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To cite this article: Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis & Kevin Lo (16 Mar 2026): Communication geography and the spatio-discursive construction of BRI projects: Geographical frames in media discourses on Piraeus Port, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2026.2645780](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2026.2645780)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2026.2645780>



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Published online: 16 Mar 2026.



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Communication geography and the spatio-discursive construction of BRI projects: Geographical frames in media discourses on Piraeus Port

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has garnered significant attention from geographers worldwide, yet few have focused on its communicative aspects. This article examines the BRI from a communication geography perspective that integrates media studies and geographical analysis. We focus on the role of media narratives in the spatio-discursive construction of a flagship BRI project—Piraeus Port in Greece. This construction involves a complex, competitive process among media outlets in different countries. Based on framing theory, we analysed 519 online news articles about Piraeus Port, written in Greek and English and originating from five countries (China, France, Greece, the UK, and the US), to reveal four major geographical frames: geopolitics, geoeconomics, local development, and governance. These frames operate at different scales, invoke different spatial imaginaries, and frame Piraeus Port differently as a symbol of peaceful coexistence, a geopolitical hotspot amid intensifying China—US tensions, a harbinger of economic prosperity, a local space of everyday life and production undergoing transformation, and a zone of exception marked by illicit activities. We further conducted a cross-country analysis and found that, while most news coverage adopted a positive view of the port project, Western media outlets were more critical than their Chinese counterparts.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received September 2025; Accepted March 2026

KEYWORDS Belt and road initiative; communication geography; China; Greece; Piraeus Port

1. Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the largest global infrastructure development project in world history (Geng & Lo, 2023a; Zheng et al., 2025). Geographers generally examine the BRI from geopolitical and geoeconomic perspectives that frame it as a project of economic integration,

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regional influence, and global geopolitical competition (Flint & Zhu, 2019; Geng & Lo, 2024). A large body of work examines how geopolitical goals and implications are met with economic development and how economic development requires geopolitical arrangements—the intertwining of geopolitics and geoeconomics (Li, 2020; Lo, 2024a; Sahakyan & Lo, 2025a). Somewhat differently, this study engages with the interdisciplinary field of communication geography to explore the different ways the BRI is understood and perceived. Communication geography draws attention to the spatial dimension of communication; it questions how communication produces space and how space produces communication (Jansson & Falkheimer, 2006). The flow and content of public information are often shaped by media outlets' specific geographical locations. At the same time, communication itself constructs spatial realities—it is important to consider how BRI projects are differently represented by media outlets based in different countries. Yet, studies on how the spatiality of BRI projects is communicated through news media are uncommon, particularly in the European context (Masduki et al., 2023; Miao, 2021; Rahman & Shehab, 2023; Sidaway et al., 2020; Stroikos, 2023).

This study draws attention to BRI projects as spatio-discursive constructs—interpretations and representations of spatial realities. The BRI reconfigures global geographical spaces to create a new world order aligned with Chinese ambitions (Geng & Lo, 2023b). It goes beyond infrastructure development to involve the politics of space and communication, where the media plays a pivotal role. The BRI is polarizing, with media and political actors in China, the West, and other BRI partner countries formulating both positive and negative media opinions (Yang & Van Gorp, 2023). Our communication geography approach builds on key theoretical discussions regarding how spatiotemporal disjuncture illuminates the simultaneous existence of differing realities within one location, grounded in the intentional obscuring of routine truths surrounding BRI projects (Apostolopoulou, 2024; Lai et al., 2020). Under the umbrella of critical geopolitics (Tuathail, 1997; Tuathail & Dalby, 1998), this paper contributes to uncovering the intricate dynamics of international political affairs and exposes the power structures that shape geopolitical understanding—structures often obscured by conventional geopolitics. It highlights how elements of geopolitical discourse can be instrumentalized to construct particular spatial realities. In addition to identifying four distinct geographical frames—geopolitics, geoeconomics, local development, and governance—this study engages with the politics of scale, examining how these frames interact across different levels and continually reshape one another, thereby exposing the contested spatial imaginaries embedded in BRI projects.

Empirically, this paper focuses on a flagship BRI project—Piraeus Port in Greece. After COSCO, a major Chinese state-owned enterprise, took ownership of the port, media discourse began characterizing Piraeus as the

'dragon's head', illustrating China's ambition to make it Europe's most important port and expand its influence across Europe and the world (Stroikos, 2023). This suggests that, while the Port of Piraeus is geographically located in Greece, its Chinese ownership triggered a discursive response that positions the port as a crucial extension of the BRI and China. In this paper, we critically examine this discursive process among various competing interests from a geographical perspective. Using a cross-country analysis of media narratives, we examined spatio-discursive constructs across four geographical frames: geopolitics, geoeconomics, local development, and governance. These frames serve as specific interpretive lenses that emphasize certain aspects of a topic while downplaying others, thereby shaping how audiences perceive and understand issues or events (Zhu, 2022). The findings illustrate how multiple realities can emerge from a single location, offering a critical perspective on geopolitics by exposing the underlying power relations.

This paper is structured as follows. [Section 2](#) reviews the theoretical orientation of communication geography and geographical framing. [Section 3](#) offers context on Greek-Sino relations and Piraeus Port. [Section 4](#) presents the methodology, while [Section 5](#) outlines the four dominant framings of geopolitics, geoeconomics, local development, and governance. [Section 6](#) concludes the paper with a discussion of the findings and future research directions.

2. Theoretical discussion

2.1. Communication geography and spatio-discursive construction

Abler (1974) noted that geographers have neglected the ways that communication networks shape space. At the time, geographers worried that rapidly evolving communication networks (due to globalization and technological advancement) would make it difficult to study how places are interpreted and affected by social relations (Hillis, 1998). The field of communication geography emerged to resolve this issue and study the spatiality of communication. As Adams (2011) explains, communication mediates between places and spaces: a 'dialectic structured by the tension between communications as context and communications as contents'. In other words, communication occurs in space, *and* that space is produced via means of communication.

Communication geographers are interested in how place and space shape experiences, information, and knowledge exchange among individuals (Adams, 2011). Space and place are not only physical objects; they are *spatio-discursive constructs* connected to interpretations and representations of reality. Communication geography thus views communication as a process that produces and maintains spatial realities (Hillis, 1998). Communication influences

the way we see, research, and write about space. Perceptions and influence can (re)create places, giving new life to important or unimportant locations through the study of communication patterns and discourses (Lindell, 2016).

Lefebvre (1991) was one of the most influential scholars to consider how communication makes representations of space abstract enough to sustain existing power relations and structures. To Lefebvre, spatio-discursive constructs as abstract understanding of space or spatial relations are shaped by powerful actors, thereby reflecting power dynamics and struggle. We experience certain spaces of control that can become more or less influential based on powerful actors' desires. In a classic example, Anderson's imagined communities reveal how media representations contribute to the production of nation-states by fostering a shared sense of identity among their citizens (Anderson, 1991). However, Lefebvre's theoretical framework is not detailed or complete. This is in part because Lefebvre's work is theoretically rich but lacks empirical grounding. This gap makes it difficult to operationalize his ideas in practical, real-world scenarios. Communication geographers have been urged to conduct further empirical, interdisciplinary research in different contexts (Adams & Jansson, 2012).

The perceptions and ideas connected to place and space can lead to changes in everyday life. The study of spatiality reveals that social life has become interconnected with the media, which people rely on to be informed and communicate with each other. Lindell (2016) demonstrates how new developments in the media industry affect social life and spatiality, shaping the representation and debate about geographical spaces. Communication geography usefully combines elements of social phenomenology to analyse mediated spaces and environments (Lindell, 2016). As Lindell notes, the transformative power of media can change the scope and character of communication, which in turn impacts the representation and politics of space. Therefore, places should not be studied by communication and geography as two exclusive bodies of research. Rather, these literatures should be combined to generate insights into similar questions of inquiry (Adams & Jansson, 2012).

2.2. Geographical frames about BRI projects

To analyse how communication shapes the spatio-discursive construction of a geographical location, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach grounded in framing theory, one of the most widely used approaches for studying media discourses in communication and journalism studies (Karyotakis, 2022). The concept of framing has been used extensively to analyse the specific interpretations present in media narratives. The core idea of framing theory is the selective representation and emphasis of reality (Entman, 1993).

An issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives by various actors, leading to distinct, often conflicting frames.

Geographical frames refer to the ways in which space or place are represented in communication, media, and discourse. In this paper, we propose four geographical frames that are influential in news articles regarding BRI projects. These frames allow us to gain a nuanced understanding of the spatio-discursive construction of BRI projects. In line with methodologies used in similar previous studies, the frames were identified through inductive frame analysis, involving a close examination of relevant literature, along with comprehensive reading, discussion, and consensus among the study's authors based on the content of the news articles (Bahoo & Alon, 2020; Karyotakis, 2022).

2.2.1. *Geopolitics*

Following critical geopolitical theory, in particular the ideas of popular geopolitics, we define geopolitical representation as narratives created by media and other powerful actors to frame international politics (Su & Huntington, 2023; Tuathail, 1999). Such framing is far from neutral; narratives are constructed using language, imagery, and symbols to represent international relations in particular ways to serve particular interests. Some may underscore a deeply territorialized vision—interpretation of the world's division into competing political entities, while others may purport a more interconnected and fluid vision of global relations featuring globalization, transnationalism, and regional integration (Koopman et al., 2021).

Geopolitical discourses redefine spatio-political relationships between countries through the use of strategic language and imaginaries (Arya, 2023). A dominant geopolitical narrative from Western sceptics is that the BRI is a geopolitical tool to boost China's global influence and challenge the Western-led global order (Lin, 2024). This narrative ties into post-Cold War geopolitical discourse, where struggles over territory and power have gained relevance and evolved into a clash of civilizations (Haglund & Singh, 2023). In this frame, the rivalry between China and the US is the focal point and is interpreted as a power struggle between an existing hegemon and an aspiring power in a zero-sum game (Allison, 2017; Schindler & Dicarlo, 2022). Media reports supporting these narratives often express the 'China threat' theory, posing questions such as whether or not the rise of China might challenge the US dominance, and poses security threat to the West (Okuda, 2016).

A competing geopolitical narrative, linked to the official rhetoric of the BRI, suggests that we live in a multipolar world where great powers can peacefully coexist by respecting ideological-cultural diversity (Cheng & Liu, 2021; Lloyd & Dixon, 2022; Sahakyan & Lo, 2025b). This narrative of China's peaceful rise rejects the idea of a power struggle between China and the West; rather, it

portrays the BRI as a win–win initiative for fostering cooperation and that China would integrate with status quo powers, rather than challenge them through war or other strategic means (Okuda, 2016). Central to this framing is a communication campaign that reimagines global space through the language of connectivity, mutual benefit, and shared destiny—what Van Noort (2021) describes as a spatial imaginary rooted in Silk Road nostalgia.

2.2.2. *Geoeconomics*

The geoeconomic framing focuses on economic interactions between countries and represents space as a conduit for trade, investment, and development (Haroche, 2024; Sahakyan & Lo, 2025a). The BRI entails significant trade and investment, making this an expectedly important frame. A popular geoeconomic framing of the BRI from Western critics has been the ‘debt trap’ narrative, which refers to the idea that China intentionally lends large sums of money to BRI countries, knowing that they may struggle to repay the loans, in order to leverage the debt to gain control over strategic assets, such as ports or natural resources, and to exert political influence (Brautigam, 2020; Liu, 2023). While this thesis lacks a solid basis, Western media has widely promoted this narrative, particularly after China gained control of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port (Moramudali & Panduwawala, 2024).

A competing geoeconomic narrative of the BRI, endorsed by the Chinese government, frames it as a transformative effort to boost global connectivity through large-scale infrastructure development (Van Noort, 2021). This narrative emphasizes the creation of trade corridors, ports, and railways to facilitate economic integration and boost regional development. China officially supports this narrative and presents the BRI as a means to stimulate economic growth in BRI countries. This geoeconomic framing also serves to legitimize China’s expanding presence in strategic locations—such as the Piraeus port—by framing them as nodes in a shared development architecture rather than instruments of geopolitical ambition.

2.2.3. *Local development*

While the previous two frames emphasize the international scale, this frame shifts focus to the local level. This local spatial framing materializes grand but abstract visions into lived realities, typically by examining the impact of BRI projects on communities, workers, and the environment. As many BRI projects target marginalized or underdeveloped regions, this spatial imaginary often involves reframing the periphery as central to future trade and development, aligning with China’s narrative of inclusive globalization (Liu et al., 2018).

From a positive standpoint, large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI can bring significant benefits, including economic growth, job creation, and improvements in transport and energy infrastructure

(Fang et al., 2021). The capacity of BRI projects to reduce poverty is a frequent topic of discussion. Furthermore, infrastructure projects create new business opportunities, especially for companies in financing, consulting, construction, and logistics (Carmody & Wainwright, 2022).

However, constructing large infrastructure projects can also create social and environmental problems due to land expropriation, labour violations, the influx of Chinese workers, and the export of Chinese polluting industries (Komakech & Ombati, 2023). For example, BRI projects in rural Cambodia have contributed to the loss of access to customary land and forest resources, resulting in negative impacts on livelihoods and the environment (Mackenzie et al., 2023). Moreover, the BRI is criticized for potentially harming local businesses by allowing an influx of inexpensive Chinese commodities. It is also claimed that the majority of BRI projects and contracts are awarded to Chinese state-owned enterprises, which secure loans from Chinese banks and rely on imported machinery, raw materials, and labour from China. This leads to the exclusion of local people and companies. Furthermore, BRI projects may disproportionately benefit national and local elites—negotiators preferred by China—and have a limited trickle-down effect on the wider population.

2.2.4. Governance

The fourth frame focuses on a range of governance issues associated with BRI projects, such as the roles of institutions, distribution of power, transparency, and accountability (Lo, 2014). This framing often spatially designates BRI projects or regions as zones of exception—territories that are carved out to operate under distinct economic regulations and where national laws and regulations are selectively suspended or modified (Rippa, 2017). It may also encompass the broader impact of the BRI on the governance of host countries, including democracy, efficiency, and decentralization. A common critical narrative about BRI projects is poor governance. This includes issues such as a lack of transparency, a lack of coordination and consultation with local communities, weak project oversight, and fraudulent, rent-seeking, and corrupt practices (He, 2019). These governance challenges, often exacerbated by weak rule of law and poor governance standards in host countries, have led to issues such as BRI projects failing to comply with environmental and social responsibility measures (Bohnett et al., 2022).

At a broader level, the Chinese government has consistently upheld a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, enabling host countries to retain sovereignty over their economic and political governance structures (Chaziza, 2023). The principle of non-interference plays a key role in promoting the BRI as an apolitical, development-centric initiative. However, this has sparked negative narratives in the West, raising concerns

about the BRI's role in reinforcing corruption or supporting authoritarian regimes (Wong, 2020).

2.3. *Politics of scale and cross-scalar interaction of geographical frames*

The four geographical frames—geopolitics, geoeconomics, local development, and governance—operate at distinct spatial scales. Geopolitics and geoeconomics operate at the macro level, focusing on international competition and markets, whereas local development and governance function at the micro level, addressing domestic policies and community impacts. However, these distinctions of scale operate not as a descriptive category but as a political process that shapes perceptions and action. In other words, the different framings of the BRI can be understood as an exercise in the politics of scale, where scale is conceived as a social construct (Prys-Hansen et al., 2024).

Within the politics of scale, *scale* is understood as a dynamically produced outcome of political contestation, rather than as a neutral analytical backdrop. The politics of scale often involves struggles over which scale dominates and how scales are reconfigured or rescaled over time. In other words, the making of *scale* is bound up with the production of *space*. For instance, studies of regional hydropolitics demonstrate how actors selectively produce and mobilize scales—local, national, regional—to legitimate particular governance arrangements and resource claims, with scale prominence varying by political goal (da Silva & Hussein, 2019). Transnational hydropolitics, in turn, has been associated with protecting national interests (da Silva, 2018). Media and policy discourses are central to this production: discursive framings define which problems and solutions appear appropriate at which scale and thereby enable certain actors to reframe local issues as matters of global strategy or, conversely, to depoliticize geopolitical concerns by downscaling them into technocratic, developmental narratives (Bréthaut et al., 2022; Ezbakhe, 2023).

Politics of scale typically presupposes distinct hierarchical levels (local, regional, national, international). However, scales are best understood as relational constructs that interact dynamically across levels of analysis (Marston, 2000). Geopolitical narratives at the international scale often cascade downwards, shaping geoeconomic framings of investment and trade, which then materialize in local development discourses about employment, rights, and community transformation. Conversely, local contestations over labour conditions or governance concerns can scale upwards, feeding into broader debates about transparency, sovereignty, and the legitimacy of China's global expansion. In this sense, frames are not static categories but

mobile discursive devices that travel across scales, overlap, and reshape one another.

It is therefore important to examine how the geographical framings of BRI projects at different scales are strategically mobilized and contested by actors to achieve political goals, such as (de)legitimizing China's ambitions in the BRI. In the case of Piraeus, the four geographical frames we conceptualized serve as scale-making practices—discursive moves that actively reconfigure the port's spatial significance (e.g., as China's gateway to Europe, as a site of local transformation, or as a governance exception)—and not merely as different descriptive lenses. Positive geopolitical narratives of Sino-Greek friendship frequently reinforced geoeconomic optimism about investment opportunities, while local governance critiques of bureaucratic inefficiency or labour rights violations often undermined these narratives and resonated in Western media coverage. Frames can therefore be mutually reinforcing in some contexts (e.g., peaceful coexistence amplifying economic optimism), competing in others (e.g., governance critiques challenging win-win rhetoric), and situationally dominant depending on the discursive moment. This cross-scalar mobility highlights the explanatory power of communication geography: it reveals how media discourses construct contested spatial imaginaries by moving across scales, rather than functioning merely as a descriptive classification.

3. BRI and Greece

China's first foray into investments and relations with European countries targeted central and eastern European nations facing financial difficulties and trouble with the EU (Vangeli, 2017). China positioned itself as a respectful partner that wanted to invest and help these countries develop their infrastructure and economy (Roussi, 2019). The EU and its mechanisms treated these countries with scepticism; Chinese investments offered a more practical approach. China aimed to create a global project that would reshape the global economy by elevating China's role in the global world order. Richer European nations have criticized these strong connections with China and BRI investments, warning that while agreements with Beijing might be beneficial, recipient countries must respect the obligations and values of the EU (Baark, 2019).

Chinese influence at the Piraeus Port began around 2007 when the Greek state re-evaluated how to manage and operate the port. The Piraeus Port Authority, a state company, became a publicly traded company, with the state having a majority stake (75 per cent) in 1999. In 2001, the Greek government signed an agreement that granted the authority exclusive use of the facilities, including two terminals (Terminals 1 & 2) and a third, yet unbuilt terminal. The Chinese state enterprise COSCO won a bid competition

in October 2008 and signed an agreement for the commercial use, operation, and further development of two terminals (2 & 3) for 35 years (Koenig et al., 2024). Until this change, the Port Authority had decided how the infrastructure and facilities would be utilized or improved. COSCO's role was standard, and it was limited to the operation of its two terminals. Things changed in 2014 when the state decided to sell its majority stake in the Port Authority through an international tender. This tender for 67 per cent of the Port Authority was part of the broader privatizations required by the country's bailout programme (Koenig et al., 2024).

COSCO was the only bidder interested in acquiring the port, despite its significant geographic location and potential regional impact. The Greek state agreed that COSCO would initially get 51 per cent of the Port Authority for €280.5 million (US\$312.1 million); after 5 years of investments of €300 million (US\$333.8 million) or more, it could acquire the remaining 16 per cent for €88 million (US\$97.9 million). This agreement lasts until 2052. This marked the first time a Chinese company became a master port operator abroad (Koenig et al., 2024). The Greek state can terminate the agreement if certain problems arise. Notably, COSCO did not purchase the land where the Port is located. Since signing the agreement, COSCO has invested an estimated €600 million (US\$667.7 million) in new hotels, cruise ship terminals, a logistics centre, a shopping mall, and increased capacity (Koenig et al., 2024).

4. Methods

This study employs a qualitative framing approach to uncover how specific locations can embody conflicting spatial discourses (Apostolopoulou et al., 2024; Karyotakis & Lo, 2024). Understanding the context and identifying the dominant narratives promoted by the media texts reveals sociopolitical and cultural insights into how news stories are presented and framed to the public (Cârlan & Ciocca, 2014; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2008). The phrases, narratives, and sentences that shaped the frames are highlighted in the exemplars presented in the next section. Since this paper adopts a qualitative approach, presenting all the collected online news stories is not feasible. Instead, we present the study's most illustrative examples (exemplars) to highlight the insights gained for each frame.

We analysed the online media coverage of Piraeus Port from one American, one British, one French, four Greek, and three Chinese news outlets. Particular attention was given to Greek media to explore how the local press portrays the geographical location. Through comparisons with other outlets, this study highlights the different ways in which Piraeus Port is constructed as a Chinese space. Our total sample included 519 online news articles. All the news outlets were selected based on their popularity and

trust, as presented in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024* (Newman et al., 2024). The analysis of the three Greek news outlets (*In.gr*, *Protothema.gr*, and *Kathimerini*) was complemented by an examination of the discourse in *Rizospastis.gr*, the official platform of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) (Gardikiotis, 2003). KKE supposedly belongs to the same ideological spectrum as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is an important party in modern Greece. KKE promotes a communist ideology and civil rights (Pappas, 2003); therefore, it is important to consider how *Rizospastis.gr* framed the news about Piraeus Port. In addition, based on the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024*, we included one prominent American (CNN), British (BBC), and French (Le Monde) news outlet in the sample. This selection was crucial for examining the framing devices and narratives promoted by media outlets originating in countries seeking to challenge China's global expansion.

We also investigated discourse on the Piraeus Port from the Chinese perspective by analysing the English versions of *Xinhua*, *Global Times*, and *China Daily*. These three news media outlets are affiliated with the CCP and have international reach, with bureaus in many countries. *Xinhua* is believed to be the world's largest news agency. *China Daily*, through heavy financial support from the CCP, has expanded its international version across the globe, including in the US. Similarly, the *Global Times* has enhanced its international influence by covering the news in a tabloid style, garnering the nickname 'China's Fox News' (Zhang & Wu, 2017).

We considered news coverage from January 2016 to January 2024 to include the entire Piraeus Port timeline (e.g., the 51 per cent acquisition by COSCO on 8 April 2016 and the extra 16 per cent acquisition on 25 October 2021). The keywords used to collect the news articles were 'Piraeus Port and China' and 'Piraeus Port'. This coverage also includes ambitious development projects that expanded Piraeus Port's reach, making it one of the most influential global import-export hubs.

5. Geographical framing of Piraeus Port

This section presents the geographical frames in the news discourse that shape the spatio-discursive construction of the Port of Piraeus. The relevant sentences and phrases are bolded in the exemplars. [Table 1](#) summarizes the key framings and narratives, including brief descriptions of the identified frames.

5.1. Geopolitics

We found 204 news articles that adopt a geopolitical frame in reporting on Piraeus Port, making this the most important framing device. These articles portrayed Piraeus Port as a strategic foothold for China in Greece and Europe. Most news articles (168) followed the Chinese official narrative

Table 1. Geographical frames of Piraeus Port.

Frame	No. of News Articles/% of total	Narratives (no. of news articles/% of total)	Key Message
Geopolitics	204/ 39.3 per cent	Peaceful co-existence (168/32.4 per cent)	Piraeus Port is crucial in the development of a strong friendship between China and Greece
		US-China rivalry (36/6.9 per cent)	Piraeus Port brings geopolitical tensions to Greece, as rising US-China rivalries have fueled concerns of a new Cold War
Goeconomics	190/ 36.6 per cent	An economic engine for Greece (145/27.9 per cent)	Piraeus Port can attract Chinese investments and economic opportunities to Greece
		China's gateway to Europe (45/8.7 per cent)	Piraeus Port as a vital tool for China to expand its economic influence in the regions close to Greece, especially Europe
Local development	91/ 17.5 per cent	Benefiting local communities (50/9.6 per cent)	Piraeus Port as crucial for improving the local community
		Civil and working rights (41/7.9 per cent)	Piraeus Port challenges the civil and working rights of the local population
Governance	34/ 6.6 per cent	Illegal activities (20/3.9 per cent)	Piraeus Port as a haven of illegal trading activities
		Bureaucratic procrastination (14/2.7 per cent)	The slow and problematic Greek bureaucracy could jeopardize the development of Piraeus Port

and framed Piraeus Port within a positive geopolitical discourse of peaceful coexistence. They argued that the project improved bilateral relations between Greece and China and led to an enduring friendship. Piraeus Port was presented as a landmark in bilateral relations between the two countries and as an exceptional and successful BRI project that would strengthen common interests between Greece and China. Both Greek and Chinese news media disseminated this positive framing of international relations.

For instance, a *Xinhua* story titled 'Chinese premier holds talks with Greek counterpart' traced the important benefits for both countries using statements by influential officials, including Greece's Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Greece was portrayed as a key Chinese ally, owing to the development of the Port of Piraeus and other projects that reinforced bilateral relations, with Greece appearing to follow China's lead. Piraeus Port was also seen as the beginning of broader collaboration in many other strategic sectors tailored to fit the way China perceives the Port of Piraeus—as part of a broader narrative about how the geographical locations under Chinese ownership become 'win-win' space (Exemplar 1):

Exemplar 1: China will work with Greece to continue high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, build and operate well **the Piraeus port project**, further deepen cooperation in the shipping industry, and **expand cooperation in trade**,

energy, telecommunications, green development and digital economy for more win-win results, the premier said. (*Xinhua*)

Similarly, Greek news stories reported on the Chinese and Greek officials, including President Xi Jinping, who have visited the port to secure bilateral relations. Such visits were positive for both sides: **'the redevelopment of the port of Piraeus will strengthen connections** between Greece and the rest of the world and provide the country with a **world-class maritime logistics hub'** (*Kathimerini*). Despite the positive framing of online stories in Greek news outlets, it was evident that there is a view that, although the port is geographically part of Greece, the country itself does not have a decisive say in what is happening. It appeared that Greece was following China's developments and suggestions.

Furthermore, some articles positioned the port as larger-than-bilateral by situating it within geopolitical visions of the BRI. Forty Chinese news articles linked the Port of Piraeus to the BRI's broader ambition of connecting cities globally, implying that under COSCO's control, the port is part of China's sphere of influence, with China playing a decisive role in shaping its future plans. As such, Port Piraeus was promoted as a beneficial initiative for humanity, which would offer a new future for other countries facing financial and infrastructure difficulties.

Displaying diverse viewpoints, the Greek media also presented the port as a space of geopolitical contention, thereby challenging the narrative that frames the Port of Piraeus as an apolitical space. A total of 36 Greek news articles took a more critical geopolitical viewpoint, foregrounding Sino-West tensions. The Greek news media underscored the potentially severe repercussions of being caught in the geopolitical crossfire between the US and China. They discursively construct the Port of Piraeus as an emerging geopolitical hotspot that could lead to political tensions between Greece and the West. Thus, geopolitics is understood as a zero-sum game where Greece must choose sides between China or the West.

For example, a news article titled 'Concerns in Europe by the Chinese presence' argued that the West (especially the EU) saw this collaboration as a geopolitical threat, as Piraeus Port gave China a significant route for expansion into Europe (*In.gr*). This suggests that Greek media recognized the political challenges posed by the new ownership. Such concerns were even more pronounced in the BBC's framing, which questioned the geopolitical impact of the BRI on Europe, highlighting the EU's initiation of a new investment programme aimed at countering Chinese influence (Exemplar 2):

Exemplar 2: **Mrs von der Leyen said the EU wanted to show that a different, democratic approach could deliver on projects** that focused on tackling climate change as well as global health security and **sustainable development for developing countries**. (*BBC*)

The exemplar subtly raised issues that have long been associated with China and the BRI, such as its authoritarian governance and poor track record on climate change and sustainability. Therefore, from a geopolitical perspective, the stories expose a contest between competing narratives seeking to define the ownership of the Port of Piraeus, illustrating how the Chinese acquisition has reterritorialized the space in alignment with Chinese interests.

5.2. Geoeconomics

The second framing, geoeconomics, imagines the Port of Piraeus as primarily an economic space and attends to the project's economic implications in Greece, China, and the broader region. Most articles (145) in this category discuss realized or potential economic benefits. The port is portrayed as the next big development project for Greece and the wider geoeconomic sphere of Europe. The port and its financial gains could expand development in Piraeus, putting the city on the global map through one of the most profitable ports in the world. Two luxurious hotels and new terminals also turned Piraeus into a prominent cruise stop in the Mediterranean Sea. COSCO's ownership was associated with prosperity in Greece (Exemplar 3).

Exemplar 3: Development of a logistics center, **construction of at least two hotel complexes, expansion of the cruise passenger port, and construction of a new passenger station** are included in Cosco's plans for the port of Piraeus, until 2021. (*Protothema.gr*)

Many hoped that successful collaboration would lead to more Chinese investment in Greece, potentially improve the country's infrastructure, and reaffirm the country's leadership position in the Balkans and Europe. Even *Rizospastis.gr*, which had the most negative stance towards Chinese investments, adopted a more neutral tone. One article reported on statements by Greece's Prime Minister, who urged Chinese businesses to come and invest in the country and underscored the important role of China-CEEC within the BRI (Exemplar 4).

Exemplar 4: Mr. Mitsotakis addressed **a new call for business in Greece to Chinese business groups**, concluding his visit to Shanghai yesterday ... Greek shipowners control 25% of the world's merchant fleet. In this, **the synergies with China, the world's largest export economy, are obvious**", reiterating that **"China has the ability to reach distant markets largely thanks to Greek-owned ships** ... (*Rizospastis.gr*)

Interestingly, the *CNN* framed the developments with the Port of Piraeus and the Chinese ownership as a way for Greece and Europe to improve their economy without revealing any concerns for the impact of China on the European continent (Exemplar 5):

Exemplar 5: Experts say **Chinese money will help Europe out of the economic slowdown**. Take the port of Piraeus as an example, although the Greek economy has been devastated by the global financial crisis, **the Chinese-run port has stayed afloat and is becoming one of Europe's main shipping hubs**. (CNN)

A set of 45 articles—almost exclusively from Greek sources—within the geoeconomic frame argued that China was using the project and Greece as a gateway to Europe. This framing reflects the Greek media's awareness of the blurred ownership of the Port of Piraeus as a geographical location. Greece's decision to pursue this path was portrayed as a pragmatic choice, driven by limited investment alternatives and the expectation that joining the BRI would bring financial gains. However, the articles lacked a systematic and critical examination of the actual economic benefits Greece has derived under Chinese ownership.

Four news articles from Chinese news organizations also framed Piraeus Port as essential for China expanding into the EU. These news stories raised critical questions and recognized that the Chinese investments were part of a larger geoeconomic plan centring on European markets. Nevertheless, their tone remained positive—the port was a great opportunity to exploit the space and the Chinese need for expansion. Greece and Piraeus Port have been portrayed as 'China's dragon's head', marking the beginning of a significant expansion into Europe and the Balkans. This term has been recognized in previous research (Gruebler, 2021; Stroikos, 2023).

However, some articles adopted a more cautious perspective, reporting that other European countries worried that the development of Piraeus Port would threaten their own strategic impact in maritime affairs, revealing once again the concern regarding the spatial dimension of the Port of Piraeus (Exemplar 6).

Exemplar 6: But there are concerns that **the European Union (EU) might eventually object to the level of investment if it poses a significant Chinese threat to European industries**. (BBC)

5.3. Local development

The previous two frames considered the international scale. In contrast, the articles in this frame examine the local economy, communities, and workers who were directly affected by the port development, framing Port Piraeus as a space of living and production undergoing rapid transformation. The articles in this frame either challenge or support the framing of the Port of Piraeus as a new space that promotes local development and a more prosperous everyday life.

Chinese news outlets (50 news articles) focused on how Chinese ownership was improving the lives of the local population and the environment through the expansion of Piraeus Port. These articles included interviews with port employees who recalled an unhappy past, when Piraeus Port was abandoned without significant financial activity. Working conditions also significantly improved under COSCO, revealing how, under China, the space is associated with positive feelings and development. A *China Daily* story titled, 'Greek port project helps boost career prospects', noted COSCO's respect for the locals and their bright new future (Exemplar 7).

Exemplar 7: When Patrisia Zigou first heard the news about the Chinese company's takeover of the Greek Piraeus Port, **she found herself grappling with concerns about her future**. The uncertainty surrounding her career at the car terminal business unit and the potential cultural differences with the new management weighed heavily on her mind. **However, as time passed, Zigou soon found the transition to be life changing.** (*Chinadaily.com*)

However, some Greek media were critical of the Chinese ownership's impact on the local population. The new ownership was associated with violations of civil and working rights. *Rizospastis.gr*, the news outlet of the Communist Party of Greece, presented COSCO and China as a capitalistic force with no connection to socialism. The publication worried that China's investment would create a more dangerous working environment and amplify precarity, community division, and environmental consequences, challenging the idea of rebranding the Port of Piraeus as a space of prosperity. An article titled 'Alexis Tsipras Visit to China: With an agenda dictated by the interests of business groups' detailed how Chinese ownership would lead to harsher working conditions for the employees (Exemplar 8).

Exemplar 8: **COSCO is looking forward to doing 'golden' jobs and, therefore, even greater profits through exploiting the port of Piraeus**, with its president, Hu Lirong, developing during the meeting he had yesterday in Shanghai with the prime minister, Al. Tsipras. The business plan of the Chinese group is to ask for the **government's successful intervention to restrict the strikes . . .** (*Rizospastis.gr*)

Similarly, *Le Monde's* two news articles portrayed the development at Piraeus Port as problematic, emphasizing that local communities continued to face poverty and worsening living conditions. Despite the port's role in attracting Chinese investments, the articles highlighted the lack of substantial improvements for the neighbouring population, which contradicts the prosperous narrative promoted by China and the fact that Chinese ownership is making the Port of Piraeus a space of economic development for the local population (Exemplar 9).

Exemplar 9: Yet the further you venture from the waterside, the more you see of another side of Greece: **working-class neighborhoods with potholed**

sidewalks, crumbling houses and inhabitants still plagued by poverty despite the return of growth and foreign investors ... (Le Monde)

The news articles criticizing the BRI project for its impact on labour and environmental conditions nonetheless depict Greece as a country compelled to accept such investments, possible loss of territorial sovereignty, and their consequences due to the financial crisis exacerbated by neoliberal policies linked to austerity measures. It is widely acknowledged that Greece endured significant hardships during the European debt crisis and was forced to adopt policies that often conflicted with the cultural values of Greek society, leading to profound transformations in various sectors, including the labour market (Koukiadaki & Kretsos, 2012).

5.4. Governance

The fourth frame discursively constructs Port Piraeus as zone of exception, where normal regulatory and political constraints are reconfigured to facilitate Chinese investment and strategic infrastructure development. Piraeus Port was at times framed as a place of lawlessness and regulatory ambiguity, and its expansion was linked to illegal activities. Greek media reported cases of illegal trading activities, including the smuggling of products and drugs. However, only one of these articles negatively opposed Chinese ownership, suggesting a reluctance to politicize the issue and narrative of development. Most stories simply neutrally reported illegal trading activities. One story noted that counterfeit brand products had been smuggled through Piraeus Port for 2 years, with an estimated revenue of 3.2 million euros.

A small number (14) of news articles focused on governance challenges the project might encounter, particularly given the Greek government's highly bureaucratic and inefficient nature. In a few cases, the Greek media reported doubts and disagreements during the ownership negotiations. The Greek media also criticized the government and bureaucrats, claiming that their procrastination or demands could jeopardize the deal and push COSCO out of the port. One article by *Kathimerini*, titled 'Why are COSCO's investments in the port of Piraeus not progressing?' explained that the government had to satisfy many different groups and interests, as the local population thought the Chinese were exerting too much influence on the government and eliminating competition.

6. Cross-country analysis

This section examines the differences in the news media coverage, with a primary emphasis on the perspectives of Greek and Chinese media regarding Piraeus Port, which emerged as the most prominent viewpoints in the

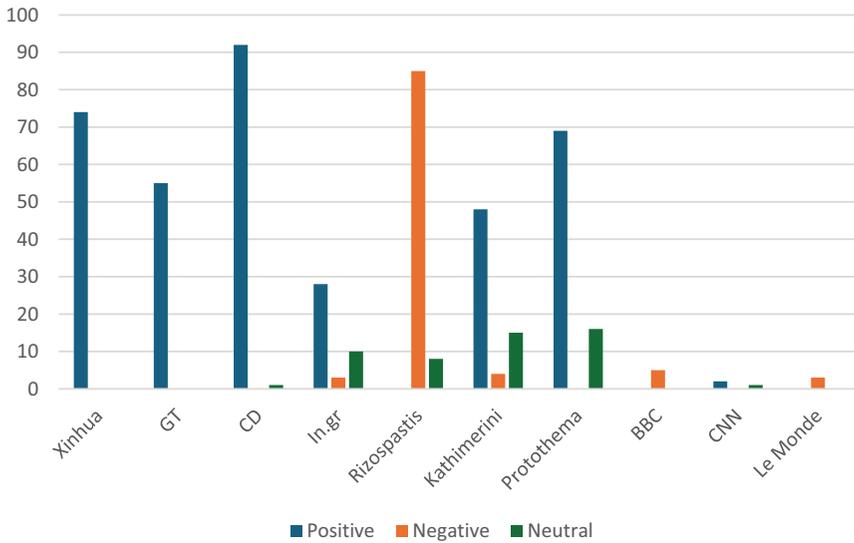


Figure 1. The tone of the articles (neutral refers to a more neutral fact-based coverage that does not take clear sides).

sample. [Figure 1](#) summarizes the tonal differences (positive, negative, neutral) of the 10 featured media outlets.

The majority of the analysed news articles took a positive tone when reporting Chinese involvement in Piraeus Port. The project was generally framed as a successful and essential BRI project that would further expand the interests of both countries, without providing critical details on how this would happen. The Chinese and Greek media's main narrative was that Piraeus Port would become one of the most prominent global ports under Chinese management—a remarkable win–win situation for both countries and the local population. However, the coverage lacks clear, critical evidence demonstrating how such outcomes will be achieved under the new ownership.

CNN appeared to favour Chinese investments in Europe, highlighting the financial benefits they could bring to the continent, without adopting a critical stance or offering a negative depiction of China. Chinese news outlets maintained a consistently positive tone throughout the study period, emphasizing how the new spatial dimension of the port is boosting the Greek economy. Similarly, Greek news media featured mostly positive articles over the examined years, except for *Rizospastis.gr*, which consistently maintained a negative tone. As for other European news media, the sample predominantly revealed a tone that was mostly negative in their coverage, and a fear that Chinese ownership makes the port a Chinese territory, in which the Greek government does not have a decisive say.

It is unsurprising that the Chinese media adopted a universally positive tone designed to enhance China's image both domestically and internationally, given that the government largely controls the media (Liu & Lo, 2022). The Greek media's positive tone, in contrast, likely reflects the country's desperate need for financial support and sectoral restructuring to usher in a more prosperous future. The Chinese investments were a crucial tool that guaranteed large infrastructure projects and could revive Greece's essential exports and take advantage of its significant geographical location to become an influential actor in the global transportation economy (Bastian, 2022). China's willingness to collaborate closely with Greece led to more deals with Chinese private and state companies. In reality, China was often the only country willing to invest in Greek infrastructure. Furthermore, the Greek media industry has become highly concentrated, with a small number of media owners dominating both traditional and new media industries (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019). These owners are known for their close clientelist connections with political parties and politicians, interfering in the news coverage and forcing it to cover topics that usually benefit them (Bantimaroudis & Maniou, 2020). As a result, the lack of in-depth and critical coverage from the Greek media may also be a result of media politics, linked to the fact that Greek media are largely owned by prominent shipping magnates, who may seek to suppress investigative reporting that could contradict their business interests (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019; Karyotakis & Zen, 2025)

The Greek media did have a more balanced stance on the investment and new ownership. They reported on several negative or troublesome aspects of the port development. For example, they highlighted the risks of becoming entangled in the New Cold War between China and US. Several reports also documented how port expansion brought more illegal activities and worker exploitation. While these stories were not always negative, they were also not uncritically positive. The neutral and critical perspectives reflect the more diverse political positions of Greek media.

Throughout the examined period from January 2016 to January 2024, there were no significant changes in the content of *Kathimerini*, *Proto Thema*, and *In.gr*. In the first 2 years of the investment (2016–2018), there was a slightly greater emphasis on the importance of the investments, and from 2019 onward, a few more articles highlighted that tensions between the USA, China, and the EU might affect how the Port of Piraeus was perceived. Also, in 2019, there was greater emphasis on the bureaucratic issues that were threatening to jeopardize further investments and the development of the port.

Interestingly, *Rizospastis.gr* was one of the most negative on Chinese ownership of Piraeus Port. While the KKE nominally shares the same ideology as the CCP, its mouthpiece framed the project as a way for a capitalistic China

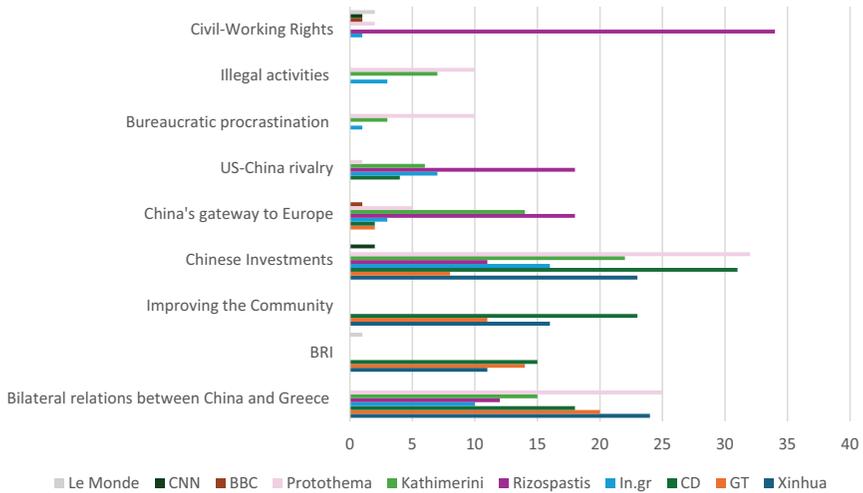


Figure 2. Frames used by different news outlets.

to expand its grip on the region to the detriment of local working and civil rights. Following *Rizospastis.gr*, both *Le Monde* and *BBC* expressed scepticism about Chinese investments in Greece. *Le Monde* focused on the environmental and labour challenges faced by local communities, while *BBC* placed greater emphasis on the geopolitical implications, raising concerns about China's expanding influence across the European continent. Despite the small sample size of these European news outlets, they offered a valuable glimpse into European news coverage, highlighting that, in online discourse, the Port of Piraeus is not entirely perceived as a Greek port. [Figure 2](#) offers a detailed view of the analysed news articles, highlighting the specific framing approaches used within the coverage.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Accompanying China's acquisition of a controlling stake is the discursive construction of Piraeus Port as a bridgehead for China's global geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions. The port is also framed as a local space of living and production undergoing transformation, and as a zone of governance exception. Each of the four geographical frames constructed by the media encompasses a constellation of overlapping and at times competing narratives that reflect divergent interpretations of Port Piraeus. For example, within the geopolitical framing, media narratives diverge significantly—some imagine Port Piraeus as a symbol of China's peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit with the West, while others highlight it as a contested geopolitical space amid growing tensions between China and the US.

The divergence revealed the complexity of how space and spatial meaning are discursively constructed, contested, and communicated (Hay & Israel, 2001). Different interests drive the formation of varying discursive constructs. Media is a site of discursive struggle and negotiation, affecting the perception, legitimacy, and success of grand initiatives like the BRI (Huang, 2007; Yang & Van Gorp, 2023). The Chinese media was entirely positive, while the Greek media took a more balanced tone, reporting successes, opportunities, and issues related to civil and workers' rights, governmental decisions, and port management. The Greek media recognized that Chinese investment could help overcome financial difficulties. Therefore, most media outlets adopted a positive tone about the Chinese involvement in the port. One notable exception was *Rizospastis.gr*, an outlet that maintained a critical stance, similar to *BBC* and *Le Monde*, which expressed caution about China's expansion into the European continent and the fact that the Port of Piraeus seems to be becoming a Chinese-owned geographical space. In contrast, *CNN* surprisingly framed the Chinese ownership of Piraeus Port as a positive, win-win scenario for both the continent and the countries involved. These different narratives reveal conflicting realities emerging from a single location, each attempting to shape the spatial meanings associated with the Port of Piraeus, thereby enhancing our understanding of its geopolitical dimension from a critical perspective (Apostolopoulou, 2024). The intense and variegated media attention surrounding Port Piraeus serves as evidence that the BRI is an ambitious, politically charged, and spatially complex project—one that intersects with diverse national interests, ideological positions, and local lived experiences (Cheng & Apostolopoulou, 2023; Richardson, 2021).

This study improves our understanding of communication geography by addressing the gap in research that calls for more empirical findings on how geographical spaces are perceived within discourse and communicated (Adams & Jansson, 2012). By exploring how a particular geographical space—Piraeus Port—is spatially represented and communicated within various media discourses, it contributes fresh, data-driven insights that can help us to better comprehend the complex interplay between geographical spaces and their narratives in communication, providing another approach for studying BRI-related spatial discourses (Apostolopoulou et al., 2024). Furthermore, the paper enhances relevant academic knowledge regarding media coverage of infrastructure projects, especially those related to the BRI. It includes a sample size that does not focus only on the most powerful Western countries of the globe, as many previous studies have done (Bahoo & Alon, 2020; Niu & Relly, 2021). In addition, within the field of communication studies, Greece is considered part of the Global South due to its limited representation in research. The country is interesting to study because it is simultaneously a close partner of China and the BRI and part of the West/EU, making its position regarding China's expanding power unique.

The findings underscore the importance of communication geography in understanding the BRI and invite further critical examination of the media's role in constructing geographical understandings of the BRI. Future research should explore how media discourses reshape and communicate the BRI across particular geographical locations, particularly through comparative news media analyses of BRI projects in different parts of the world. Furthermore, communication about BRI occurs at multiple spatial scales underpinned by both local and global geographical frames. These different spatial framings are not distinct but are deeply interconnected in the context of globalization: global forces shape local realities, while local developments can have global implications (Brenner, 2001). By clarifying how geopolitical, geoeconomic, local development, and governance frames interact across scales—sometimes reinforcing, sometimes competing, and often shifting in dominance—this study demonstrates that communication geography offers more than a descriptive vocabulary. It provides an explanatory model of how media discourses travel, overlap, and reshape spatial imaginaries, thereby deepening our understanding of the contested politics of scale in BRI projects such as Piraeus Port.

Moreover, scholars might investigate different forms of communication to generate a fuller picture of the relationship between communication and space regarding the BRI. In particular, the emergence of social media and its unique ability to disseminate information and mobilize ideas between people globally should be critically examined in the context of the BRI. Finally, geographers are increasingly drawn to the concept of social justice, which holds significant relevance for the BRI, as the projects often generate substantial impacts on local communities and the environment (Lo, 2024b; Wang & Lo, 2023). Developing a communication geography perspective on this issue can enhance our understanding of how perceptions and narratives of justice are formed and can lead to better management of the social and environmental impacts of the BRI.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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