

Greeks wage a court battle against Chinese-funded port that May poison the environment

Chinese investment in Greece's Piraeus port as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has boosted trade between the two countries, but tensions over the alleged breaking of environmental rules have highlighted a conflict between the potential benefits and harms of that investment.

In 2016, China's state-owned shipping company, COSCO, bought a majority stake in the public company managing Piraeus (PPA), a port located just southwest of Athens. Under COSCO-PPA, the Piraeus port became the largest in the Mediterranean. China has nicknamed it the "Dragon's Head," as a key entry point for Chinese goods into Europe. According to Greece's statistical agency, the worth of imports from China went from 2.89 billion euros (US\$ 3.2 billion) in 2016 to 3.74 billion euros (US\$ 4.27 billion) in 2020. This expansion has, however, been met with opposition from locals over toxic pollution in the area's fisheries, and landed in a legal battle in May 2020. At the same time, those locals and affiliated environmental experts are having to make their challenges in the context of flimsy local regulations and suspicion that Greek authorities are siding with COSCO-PPA for the sake of growth and expediency.

While in recent years Greek opinion polls have repeatedly reflected generally positive attitudes toward China and the Chinese, the tension over the Piraeus port threatens that goodwill. And this conflict is playing out both in the courts and in public opinion.

Global projects in fragile ecosystems

To acquire an additional 16 percent stake in the PPA, COSCO needs to deliver on new infrastructure. Of all the projects in the PPA's master plan, the most important and costly one is a new cruise shipping port in Piraeus' Peiraiki district.

The cruise port plan involves removing 620,600 cubic meters of sediment from the port city's seafloor and disposing of it at sea, between the nearby islands of Aegina and Salamina. This sediment is filled with decades of sewage discharge, maritime waste, and pollutants from the area's intensive industrial plants. When scooped out, dumped elsewhere, and re-activated, it can be catastrophic.

In late April 2020, marine conservation institute Archipelagos warned that the activity would have a serious impact on the area's fisheries. The Workers' Association of the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research warned that the impact would create a "subaquatic toxic landfill," at the expense of the area's fragile ecosystems.

The Greek Ombudsman, a national-level, constitutionally sanctioned watchdog, has

identified key licenses that were never approved prior to the development of the new port in Peiraiki. The license to do any development activity at all expired in 2018, and never included permission to develop a new port. It is also missing a Strategic Impact Assessment (SEA), which would be required by the European Union for development of this scale. Despite the failure to receive necessary permissions, COSCO-PPA launched development of the port during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

Locals push back

In the last week of April 2020, as floating cranes scooped mud out of the water and transferred it onto barges, Peiraki residents attempted to identify the ships on marinetraffic.com, a publicly accessible vessel traffic service. They saw nothing — the ships had their automatic identification system switched off, in violation of Greek law.

Anthi Giannoulou, a lawyer representing Piraeus Labour Centre in a court case against the port, told Global Voices that she sent the Coast Guard evidence from marinetraffic.com.

“Nothing happened, as far as I know. Instead, the head of the Piraeus Port Office was promoted,” she said in an interview conducted in February, 2021.

In May 2020, Piraeus Labour Center filed and a group of 115 local citizens each filed an application to Greece’s supreme administrative court requesting the cancellation of the decisions that approved the port’s development. Giannoulou also filed a supplementary out-of-court legal notice to the authorities, detailing her arguments and putting it into the public record.

Public opposition to the project is captured by Kritonas Arsenis, a long-time environmental activist and MP with opposition party Diem25. In a speech to parliament in May 2020, he pressed the government for clarification on dredging works:

While Greece’s supreme administrative court deliberates, dredging can take place in Peiraiki, but there can be no dumping of dredged sediment in the Saronic Gulf

The regional council, meanwhile, voted in favor of stricter terms on potential dredging activities.

In December 2020, the Ministry of Environment approved an impact assessment filed by COSCO-PPA, but the company is still missing the more comprehensive and legally mandated Strategic Impact Assessment (SEA).

A low profile

Despite the fact that the Piraeus Port development may poison a significant part of Greece’s seafood harvest, there has been little attention paid to the debate in Greek media. COSCO-PPA has maintained a low profile in Greece, seemingly preferring to let their allies in the

Greek government and industry represent their position.

In response to a question from Global Voices on the licenses and environmental studies required, COSCO-PPA responded the following:

“PPA S.A. adheres to all environmental legislation and publishes environmental data, as mandated by the law, both in its Corporate Social Responsibility reports and in its Annual Financial Report.”

COSCO's venture in Piraeus may top the agenda of bilateral meetings between Greece and China, but they will likely continue to find opposition: Groups like City-friendly port! and ΠΕΙΡΑΪΚΗ ΑΛΛΗΛΕΓΓΥΗ (Piraeus solidarity) have been critical platforms for publicizing audiovisual evidence of questionable COSCO-PPA activity. What the members of such groups believe about the BRI more generally is not always clear. It seems safe to say that the area's fragile ecosystems and their coastal communities are more important to them than plans for boundless growth.

Source: goodmenproject.com