1
Romania	1
Bulgaria	1
Croatia	1
Israel	1

* The table only covers PLAN visits to Russian Black Sea ports

Sources: Institute of International Economic Relations, K. Allen et al.

Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping operations constitute another a prominent foreign policy vector of the PRC. China is eager to portray itself as a 'responsible great power' through its significant contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. The PRC is the largest troop-contributing country among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the second-largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping, covering 18.7% of the total budget for the fiscal year 2024-2025. However, Beijing's peacekeeping efforts across Europe's southeastern periphery reflect a careful balance between diplomatic restraint and strategic visibility.

Wearing the UNSC P5 Mantle

Unlike China's presence in other parts of the world and mostly Africa, its peacekeeping footprint in the ESEP area is confined to its contribution to two UN missions to Lebanon and Cyprus. In **Lebanon**, China has played an active role in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) since 2016, primarily through the deployment of engineering and medical units. In 2024, its contribution to UNIFIL exceeded 400 troops and staff officers and, as of March 2025, this was China's second largest contingent of troops and experts after the UN mission to South Sudan (UNMISS). Chinese peacekeepers have contributed to humanitarian assistance and infrastructure development, which also include soft power activities, such as the construction of the China-Lebanon Peace Square. During the October 2024 escalation between Israel and Hezbollah, China called on Israel to ensure the safety of UNIFIL personnel.

In contrast, China's role in the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in **Cyprus** (UNFICYP) is largely diplomatic and symbolic. Between 2011 and 2023, the PRC seconded six troops and 41 police officers to UNFICYP. While Beijing consistently supports the renewal of the UNFICYP mandate, its involvement has been limited to backing UN-led efforts and advertising its Global Security Initiative (GSI). However, Beijing is unlikely to become actively involved in a mediation process on the Cyprus issue. China's default position remains one of cautious distance, as it lacks the strategic incentive or geopolitical urgency to mediate. And, above all, its involvement would pose a diplomatic dilemma for Chinese policymakers, as it would risk straining relations with key stakeholders in this dispute: **Turkey**, **Greece**, the United Kingdom, and the EU.

Nor has China been willing to get embroiled in the conflict in **Syria**, despite the fact that it has kept its embassy in Damascus open all along and has had a special envoy for the conflict since 2016. China has been in lockstep with Russia on major issues related to Syria, as illustrated by its votes at the UNSC, and effectively supported the Assad regime till its collapse in late 2024. Notably, official Chinese statements on the conflict in Syria have scrupulously avoided any mention of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) UN norm as a justification for foreign military intervention against the Assad regime for its attacks on thousands of Syrian civilians.[iv] Most probably, in conjunctions with other considerations China's support to the Assad regime was based on a broader geopolitical calculus as well, given that Syria was close to Iran, a security partner of both Moscow and Beijing in the Middle East.

At the same time, China did take part in an international operation for the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, conducted in 2014 under the supervision of the UNSC and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). However, China – as well as Russia – did not contribute financially to the programme – instead, both countries provided military vessels and other equipment for the removal of chemical weapons.

In **Libya**, China has maintained an opportunistic wait-and-see approach. Before the 2011 uprising, Chinese companies were heavily invested in infrastructure, oil, and construction projects across the country. Although China abstained from the March 2011 UNSC vote that empowered NATO to intervene in Libya, Beijing later criticised western countries for overstepping the UN resolution's mandate and overthrowing the regime of dictator Muammar Qaddafi. It has been pointed out that, despite Beijing's initial support for international efforts to condemn and sanction the Libyan regime, its subsequent criticism of the NATO-led mission was to a great extent motivated by other practical considerations. Most notable among these was an apparent desire to avoid appearing at odds with two key regional organisations, the Arab League (AL) and the African Union (AU), with which China already had important economic and political ties.[v] Since 2011, Beijing has continued to support UN-led diplomatic efforts for peace while keeping its economic partnerships with both sides in the conflict.

In **BiH**, China is not involved in the European Union Force, which is understandable but, in tandem with Russia, has played the role of a spoiler. Both Moscow and Beijing have opposed the appointment of the High Representative who oversees the implementation of the Dayton Agreements. With China's support, Russia has proposed a draft resolution before the UN Security Council to abolish the Office of the High Representative (OHR) on the grounds that his services are no longer needed due to the progress that has been made in the war-torn country. In the end, the UNSC turned down the Resolution. In addition, both China

and Russia voted against the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution, adopted in May 2023, to establish the "International Day of Srebrenica Genocide".

In fact, in the case of BiH Beijing's lofty rhetoric about respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity is contradictory and shrouded in ambiguity, at best. Beijing views separatist movements as being perilous to the territorial integrity of the Chinese state, a policy anchored in the 'Anti-Secession Law' adopted by the National People's Congress of the PRC in March 2005. Therefore Beijing is unlikely to recognise an independent Republika Srpska (RS), yet it is indulging in inflaming tension and essentially destabilising BiH. For instance, Chinese and Russian diplomats attended the celebration of the controversial RS national holiday on 9 January 2022, which has been declared unconstitutional by federal BiH institutions. It is obvious that China's foreign policy approach to this particular Western Balkan state diverges from its stance on other similar disputes worldwide.

Beijing's Peacekeeping Initiatives in ESEP

As for the long-standing **Palestinian issue**, Beijing has consistently supported the two-state cause. In July 2024, China hosted 14 Palestinian factions which signed a declaration on national unity. However, despite its ostentatious diplomatic activism, Beijing will not take the lead in terms of mediation and conflict resolution in a region fraught with historical complexities. While Chinese president Xi has presented at least three peace plans, they are of questionable feasibility, and mostly aiming to win the hearts and minds of a broader Global South audience. After irking **Israel** with its pro-Palestinian and pro-Iranian rhetoric following the Hamas attack in October 2023, Beijing changed course and sought to balance moral positioning and geopolitical pragmatism, ensuring it remains a credible partner for developing nations and Arab states in particular, but without completely alienating Israel.

On the war in **Ukraine**, China has not officially recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the more recent incorporation of the four eastern Ukrainian provinces, signaling its reluctance to fully endorse Moscow's territorial claims despite growing strategic alignment between the two powers. However, Beijing's 12-point position paper presented on 24 February 2023 was dismissed by both Kyiv and its western partners. Beijing's policy in post-war Ukraine could presumably take three forms: China could send a small number of police officers or engineering troops as a contribution to a UN-led peacekeeping force; it could participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine; or, it could consider the role of a guarantor of Ukraine's security, a scenario definitely more palatable to Russia than one involving western powers and NATO.

China's Diplomatic Silence

In stark contrast to China's diplomatic activism and vocal advocacy for a two-state solution in Israel, Beijing is conspicuously silent in the case of other conflicts in Europe's southeastern periphery. While China has not officially recognised areas occupied by Russia, such as **Moldova**'s Transnistria or **Georgia**'s Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Beijing has not stated its position on these frozen conflicts, and has not taken any diplomatic initiatives. While it is obvious that China is careful to avoid stirring trouble in its strategic partnership with Russia, such a position is consistent with Beijing's broader policy of not recognising separatist regions - this would contradict China's stance towards Taiwan, which it considers a renegade PRC province. This is also why China does not recognise the self-proclaimed 'Turkish Republic of Northern **Cyprus**' (TRNC), an entity only recognised by Turkey. Along the same lines, despite its consistent support to Belgrade, the Chinese government is unlikely to support an independent Republika Srpska which seeks to walk out of **BiH**.

Beijing's stance towards peacekeeping in the ESEP region has been selective and based on China's self-interest

Beijing is silent on another issue that relates to conflicts in the ESEP region. In principle, China has always been interested in the reconstruction of **Syria** and **Libya**, and is now preparing to get involved in post-war Ukraine. China has hinted that it could participate in a peacekeeping mission in **Ukraine**, but only under UN

auspices. However, Beijing's assumption is that the estimated $486 billion cost of Ukraine's reconstruction will be borne primarily by western donors and China is not expected to shoulder a significant financial burden. In other words, Beijing's reconstruction ambitions are merely an extension of its well-established BRI policy, with Chinese companies undertaking loan-based infrastructure projects or seeking contracts paid-for by other sources.

In yet another potential flashpoint in the ESEP region, Athens and Ankara have locked horns over a 2019 maritime boundary deal between **Turkey** and **Libya**, which is challenged by **Greece** as arbitrary and illegal. Although China is party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and a permanent member of the UNSC, it is unlikely to take a stand in this particular dispute. Most probably, Beijing will stay away from UNCLOS-based arguments, given its dispute with the Philippines in the South China Sea and the 2016 ruling of an international tribunal in The Hague which Beijing clearly ignored.

Arms Sales

China has only recently turned into a supplier of arms to the ESEP region. In fact, until recently it used to purchase weapons and related technologies from other suppliers, but it is rapidly shifting to a more competitive defence industry that has upgraded the quality of its arms for exports. The PRC has both improved the quality of its arms and expanded the range of equipment it provides, with the most notable advances in aircraft and ships. While historically China's arms makers have focused almost exclusively on supplying the PLA, over the last decade they have started looking for overseas markets to support Beijing's commercial and geopolitical goals alike. Between 2019 and 2023, China accounted for 5.8% of conventional arms sales on a global scale. Today, China-made weapons are gradually becoming visible in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, and are making inroads in Central Asia and the Middle East. While the ESEP region does not account for a significant share of China's arms sales, there are signs that Beijing is beginning to view Europe's southeastern periphery as both a source of military technologies and a market for its own weapons.

Close cooperation between China and **Russia** has played a vital role in buttressing Russia's military capabilities with obvious implications for the war in Ukraine. Despite sweeping western sanctions aimed at curbing Russia's access to military technologies, Beijing has kept supplying dual-use goods to Moscow. In response, Ukraine has imposed sanctions on several Chinese firms accused of supplying Russia's defence industry, even though Beijing denies any involvement in arms transfers to Russia. The scale of China-Russia trade, peaking at $240 billion in 2023, leaves plenty of room for Beijing's indirect support for Moscow's war effort. Further fuelling these concerns, Chinese-manufactured ammunition has reportedly been recovered from the battlefield in Ukraine. According to Kyiv, Chinese military supplies to Russia include gunpowder and artillery, an allegation refuted by Beijing. While it remains unclear whether it was supplied directly by China or acquired through third parties, these developments cast doubt on Beijing's professed neutrality and point to its much more complex role in the conflict.

While Beijing publicly maintains a position of neutrality with respect to the war in **Ukraine**, its actions suggest a more nuanced role that effectively amounts to support provided to Russia. Ukrainian authorities report that approximately 60% of foreign-manufactured components found in Russian weaponry originate from, or are re-exported through, China. These components include essential technologies, such as microchips, circuit boards, and other electronic systems used in drones, missiles, and surveillance equipment.

Ukraine, too, has been a supplier of military equipment to China, starting with the sale of its decommissioned aircraft carrier Liaoning (former Varyag) in 1998. However, concerns over national security began to emerge in the 2010s, particularly surrounding Chinese involvement with the strategic Ukrainian company Motor Sich, a key manufacturer of aircraft engines. Apprehensions about technology transfer and potential espionage raised alarms among Ukrainian officials and western allies, with the U.S. embassy in Kyiv leading a campaign to block the Chinese takeover of Motor Sich. Following the Ukrainian government's nationalisation of the

company, China's investment firm Skyrizon initiated legal action against Ukraine at the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes in The Hague. Subsequently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to the freezing of Chinese projects in Ukraine and military cooperation. It is noted, however, that Ukraine continued to export arms to China even after the outbreak of the war, obviously in order to finance its defence industry.

Israel and China have had a long-lasting cooperation in defence technology transfers. Israeli arms sales to the PRC have included unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), surveillance equipment, monitoring devices and dual-use technologies. However, Beijing's military relationship with Israel has cooled significantly, not least due to China's stance amid the conflict in Gaza after October 2023. While China maintains a no-weapons policy regarding the Israel-Palestine issue, its neutrality has come under scrutiny. Reports confirming the use of Chinese-made weapons by Hamas fighters shed light on intricate networks of arms smuggling and illicit weapons sales taking place on the black market. Chinese machine guns, anti-tank weapons, AK-47 rifles, and even Syrian-made rockets based on the Chinese WS-1 rocket system blueprint, have been found in the possession of Hamas and have been used against Israel. These weapons are likely to have been smuggled through third countries, but Israel has raised questions regarding China's due diligence, or the lack thereof, with respect to its arms sales.

China is increasingly viewing the ESEP region as a market for its weapons, despite fierce competition with other suppliers

Egypt stands out as another prominent recipient of Chinese military hardware in the ESEP region. Sino-Egyptian military cooperation dates back to the 1980s, when China supplied B-6 bombers, F-6 fighters, submarines, and frigates, and this partnership has only deepened over time. In April 2025, following a high-profile joint military exercise, media reports suggested that Egypt might be considering purchasing the J-10C fighter jet, a move that would significantly alter regional power dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is duly noted that China has been actively targeting the markets in South Asia and the Middle East to export its J-10C aircraft, presenting it as a superior alternative for western fighter jets. In addition, Egypt has partnered with China in drone development, including the co-production of the ASN-209 UAVs and the operational deployment of Chinese-made Wing Loong drones. The collaboration also extends to licensed manufacturing, as seen in the production of the K-8E, an Egyptian variant of China's Hongdu JL-8 trainer jet which began in 2000. Last but not least, Egypt has officially confirmed it is now using the Chinese HQ-9B long-range surface-to-surface missile system.

Serbia's track record in purchases of Chinese military equipment is equally impressive. A major breakthrough occurred in 2020, when Serbia and China finalised their first formal defence deal. As part of the agreement, Serbia purchased six CH-92A UAVs for surveillance and precision-strike missions, along with 18 FT-8C laser-guided missiles. In the same year, and within the context of a military demonstration in Pester coded 'Cooperation 2020', which also showcased Russian tanks, helicopters and fighter jets, Serbia boasted its updated fleet of Chinese CH-92A combat drones, the first ever deployment of Chinese UAVs in Europe. Additionally, Serbia has gained the technological knowledge to produce its own drone, Pegasus, which has capabilities similar to those of the CH-92A UAV.

Another arms purchase from China in 2022 consisted of FK-3 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) capable of eliminating aircraft, drones, cruise missiles, and helicopters, even in challenging weather conditions. The FK-3 purchase has rendered Serbia the first operator of Chinese missiles in Europe and in late 2024 Belgrade announced the completion of the necessary training in China. Prior to these purchases, in 2017 China had supplied €900,000 worth of military equipment that included rubber boats with outboard engines, snowmobiles, and portable devices for detecting explosives and narcotics. Also, increased activity has been observed in the civilian sector by the Poly Group Corporation, the same Chinese defence company which has donated engineering equipment to BiH and has faced sanctions by the U.S. government for violating the Iran, North Korea and Syria Nonproliferation Act.

One of China's strategic objectives is to expand its arms manufacturing footprint by gaining entry into the European defence market, from which it has long been excluded due to the EU's arms embargo imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. The fact that Serbia is not an EU member and thus not bound

by the embargo allows China to break into the European arms market, traditionally dominated by U.S. and European manufacturers.

In **Libya**, China's involvement is more controversial. Libyan officials reportedly met with representatives from Chinese state-owned arms companies, who allegedly offered $200 million worth of small arms to the Gaddafi regime, in violation of a UN arms embargo. While Beijing denied the allegations, similar concerns resurfaced in 2024, when Italian authorities intercepted Chinese-made military drones disguised as wind turbine components en route to forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya. These incidents suggest a dual-track policy by China in Libya: public diplomatic neutrality coupled with discreet, flexible military engagement.

NATO members in the ESEP region show little to no evidence of arms transactions with China, which reflects their close alignment with western defence structures and suppliers. In 2013, **Turkey** shocked its NATO partners by choosing the Chinese air defence HQ-9 system over the products of American and European competitors, but under western pressure Ankara had to back off from the deal later that year. In 2019, media reports revealed that Turkey was eyeing the fighter jets Su-57 from Russia and Shenyang J-31 from China, after the U.S. warned Ankara that it would block the delivery of F-35s. Those deals did not go ahead, but the message certainly was not missed in Washington. Moreover, in light of Turkey's growing defence industry and expanding production capabilities, Ankara is likely to jostle with other suppliers, including China and Russia, for a market share in the ESEP region. The recently unveiled KAAN fifth-generation fighter aircraft programme is an example of Turkey's plans to wean itself off other producers of advanced weapons.

By focusing its arms sales on countries outside the western security umbrella while staying away from more politically sensitive conflicts, China expands the global reach of its defence industry and cultivates long-term strategic influence. These transactions function as a diplomatic tool, allowing Beijing to assert itself as a security partner while preserving its image as a non-interventionist power under the broader framework of the BRI and the GSI.

It is also worth noting that, in competing with western suppliers for a piece of the ESEP pie in terms of arms sales, Beijing has embarked on a public diplomacy campaign through the provision of military equipment as donations. While most recipients of Chinese military aid are in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe's southeastern periphery has also seen manifestations of Beijing's 'charm offensive' through grants and donations. Thus, by August 2019 China had donated to **Serbia** military equipment worth $5.2 million, including items for combating natural disasters, as well as sanitation and firefighting vehicles. Between 2011 and 2021 the BiH army received from Chinese defence companies three donations worth €2.8 million in total. The equipment included engineering machines, trucks and excavators. In 2021, the national army of **Lebanon**, too, received 100 vehicles as a donation from China.

At the same time, it is clear that China is interested in western military technologies and capabilities while it is also increasingly competing with the West for market share. This trend is illustrated by two intriguing incidents recorded in the ESEP region in 2025. First, four Chinese nationals were arrested in **Greece** in July 2025 for allegedly photographing the facilities and equipment at a local air force base. A day later, two Chinese nationals were arrested in **Ukraine** on suspicion of spying on the Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missile programme, a key part of Kyiv's growing domestic arms industry that is critical to its defence against Russian forces.

Overall, China's arms exports to the ESEP region's West-oriented countries after 2010 have gradually diminished or remained non-existent for the most part. Conversely, Chinese weapons have been increasingly finding their way into the markets of Turkey, Russia, Serbia, and Egypt, countries with a more diversified foreign policy. The deepening of arms trade between Beijing and the aforementioned countries is both quantitative and qualitative, while it is worth noting that this trend seemed to ebb in 2024 in all but Russia, which peaked its arms purchases from China amid its ongoing military campaign in Ukraine. Figure 4 illustrates China's arms exports to its four largest partners in the ESEP region between 2010 and 2024.

Figure 4

Arms Transfers from China to the ESEP Region, 2010-2024

(millions of Trend Indicator Values*)

Year	Russia	Egypt	Turkey	Serbia
2010	25	689	467	16
2011	10	653	754	-
2012	121	308	1,481	0
2013	184	719	769	-
2014	207	430	1,525	-
2015	113	1,443	443	-
2016	127	1,653	326	23
2017	94	2,472	427	65
2018	62	1,629	486	4
2019	5	1,081	767	84
2020	1	1,401	107	145
2021	6	1,290	282	115
2022	75	743	186	164
2023	219	1,151	679	419
2024	467	72	381	153
Total	**1,715**	**15,734**	**9,080**	**1,188**

* Measurement units reflecting capabilities of weapons, not financial value

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

Critical Infrastructure Security

Chinese investments in ostensibly civilian infrastructure, such as logistics hubs, energy networks and telecommunications, often bear the potential for military applications, including surveillance, intelligence gathering, and operational support in times of crisis. These dual-use capabilities accentuate fears that China could exploit its control over critical infrastructure to gain strategic leverage, enabling it to exert political or economic pressure on host countries. These risks are particularly acute in NATO or EU countries where Chinese access could intersect with western defence logistics.

Transport Infrastructure

In the 2010s and the early days of the BRI, China was seen as a major investor by the majority of ESEP governments. In the 2010s, **Romania** and **Bulgaria** were interested in attracting Chinese investment in their transport and energy infrastructure. However, very few of the initial ideas have materialised, either because of deficient project design or security-related concerns, particularly in relation to Black Sea ports. In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the strategic value of the port of Constanța has become even more pronounced. This helps explain why the prospect of Chinese involvement in such infrastructure is viewed with increased caution by NATO and EU member states, given the potential implications for regional security and geopolitical balance.

China's presence in **Georgia** is growing on the heels of BRI projects tied to the Middle Corridor, the trade route linking China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus. Georgia serves as a crucial gateway offering China a relatively stable and business-friendly partner along a route that bypasses both Russia and sanctions-affected Iran. Key investments include the East–West Highway, rail modernisation, and the upgrading of Batumi and Poti ports, all projects with dual-use potential. In 2017, CEFC China Energy acquired a 75% stake in the Poti Free Industrial Zone, which is closely linked to port operations. Additionally, in 2023, a Chinese Railway delegation visited the port of Batumi to explore increasing container traffic through the Middle Corridor, thus indicating China's interest in enhancing its logistical footprint in the region.

In 2024, Georgia's government announced plans to revive the Anaklia port on the country's Black Sea coast with a Chinese-led consortium, reflecting Beijing's renewed interest in the Middle Corridor amid the evolving regional dynamics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, there is no public indication that Russia would grant China access to its naval base in Abkhazia, as Moscow tightly controls the territory and is cautious about allowing third-party military presence that could complicate its strategic interests.

Therefore, the likelihood of Georgian ports being used by the Chinese navy remains low in the short run, given the complex regional dynamics. Both **Russia** and **Turkey**, as influential powers in the Black Sea basin, are likely to oppose any permanent Chinese naval presence that could alter the regional security balance. Consequently, while infrastructure improvements may have dual-use capabilities, the militarisation or direct naval use of these ports by China is highly sensitive and - at least for the time being - constrained by geopolitical realities.

In the Western Balkans, China focuses on investing in major infrastructure and energy projects in tune with the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative. A major investment is the Bar-Boljare Highway in **Montenegro**, which connects the Adriatic port of Bar to Serbia's capital. This move has been heavily criticised, as the Chinese loans amounting to 85% of the $810 million required to complete the first part of the construction have left Montenegro excessively indebted and with limited fiscal space. Also, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the EU, which are the main financial contributors to the second section of the motorway, requested the cancellation of the tender for the design and construction due a route revision and the presence of three Chinese companies and a Turkish-Azerbaijani consortium in the short list.

The port of Bar on the shores of Montenegro is a significant asset, regularly visited by NATO military vessels. It should be noted that both Russia and China have expressed interest in this facility. According to Montenegrin media outlets, in the 2010s Moscow lobbied hard for access of the Russian navy to the ports of Bar and Kotor. In July 2021, a contract worth more than €10 million was signed between the port of Bar and Zijin, a Chinese mining company operating in Serbia. In early 2025, COSCO Shipping established a new service via Bar, which represents the first entry of this Chinese maritime giant into a port in Montenegro. In theory at least, a high-capacity highway linking Bar to Serbia could enhance not just trade flows but also the rapid movement of troops or equipment inland, particularly if Sino-Serbian military cooperation continues to grow. Further, Montenegro's debt trap dynamic raises concerns over Beijing's political leverage over Podgorica, which could translate into strategic concessions to China.

Another major project financed through Chinese loans in the Western Balkans is the Belgrade-Budapest railway track between **Serbia** and **Hungary**, where China aims to connect the two capitals by creating a railway network for the transportation of both passengers and cargo. A $2.1 billion loan, awarded by China to Hungary, corresponds to 85% of the total cost for Budapest. For the Serbian side, the Export and Import Bank of China has lent the Serbian government $297 million, almost 15% of the total money needed for the completion of the Serbian side of the railway. A railway track can facilitate the rapid transport of military personnel or equipment, especially if the network is integrated across borders. The project increases China's presence in EU transportation corridors, which could be leveraged in times of geopolitical strain for logistical dominance or surveillance.

Increased western concerns about the potential dual use of certain Chinese investments in transport infrastructure are visible in the case of **Croatia's** port of Rijeka. A tender for the creation of a container terminal at the harbour was initially won by a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) in 2020, but it was cancelled by the Croatian authorities for strategic reasons under western pressure. The republished tender was won by the Danish company Maersk which was awarded the contract. Croatia's NATO membership does not leave much room for cooperation with China in the fields of security since the Rijeka port is used by NATO for the transportation of military equipment, and by the U.S. navy to maintain and restore ships. Nonetheless, similar concerns did not seem to have been taken into account in the case of Zadar port on the Dalmatian coast. A Chinese-backed firm already holds a 23.1% stake in the port, while there have been protracted discussions about a potential recapitalisation to a 76% majority stake. This move, if completed, would give China control of another strategic location in Europe and would provide a window to the Adriatic Sea.

In 2015, a Chinese consortium led by COSCO took over Kumport, **Turkey**'s third largest container terminal. This $920 million investment on the European side of the Bosphorus Strait would make a lot of sense as part of a transport corridor via next-door Bulgaria whose railway network, however, is in a sorry state. Chinese corporations have expressed interest in upgrading Bulgarian railway infrastructure, but in 2024 CRRC, a Chinese SOE, withdrew from a tender for the procurement of electric trains after the EU launched a probe over suspected subsidies and an 'unduly advantageous offer'.

In **Egypt**, China's involvement is most prominent in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCEZ), a sprawling industrial estate to the south of the Suez Canal. Established jointly by the Chinese and Egyptian governments, the SCEZ has attracted a large number of Chinese enterprises which have established manufacturing bases. Given the Suez Canal's critical role in global maritime trade and its strategic value for naval operations, this investment represents a significant convergence of China's economic and strategic interests. Additionally, the Chinese SOE COSCO Shipping Ports has acquired stakes in two Egyptian ports: 20% of the stock of East Port Said, the Suez Canal's largest transshipment port, and 25% in Ain Sokhna Port where COSCO has been awarded a 30-year concession contract.

Airports are also classic dual-use infrastructure, as they can be adapted for surveillance activities or even military airlift operations. This is why Chinese ownership or management of these facilities raises questions about data access, security protocols, and potential use during regional crises. The China Everbright Group acquired the Tirana airport in **Albania** in 2016, only to sell its stake to a local conglomerate in 2020 and withdraw from the project. In 2018, the concession of the Plovdiv airport in **Bulgaria** to the now-defunct HNA conglomerate from China was declared null and void.

Energy Infrastructure

Chinese companies have been very active in the energy sector in Europe's southeastern periphery as well, but again with a mixed track record. Protracted negotiations with a Chinese SOE on the takeover of the Cernavodă nuclear plant in **Romania** were severed in 2020. In **Bulgaria**, there were negotiations in 2018 about the participation of the state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) in a public tender for the construction of a nuclear plant in Belene, but the project was suspended three years later.

Chinese contractors have been more successful in other ESEP countries, such as **BiH**, where the Stanari lignite plant was built in 2016 in the RS entity by the Dongfang Electric Corporation, though the construction of a new unit at a thermal plant in Tuzla was cancelled in 2023. In 2019, the Chinese SOE Norinco International undertook the construction of a €230 million Senj wind farm in **Croatia** and its operation for 23 years. What does not seem to have been taken into account by Croatian authorities is the fact that Norinco International is a subsidiary of a large defence contractor in the PRC, the China North Industries Group, also known as China Ordnance Industries Group Corporation Ltd.

Projects undertaken by Chinese SOEs account for a growing share of **Egypt**'s energy production capacity, through the construction of the largest onshore wind farm in the country and a $200 million solar park. Government officials in **Turkey** are holding discussions with Chinese companies on the prospects of both conventional and small modular nuclear reactors to be built in the country. In **Greece**, the State Grid Corporation of China has acquired a 24% stake in the Independent Power Transmission Operator (IPTO) and is involved in the construction of a high-voltage link between the mainland and the island of Crete.

Chinese Presence in the Vicinity of Naval Facilities

Notably, naval bases are frequently collocated with or in the vicinity of commercial ports. Sea ports offer a ready platform for intelligence collection. In the normal course of business at a port terminal, operators collect and process huge volumes of proprietary information about vessels, their fuel and supply, routes and destinations, cargoes, personnel, and other salient details. These data are potentially valuable for military intelligence purposes, especially given the relative ease with which the same observations may be taken of military vessels calling in commercial ports.

The port of Piraeus in **Greece** is definitely a case in point. A majority stake in this critical maritime hub is held by the state-owned COSCO. Beyond its commercial function, the port's capacity to accommodate large vessels has prompted concerns about its potential dual-use capabilities, including military applications. In addition, the port is located less than eight nautical miles away from a major Greek naval base.[vi] In **Israel**, Chinese firms are playing a key role in the management of the Haifa Bay port and the construction of the port of Ashdod. The concern in Haifa is that the terminal co-managed by the Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG), is a mere 1.8 kilometer away from Israel's main naval base which is used by the 6th U.S. Fleet as well. Cancelling SIPG's contract would be a politically difficult decision for the Israeli government to make, but a relevant debate has been underway.

The Hong Kong-based company Hutchison Ports has forged a long-term collaboration with the **Egyptian** Navy to construct and manage a new container terminal within the Abu Qir Naval Base on the Mediterranean coast. Hutchison Ports' influence reaches even further with the concession agreements for two new container terminals in the ports of Ain Sokhna and El Dekheila. Given that both ports are easily adaptable to military needs, the potential security threat from the dual-use nature of these investments is quite clear.

Despite the presence of COFCO, a large Chinese food trader, at a terminal in Constanța, **Romania**, there is no evidence that China sought to take control of the entire port. This would have been unthinkable anyway, as the country's largest Black Sea harbour is located just 30 kilometres away from the Mihail Kogălniceanu military base, one of the pillars of NATO's southeastern flank.

China's Military-Civil Fusion concept brings together commercial sectors and the PLA into a tightly knit network

The construction of a Russian naval base in Ochamchire in Abkhazia, nominally a province of **Georgia**, is underway just 30 kilometres away from Anaklia. This new military facility may well represent an attempt to reassert Russian influence in the Black Sea region as a safe haven for its fleet, which has been subject to Ukrainian drone attacks since 2022. Moreover, observers have pointed out that Moscow may not be happy with an increasingly active China on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, as Anaklia is close to the division line between Russian-dominated Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia.

While there is no conclusive evidence that Chinese investments in transport and energy infrastructure in the ESEP region are explicitly intended for dual-use military purposes, growing concerns have rightly been raised regarding the potential for such infrastructure to be leveraged strategically in times of crisis, particularly in the context of hybrid warfare or geopolitical tension. Railways, ships, ports, cranes, containers, and other components enabling trade to flow physically are also elements of a seamless logistics and digital network. Chinese companies operating these assets gain access to proprietary information about transactions and movements through their increasingly integrated activities in the domains of trade and communications.[vii]

Such leverage would provide China with significant coercive power, especially in countries heavily reliant on a single source of capital or lacking diversified infrastructure partners. Dual-use infrastructure and technologies are easy to weaponise and Beijing has not hesitated to do that in pursuit of larger geostrategic objectives. Notably, the PLA has long operated under the Chinese government's fundamental concept of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF), promoted via the elimination of barriers between civilian research, commercial sectors, and the country's military and defence industrial sectors. In this vein, the Chinese government announced in June 2015 that all civilian shipbuilders had to ensure that their new commercial vessels were suitable for military use in emergencies. This strategy is designed to enable China to convert the considerable potential of its commercial fleet into military strength to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Telecommunications & Surveillance Technologies

In the context of its Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, China seeks to deepen its relations with the countries of the ESEP region, as Beijing aims to become a global leader in technology, by shaping international technical norms and standards along the way. As with BRI-linked investments in dual-use infrastructure, China's

footprint in telecom and surveillance technologies, such as 5G networks and smart city systems, has raised security concerns among western governments. These initiatives promoted by Beijing are not merely commercial in nature; they also carry strategic implications, offering China a channel to exert influence and potentially export elements of its own model of digital governance.

Chinese tech giants, such as Huawei, have actively pursued contracts in the telecom sector of ESEP countries. Furthermore, reports have highlighted the widespread deployment of Chinese-made surveillance cameras, primarily by Dahua and Hikvision, across Europe's southeastern periphery. This concern is particularly acute in **Ukraine**, where some of these surveillance devices are integrated into the national 'Safe City' public security initiative. Chinese technology firms, particularly Huawei, have made inroads into Ukraine's telecommunications sector, most notably by developing a 4G network for the Kyiv metro and engaging in cybersecurity cooperation. Given China's strategic partnership with Russia, there is a considerable risk that data harvested by these surveillance systems could be shared with or directly accessed by Russian entities, potentially undermining Ukraine's national security amidst the ongoing war. In 2023, Ukraine's Anti-Monopoly Committee excluded a local firm from a public surveillance contract due to its partnership with Hikvision. With the war against Russia still raging on, Kyiv is likely to become even more cautious with Chinese critical tech.

Under the current government of **Georgia** and particularly after the 2024 turmoil in the country, Chinese-made surveillance equipment has been increasingly integrated into national public security systems. Reports suggest that Georgian government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Tbilisi municipality, have been supplied with AI-driven crown control systems, predictive policing algorithms, and digital surveillance equipment purchased mainly from Huawei, Hikvision and Dahua. These companies operate under Chinese jurisdiction and are subject to the 2017 National Intelligence Law of the PRC which compels business entities to cooperate with state intelligence services upon request. This legal obligation heightens concerns about the potential for unauthorised access to surveillance data by Chinese authorities or other foreign actors aligned with Beijing's interests. Regarding 5G, Georgia has not yet fully acquired it, but Chinese companies have shown interest in developing technology parks and expanding 5G infrastructure in the country. As the Georgian government further drifts away from the West, even in the face of domestic opposition mirrored in mass protests, the appetite for a strengthened partnership with Tbilisi will only grow in Beijing, as long as this does not stand in the way of vital Russian interests in the country.

In **Serbia**, China maintains a robust digital presence through the collaboration between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chinese technology company Huawei in the development of the Belgrade 'Safe City' project. This initiative, designed to enhance public safety, aims to prevent and detect crimes through the installation of facial recognition cameras across Serbia's capital. The project not only strengthens China's technological footprint in Serbia's surveillance infrastructure, but it also provides Huawei with access to sensitive data without sufficient scrutiny as to its use. Beyond this, in 2020 Huawei supplied critical equipment to the State Data Center, which serves as a repository for data from Serbia's public institutions and government entities. This cooperation highlights the growing role of Chinese technology in Serbia's digital infrastructure, and warrants questions about data security and the potential influence China could wield over sensitive information and government decision-making.

Huawei has forged close ties with the Serbian state-owned Telekom Srbija as well. In 2016, the two companies agreed on a €150 million deal for the upgrading of the landline network. This cooperation has raised many concerns not only in the EU and the U.S., but also from local civil rights organisations that warn about violations of data privacy, especially regarding the 'Safe City' project and a lack of information about the management of the obtained data, with a view to the right of free expression and movement in Serbia. In fact, while the Serbian government has tried to keep Safe City systems out of the public eye, it is substantially expanding the use of advanced Chinese-made surveillance tools by scaling them up.

Not unlike Serbia, **BiH** has also favoured close cooperation with China in the telecommunications sector. In 2018, Sarajevo signed an MoU with Huawei that entails the development of a 'smart capital' that includes extensive oversight initiatives, smart management platforms, public security solutions, and advanced traffic control systems. Huawei operates through Huawei Technologies Bosnia and is involved in the existing infrastructure while also cooperating with companies in BiH for the development of the 5G network.

Egypt is yet another prominent example of China's penetration into the telecommunication sector in ESEP countries. Huawei has played a central role in the development of Egypt's new administrative capital, envisioned as a model smart city powered by Chinese technology. Meanwhile, Hikvision has provided surveillance systems for public transport in the Suez Governorate, expanding China's role in Egypt's infrastructure. The U.S. has voiced concerns over Hikvision's activities and has sanctioned the company over risks of data security and potential espionage.

Telecommunication and surveillance technologies serve as a channel for the promotion of China's digital governance model

Cyprus has become another significant node in China's regional digital strategy. Huawei dominates the island's 5G infrastructure, supplying an estimated 80% of the core network and 100% of the radio access network (RAN) for the Cyprus Telecommunications Authority. This level of integration has alarmed Brussels and Washington, as it effectively facilitates a Chinese technological foothold inside the European Union, with potential implications for data sovereignty and EU foreign policy autonomy.

In **Turkey**, Huawei has also made inroads despite NATO's unease. In 2022, Türk Telekom signed a memorandum of understanding with Huawei for 5G development, reinforcing a close partnership with the Chinese telecom giant. While Turkcell has also partnered with Ericsson for 5G trials, Turkey's engagement with Huawei signals a balanced approach to western and Chinese technologies.

Chinese telecommunications and surveillance systems have a strong presence in **Lebanon**. Indicatively, Huawei is involved in multiple fiber optics and 5G projects all over the country including the provision of cell towers to the Lebanese ministry of telecommunications. Notably, Huawei helped Lebanese data firm Touch to perform the first 5G trial in the country as early as 2018.

In 2020, **Bulgaria** joined the 'Clean Network Initiative', promoted by the first Trump administration in 2020 with a view to effective approaches to data privacy and security. Although Sofia signed an MoU on 5G security with the U.S., its implementation is debatable. While Bulgarian authorities have taken steps to limit Huawei's influence somewhat, Chinese firms remain deeply involved in building the country's digital infrastructure, which could potentially be exploited for surveillance or intelligence purposes. In doing so, China also employs soft power tools, such as Confucius Institutes, to promote technology partnerships, and facilitating the discreet integration of surveillance systems under the guise of 'harmless' economic and cultural exchanges.

Despite being a NATO member since 2017 and a candidate to join the EU, **Montenegro** did not align itself with the Clean Network Initiative.[viii] Podgorica is walking a tightrope between its western partners and China, to which it is heavily indebted for the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway. In performing this precarious balancing act, Montenegro has not explicitly banned Chinese companies from participating in the development of the national 5G network, though the state-owned operator Montenegro Telekom has announced that it would initially use equipment from Ericsson and Nokia.[ix] **Greece**, too, offers a more nuanced picture. Huawei has been eased out as a supplier to the core of 5G networks, but it has been involved in upgrading the internal telecommunications infrastructure at the Chinese-controlled port of Piraeus.

Other ESEP countries have chosen a more cautious approach vis-à-vis cooperation with China in the aforementioned sectors. In 2020, both **Albania** and **North Macedonia** became members of the Clean Network. Skopje has changed its Law on Electronic Communications, so that Huawei is not allowed to participate in the creation of the 5G network.[x] As a result, North Macedonia has excluded Chinese companies from its 5G network, despite a strong reaction of the PRC embassy in the country, and the relevant contract has been awarded to Ericsson. Similarly, Albania has completely cut off 5G ties with Chinese suppliers. In 2020, Greece joined the Clean Network as well, even if this was announced by the U.S. ambassador in Athens and not by the national authorities.

Israel has taken a firm stance against Chinese involvement in its digital infrastructure. Citing national security concerns, the Israeli government has excluded Chinese firms from its 5G development altogether, aligning closely with U.S. cybersecurity priorities. Moreover, the national authorities have suspended the supply of Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) to the military following internal warnings that the cars could pose surveillance

risks. Cybersecurity and intelligence officials have argued that that Chinese EVs could collect and transmit sensitive data through their embedded sensors and communication systems.

In 2021, **Romania** enacted a U.S.-backed law effectively banning Chinese firms, including Huawei, from participating in its 5G roll-out. This decision aligns with a 2019 joint statement signed by Washington and Bucharest that advocated a robust approach to evaluating potentially risky 5G vendors. However, investigations have revealed that Chinese-manufactured surveillance cameras are installed at approximately 28 sensitive military sites in Romania, including the NATO Aegis Ashore missile defence base. These devices are also used by national security institutions, such as the coast guard and the Romanian intelligence service. Experts warn that firmware vulnerabilities in these cameras may enable unauthorised remote access, data interception, and even cyber attacks by state or non-state actors.

It is clear that some countries in the ESEP region, such as **Romania, North Macedonia, Albania, Israel and Ukraine** (since 2022), have aligned closely with western cybersecurity frameworks. Others, such as **Serbia, BiH, Egypt, Lebanon** and increasingly **Georgia**, have welcomed Chinese technology with minimal scrutiny, effectively expanding Beijing's influence over their digital infrastructure. Other ESEP countries illustrate the delicate balancing act between maintaining their western allegiance, while engaging with Chinese firms for economic and technological development.

Protection of Chinese Interests Overseas and Law Enforcement

Protection of Chinese Investments and Citizens

Given the volume of Chinese overseas investments and the weight of exports as a key growth driver, the security of China's overseas interests is an increasingly important issue for Beijing. While Europe's southeastern periphery accounts for a relatively small chunk of China's overseas investment which is concentrated mainly in Southeast Asia and Africa, it is undoubtedly important to Beijing, as the ESEP region sits on major transportation routes and hosts growing Chinese investments targeting the EU market.

However, China is not in a position to protect its interests in Europe's southeast periphery through hard power and is forced to consider 'second-best options'. In **Egypt**, where China has invested in large-scale production facilities in the Suez Canal Economic Zone as well as in infrastructure and energy across the country, Beijing seeks relevant arrangements with national authorities. In September 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping and his counterpart el-Sisi discussed, among other topics, the need for deeper cooperation in counterterrorism and law enforcement in order for China to continue investing in Egypt. The two heads of state witnessed the signing of documents on bilateral cooperation in a wide range of areas, including law enforcement. Yet another meeting, held in October 2024, confirmed the desire of the two sides to deepen their cooperation specifically in the area of law enforcement. In June 2017, a 'technical cooperation document' covering 'a number of specialised security fields' was signed between the Egyptian Interior Ministry and the PRC Ministry of Public Security.

Furthermore, there are indications that private security firms, not necessarily Chinese, but contracted by Chinese SOEs, have been active in **Egypt** and **Libya**. For instance, the Frontier Services Group (FSG) was founded by an ex-U.S. Navy Seal and is reportedly owned by CITIC Group, a large Chinese state-owned conglomerate. In 2021, UN monitors accused FSG of running a private military operation to supply advanced weaponry, including drones and attack helicopters, to the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar. Such examples serve as warning signs of the controversial dealings that can be anticipated between Chinese companies and security firms eager to profit from China's need to protect its investments in the region.

At the same time, Beijing has become increasingly sensitive about the safety of Chinese citizens overseas. The hasty evacuation of 36,000 PRC nationals from **Libya** in 2011 made the protection of Chinese citizens abroad a high priority.[xi] It changed Beijing's attitude towards the role of military instruments vis-à-vis threats to its interests abroad by pushing the PLA to develop the necessary capabilities for deployment beyond the national borders. In 2015, China passed a law allowing its forces to venture overseas on counterterrorism

operations, and has been seeking to extend its capacity to carry out remote missions in case it needs to rescue Chinese citizens.

In 2021, the number of Chinese workers in **Egypt** stood at approximately 5,000 and more than 7,000 a year later, so it is not unreasonable to assume that their number has risen even further by 2025. Before the Hamas-triggered hostilities began in October 2023, estimates indicated there were around 30,000 Chinese workers in **Israel**, mostly in the construction sector, but they left after the outbreak of the conflict. It was only in June 2025 that they started returning to the country, as part of a bilateral agreement between Israel and the PRC. In 2021, some 8,000 Chinese workers were recorded in **Turkey**, while a growing number of applicants from the PRC are acquiring Turkish passports through the country's citizenship-by-investment scheme.

Given the growing number of PRC citizens travelling or residing overseas, Beijing has actively sought arrangements with law enforcement agencies in a number of countries, including in Europe's southeastern periphery. For instance, joint police patrols are increasingly being promoted by Beijing. This form of cooperation is becoming common in countries hosting high numbers of Chinese tourists or Chinese diaspora communities, with the objective to provide visible protection to PRC citizens. and foster bilateral law enforcement cooperation. At this stage, joint patrol units with the involvement of Chinese policemen in the ESEP region are only recorded in Serbia and Croatia.

Since 2019, Beijing and Belgrade have been implementing a joint police patrol programme aimed at enhancing the safety and experience of Chinese tourists visiting **Serbia**. This initiative was introduced in response to a significant increase in tourist arrivals from the PRC, which surged following the mutual abolition of visa requirements between the two countries in 2016. Joint police patrols, composed of Serbian and Chinese police officers, are typically deployed in areas with high tourist traffic to provide assistance, translation support, and a tangible sense of security for Chinese visitors. Meanwhile, Serbian police officers have participated in joint police patrols in China as well – in particular, in Guangzhou, Hainan and Zhejiang, in order to provide assistance to tourists from Serbia.

A similar arrangement has been in place between China and **Croatia** since 2018. Joint police patrols were launched in key Croatian tourist destinations, particularly during the summer months when the country experiences a high influx of international tourists. The joint Sino-Croatian Police Patrol Force was set up 2018 and PRC diplomats have repeatedly stated that this is an avenue to be explored for further cooperation with Croatian law enforcement agencies.

Other Forms of Law Enforcement Cooperation

Apart from the protection of its investments and citizens in Europe's southeastern periphery, Beijing is interested in cooperation with ESEP countries in a broader spectrum of issues pertaining to law enforcement. This relates to the fact that China itself has become a major hub for transnational crime, such as drug trafficking, money laundering and cyber crime. The key PRC institution in charge of implementing this policy is the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). By March 2017, the MPS had already established close law enforcement cooperation relationships with 113 countries, and 129 bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. In May 2017, Beijing hosted a 'security cooperation dialogue' between China and more than 20 national security departments of countries along BRI routes.

Chinese law enforcement agencies have always thought highly of **Israel**'s counterterrorism expertise and do not hide their intention of assimilating useful lessons learned from it. While the two countries have not had any official cooperation in military or counterterrorism fields, there are indications of informal contacts between China and Israel in 2014 on the Islamic Jihad organisation allegedly using the Bank of China to finance its activities.

Beijing has sought to promote its cooperation in the area of law enforcement with other ESEP countries. In January 2016, **Bulgaria** and China signed a cooperation agreement on law enforcement, covering international terrorism and organised crime, trafficking in human beings, narcotics and firearms. In addition, the agreement provides for exchange of experts and police training. China has stated its intention of strengthening cooperation with Georgia in the fields of police exchanges and combating transnational crime.

In December 2024, the citizen protection minister of **Greece** and China's public security minister signed an agreement on police cooperation focusing on combating organised and financial crimes, drug trafficking and managing illegal migration. The agreement also includes provisions for information sharing, technical expertise exchange and officer training with a view to enhanced operational capabilities.

In 2025, **Georgian** security officials held meetings with Chinese counterparts from law enforcement agencies, with China's ambassador in Tbilisi pledging more robust police cooperation between the two countries in combating transnational crime. Worth noting is that plans for enhanced Sino-Georgian coordination in law enforcement came in the wake of massive anti-government protests in the country which posed a threat to the ruling Georgian Dream party.

China's evolving counterterrorism policy relates largely to the restless region of Xinjiang and its Uyghur inhabitants. **Turkey** has historically been a refuge for Uyghurs fleeing the PRC and has one of the largest Uyghur diaspora communities, with a population estimated to be between 50,000 and 75,000. This issue has always been a point of friction between China and Turkey. In 2016, during a visit of China's foreign minister Wang Yi to Ankara, his then-counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Turkey would take all necessary measures to strengthen bilateral cooperation in counterterrorism and security, and 'fight against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).' China has been pressuring Turkey to ratify an extradition treaty between the two countries, though in December 2022 Ankara denied social media rumours of the extradition of Uyghur dissidents to China or deporting them to other countries. However, a reported wave of detentions of Uyghurs in 2024 coincided with a visit to Xinjiang by Turkey's foreign minister Hakan Fidan who expressed Ankara's support for China's 'anti-terrorism efforts'. According to media reports, Egyptian authorities, too, detained hundreds of Uyghurs and deported at least 20 of them in 2017.

Cooperation in law enforcement is directly linked to China's national security strategy and foreign policy objectives

Similarly, China is particularly worried about the presence of Uyghur fighters in **Syria**. Beijing's support to the Assad regime was based on a broader geopolitical calculus, given that Syria was close to Iran, a security partner of both Russia and China in the Middle East. Beijing's primary concern regarding post-Assad Syria is not the country's strategic importance, but the presence of Uyghurs among the rebels who marched into Damascus in December 2024. Towards the end of 2017, China reportedly deployed counterterrorism units in Tartus, with the approval of the Assad regime and the objective of targeting Uyghur militias. The estimated number of ETIM fighters operating in Syria at the time varied between 2,500 and 5,000. While China clearly supported the Assad regime in Syria until its collapse in late 2024, reports of Uyghur militants being close to the new government in Damascus are a major concern for Beijing. More than 3,000 Uyghur fighters are now expected to join the Syrian armed forces as soldiers and officers. Moreover, Chinese authorities are inevitably worried that the political identity of the Uyghur community in Syria has now been rebranded as an East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), a clear reference to the Xinjiang region in the PRC.

Last but not least, there have been many reports about clandestine Chinese 'police service centres' expediting involuntary returns of PRC citizens – either political dissidents or fugitives involved in economic crimes - to China. While Beijing denies the existence of these controversial structures, in the ESEP region they have been detected in **Greece, Israel, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine and Russia**.

Conclusions

In addressing the four research questions set out in the Introduction to this report, the research has yielded the following key findings:

Drivers Behind China's Pursuits in the ESEP Security Realm

Quite understandably, the foreign policy of the PRC is tailored to further its national interests. China's military engagement with Europe's southeastern periphery reflects Beijing's objective to expand its influence in the region while avoiding direct confrontation with other security actors, such as the U.S., NATO, and regional powers. At the same time, Beijing's defence cooperation with non-NATO states, such as **Russia**, **Egypt**, and **Serbia**, is expanding significantly.

While Chinese military diplomacy is often framed as exchange of experience aiming at mutually beneficial capacity-building, it actually aims at expanding China's influence in the regional security landscape. Against this backdrop, Beijing's approach to joint military exercises is designed to foster the development of working relationships with the armed forces of ESEP countries without appearing overtly militaristic. This cautious approach is conditioned by the geopolitical complexity of Europe's southeastern periphery and the heavy footprint of other powerful security actors.

Naval port calls are more than just ceremonial gestures. They play into China's broader outreach to and soft power strategy in the ESEP region, showcasing PLAN's growing blue-water capabilities and objective to project a peaceful image overseas. Thus, these visits serve both diplomatic and public relations purposes, and reflect China's ambition to signal its global naval outreach beyond its 'near abroad'.

In peacekeeping, Beijing seeks to strike a delicate balance between diplomatic restraint and strategic visibility, by projecting its narrative about being a global actor and a responsible stakeholder. This approach aims to help China demonstrate its international political weight without provoking direct confrontation with western powers in the ESEP region. However, despite its pronouncements of global commitments, China's direct peacekeeping involvement in Europe's southeastern periphery remains limited. Generally, Beijing prefers to stay away from highly sensitive disputes, especially when these concern China's close ally, **Russia**. In parallel, Beijing does not miss any opportunity to cast the West in a negative light and score political points against it, by posing as a representative of the Global South.

Through the deployment of surveillance infrastructure, 5G networks, and smart city technologies, Beijing seeks to embed itself into the digital ecosystems of the ESEP region. These investments are both economic and profoundly strategic, facilitating the export of Beijing's model of digital governance, offering China back doors into sensitive data networks, and potentially serving as 'Trojan horses' for espionage. Rail terminals, logistics hubs, or tech systems developed or managed by Chinese firms may also include surveillance or control capabilities, due to the inherently dual-use nature of many modern technologies.

Cooperation with national police forces and other law enforcement agencies in ESEP countries is driven by multiple factors, ranging from the protection of Chinese investment and the safety of PRC citizens to combating organised crime. In other cases, Beijing promotes initiatives that serve its foreign policy objectives and national security strategy, as illustrated by reports of involuntary returns of dissidents or close monitoring of Uyghur communities in the region.

China's Playbook in Europe's Southeastern Periphery

Overall, Beijing's approach to countries in Europe's southeastern periphery is flexible and often 'customised', i.e., adjusted to their national peculiarities and domestic context. In doing so, China uses a variety of tools ranging from high-profile meetings to joint military exercises to arms sales to cooperation in law enforcement. Some of these tools, e.g., symbolic naval visits, may be of limited practical value which, however, ensure visibility. For Beijing, functional exchanges and other forms of capacity-building ideally serve as a springboard in pursuit of broader strategic goals, such as fostering long-term defence relationships,

familiarising ESEP armed forces with Chinese operational standards and doctrines, and subtly expanding China's influence in the security landscape of Europe's southeastern periphery. In some cases, Beijing tests techniques clearly based on the fusion of cultural and military diplomacy.

In the domain of peacekeeping, China treads carefully in the region and, above all, in line with its national interests. It contributes a substantial number of troops to the UN mission in Lebanon and participated actively in the removal in chemical weapons from **Syria**. However, the general pattern is that Beijing confines itself to votes in the UNSC and effectively takes a back seat, for the most part expecting other powers to seek resolution to conflicts in the ESEP region. In some cases, such as the **Palestinian issue** and tensions in **BiH**, China displays diplomatic activism, and in other cases (**Cyprus**, **Syria**, **Libya**, **Ukraine**, Transnistria in **Moldova** and Abkhazia in **Georgia**) stays conspicuously silent, even though this is not a sign of principled positions and policy consistency.

The sales of Chinese weaponry and dual-use technologies are growing in Europe's southeast periphery, though not uniformly across the region. Few countries, notably **Russia**, **Egypt** and **Serbia**, stand out as the principal recipients of both civilian and military high tech from China, while in other parts of the region there is substantial suspicion and even a pushback against Beijing's penetration in politically sensitive and security-related sectors.

The same conclusion applies to China's expanding footprint in critical infrastructure across Europe's southeastern periphery, which presents a complex challenge for NATO and the EU. While most Chinese investments are viewed as commercial ventures, the dual-use potential of transport, energy and telecoms networks cannot be overstated, especially in countries that face a limited wiggle room due to debt burdens or economic dependence on China. For instance, the blurry lines between China's presence in commercial ports and its potential military implications deserve particular attention.

Cooperation with Beijing in the area of law enforcement is yet another area that has so far remained under the radar. Thus, joint police initiatives underscore China's evolving approach to soft power projection and its use of public security cooperation as a diplomatic tool in the ESEP region. With regard to combating transnational crime, which often originates in China itself, there are legitimate concerns about the imposition of Beijing's standards in relation to human rights and the rule of law.

Constraining Factors for China's Security Involvement

While Beijing is increasingly muscular in its 'near abroad', e.g., vis-à-vis Taiwan or neighbouring countries around the South China Sea, at present the PLA is not postured for high-end conflict outside of East Asia. China's only military base at Djibouti does not allow it to forward-deploy its forces into the Eastern Mediterranean or elsewhere in the broader ESEP region. This is why at this stage the PRC is not in a position to project hard power in the complex and fickle security patchwork of Europe's southeastern periphery. China's cautious behaviour in the Black Sea is a case in point. While Chinese military vessels have made friendly visits to ports in four littoral countries in the basin, they have not been involved in joint naval drills in the Black Sea, not only because of NATO presence there, but arguably because of Russian and Turkish apprehension as well.

This clearly shows that the agency of regional powers should also be factored in. Notwithstanding its 'no limits partnership' with China and depletion of resources in the war in Ukraine, **Russia** has its own geopolitical agenda in Europe's southeastern periphery and is unlikely to cede ground to China in the region. **Turkey**, too, is an actor to be reckoned with. In oscillating between alignment with NATO and cautious cooperation with China, Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy does not necessarily translate into welcoming Beijing to the ESEP region.

Objections to Huawei's presence in 5G networks in NATO members, the aborted tenders for the Rijeka terminal in **Croatia** and the Cernavodă nuclear plant in **Romania**, the nationalisation of the Motor Sich company in **Ukraine**, the cancellation of the HQ-9 tender in **Turkey**, growing resentment in **Israel** or **Greece**'s objections to more port calls by PLAN vessels exemplify to what extent countries with western affiliation are increasingly prepared to oppose Chinese presence in sensitive areas. However, given the diversity of the ESEP region, this is by no means a general pattern, as all the countries have their own national priorities.

Considerations of ESEP Countries in Viewing China as a Security Actor

The last research question is not about what Europe's southeastern periphery looks like from the vantage point of Beijing, but what remote China looks like from regional capitals. No wonder, the 21 countries covered in this report have very different perspectives, from keen interest in working with China as a security partner to grave concerns about letting Beijing too close in sensitive areas. According to a recent study of China's global military diplomacy, **Russia** was the most active partner of Beijing in 2023-2024, while none of the other ESEP countries made it to the top ten in that ranking. Russia is the only country whose geopolitical objectives largely align with those of China, as the two powers share the goal of challenging the U.S. and NATO influence both in the ESEP region and globally.

Nearly all the ESEP countries view China as a potential partner in their infrastructure and industrial base, as well as a huge market for their exports. However, the appetite of some of these countries for economic cooperation with Beijing clashes with the security concerns of their western allies. Thus, naval visits to **Israel**, **Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece** and **Ukraine** in the 2010s took place at a time, when China was not yet seen as a strategic rival by the West and a security challenge by NATO. Furthermore, back then Bucharest, Sofia and Zagreb viewed China as a promising economic partner in the framework of the 17+1 cooperation format, but these expectations have now been shattered and enthusiasm has fizzled out. Moreover, EU and NATO members are increasingly cautious in relation to Chinese investments, especially in sensitive sectors with potential security implications, such as transport, energy and telecom infrastructure.

In other cases, ESEP countries seek closer ties with China as a counterbalance to other actors in the region. For instance, **Egypt** may be considering the purchase of Chinese fighter jets after the announcement of Trump's idea about turning the Gaza strip into a 'Riviera of the Middle East' and the mass deportation of Palestinians to neighbouring countries. Presumably, ties with China are not only a means of diversifying Egypt's global partnerships, but also a way to maximise leverage in Cairo's relationship with the U.S. Similarly, **Turkey** was tempted to buy the Chinese missile system HQ-9 in 2013 or consider the purchase of Chinese fighter jets in 2019, arguably as an act of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis NATO and the U.S.

By the same token, close relations with China aim to help **Serbia** offset both western and Russian pressure. Belgrade has prioritised its multi-vector foreign policy and, while Serbia is a candidate to join the EU, it has clearly defied the western stance by refusing to join sanctions on Russia or share concerns about China's economic penetration into European markets. **Georgia** is yet another case in point. Despite the fact that the current government of the country is consistently copying elements of Putin's playbook, the construction of the Russian naval base in Abkhazia, formally part of Georgia, may explain Tbilisi's increasingly close relations with Beijing as a counterweight to Russian expansionism. Further north, **Ukraine** and **Moldova** used to see Beijing as a third power that could rein in Moscow, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has affected their attitude towards Beijing very negatively.

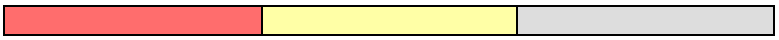
Domestic politics should also be factored in. Thus, the government of **Greece** between 2015 and 2019 viewed the PRC as a shield against western pressure and made a number of goodwill gestures to Beijing, such as effectively siding with it on the 2016 ruling of the Hague against China in its dispute with the Philippines in the South China Sea or joining the 17+1 format in 2019. In contrast, the current centre-right government has been visibly more cautious to China. In **Egypt**, Beijing clearly prefers the current el-Sisi military-backed government over the Muslim Brotherhood of Morsi, which came to power after the Arab Spring. The current government of **Georgia** has certainly changed the pro-western orientation of the country and the rapprochement with Beijing is a sign of that shift. And China has a number of reasons to be reserved towards the new government in post-Assad **Syria**, with the integration of Uyghur fighters into the armed forces of the country, though Damascus is unlikely to proceed to a headlong clash with Beijing over this issue.

Clearly, Sino-Russian relations deserve special attention. As a UNSC permanent member, China has consistently aligned with **Russia** in the case of conflict-torn countries, such as **Syria** and **Libya** as well as **BiH**. In each case, Beijing has backed Moscow's opposition to West-backed interventions, sanctions, or governance mandates. Whether through vetoes, abstentions, or statements reinforcing principles of non-interference and state sovereignty, the diplomatic alignment between Beijing and Moscow illustrates how the two powers work in concert to counterbalance western influence in Europe's southeastern periphery. As

for joint military exercises, the two powers have demonstrated restraint in the ESEP region and have chosen to project their growing military cooperation rarely and in international waters in the Mediterranean, where they can demonstrate strength and maintain a level of geopolitical deniability without directly challenging NATO's southeastern flank.

Figure 5 provides the 'big picture' of China's engagement with Europe's southeastern periphery, under the seven indicators used in this research. 'Peacekeeping', 'Arms sales' and 'Telecoms and surveillance technologies' appear to be the areas, in which China has been more active than in other domains, followed by 'Military cooperation' and 'Infrastructure security'. Egypt, Serbia and Russia stand out as the ESEP countries with the most substantive engagement with China as a security actor in the region. By and large, NATO members and Israel are increasingly cautious vis-à-vis China, compared to non-NATO members.

Figure 5
Relations with China in the Realm of Security in the ESEP Region
2010-2025



Country	Military-to-Military Cooperation	Naval Visits	Peacekeeping	Arms Sales	Infrastructure Security	Telecoms and Surveillance Technologies	Law Enforcement
Egypt							
Serbia							
Russia*							
BiH**							
Turkey							
Cyprus							
Greece							
Israel***							
Lebanon							
Syria							
Montenegro							
Georgia							
Ukraine****							
Bulgaria							
Croatia							
Moldova							
Romania							
Libya							
N. Macedonia							
Albania							
Slovenia							

* This only reflects Russia's direct military cooperation with China in the ESEP region.
** This mainly reflects China's engagement with Republika Srpska.
*** China's peacekeeping efforts reflect its initiatives in favour of a two-state solution.
**** In this case, substantive engagement only relates to the sale of Ukrainian arms to China.
Source: Institute of International Economic Relations

Endnotes

[i] Officially referred to as China – Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) cooperation platform. Initially known as the 16+1 format, which turned into 17+1 after Greece's accession in April 2019. It is now down to 14+1, after Lithuania walked out in 2021, followed by Estonia and Latvia in 2022.

[ii] Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021, point 55, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

[iii] Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, John Chen, 'Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications', *National Defense University*, July 2017, pp. 34, https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=china-strategic-perspectives&.

[iv] Michael Swaine, 'Chinese Views of the Syrian Conflict', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 39 (2012), p. 4, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM39MS.pdf.

[v] Ibid, p. 6, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM39MS.pdf.

[vi] Francesca Ghiretti, Jacob Gunter, Gregor Sebastian, Meryem Gökten, Olga Pindyuk, Zuzana Zavarská, Plamen Tonchev, *European Parliament*, 'Chinese Investment in European Maritime Infrastructure', September 2023, pp. 26-27, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/747278/IPOL_STU%282023%29747278_EN.pdf.

[vii] Isaac B. Kardon, Statement for the Record before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing: "China's Military Diplomacy and Overseas Security Activities", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 January 2023, p. 6, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/Isaac_Kardon_Statement_for_the_Record.pdf.

[viii] Ibid. p. 5.

[ix] Ibid. p. 13.

[x] Stefan Vladisavljev, 'China's 'Digital Silk Road' Enters the Western Balkans', *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe* (CHOICE). June 2021, p. 12, https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE_policy-paper_digital-silk-road_A4_web_04.pdf.

[xi] Ghiselli A. (2021), *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, pp. 114–143.