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MAGAZINE

STRATEGIC MINERALS

A New Geopolitical Battlefield

April 2025

Nº69

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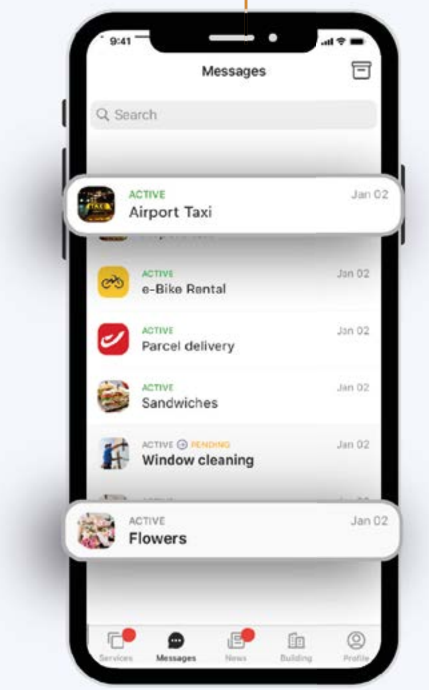

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Nº69 April 2025

EUROPEDIPLOMATIC MAGAZINE

IN THIS ISSUE

"Europe Diplomatic Magazine" is characterized by a very open editorial line that allows it to capture all the themes that affect directly or indirectly the European political, economic, social and security issues. Whether piracy in the Gulf of Aden and its threats to the global economy, articles about political leaders, geostrategic situations or technological developments affecting our civilization, Europe Diplomatic Magazine strives to work in comparing opinions and providing an objective analysis based on extensive research. For a wide audience composed of both members of the diplomatic corps, lobbyists, international officials or academics, the magazine gives everyone the necessary and useful information about all topics that make up our daily lives. Covering sensitive issues such as nuclear, the rise of Islamism and energy dependence, the magazine opens its pages to recognized specialists who would like to express first order and exclusive information. But Europe Diplomatic Magazine is not only a source of information on recent topics. It is also addressing older facts with deep thought fur further analysis. Whether it's news, security, diplomacy, technology, energy, terrorism, European affairs, no subject is treated superficially. Europe Diplomatic Magazine is an independent media, conveying balanced ideas of openness and analysis based on almost 30 years of experience in the journalistic world.

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Rare earths processing plant in Baotou, Inner Mongolia, China

STRATEGIC MINERALS

A New Geopolitical Battlefield

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Rare Earth Elements

In the complex world of global geopolitics, the quest for minerals and rare-earth elements (REEs) has emerged as one of the most compelling and consequential narratives of the 21st century. These precious resources, often buried deep within the earth's crust, are something of a lifeblood for our modern world. They power the technology that defines our daily lives, from the smartphones we carry in our pockets to the electric vehicles driving silently along our roads. They are the power behind the towering wind turbines producing clean energy and the sophisticated missile systems safeguarding nations. Elements like lithium, cobalt, and rare-earth metals such as neodymium and dysprosium, among many others, have become indispensable to progress, innovation, and military power.

Yet, the story of these minerals and elements is far from simple. Their extraction and control have sparked a complex set of geopolitical rivalries, environmental challenges, and serious ethical questions. As the demand for these resources surges, nations find themselves entangled in an intense game of resource diplomacy, where the stakes are nothing less than economic dominance, technological supremacy, and strategic influence. The United States, China, Russia and other powers are at the forefront of this contest, each vying to secure access to these critical materials. Meanwhile, countries like Ukraine, Greenland, Canada, and many African nations have found themselves thrust into the spotlight, their lands and resources becoming the focal points of this game of high-power politics.

But this scramble for resources also has a much darker side. The environmental effects of mining operations, often carried out in ecologically sensitive areas, has raised alarms about sustainability and the long-term health of our planet, as well as ethical concerns, as the extraction of these minerals is sometimes linked to exploitative labour practices and the marginalisation of local communities. The geopolitical tensions surrounding these resources can actually reshape alliances, ignite conflicts, and redefine the balance of power on the global stage.

The quest for minerals and rare-earth elements is more than just a race for economic gain—it describes humanity's aspirations, challenges, and contradictions in an increasingly interconnected and resource-hungry world. The decisions made today, by nations and corporations alike, will echo far into the future, shaping the path of technological progress, environmental responsibility and global stability.

The Geopolitical Chessboard: Ukraine, Greenland and Beyond

The United States has recently turned its full attention to Ukraine, a country whose significance extends far beyond its role as a strategic buffer between NATO and an increasingly assertive Russia. Ukraine possesses vast reserves of lithium, titanium, and rare-earth elements (REEs)—

resources that have become the lifeblood of modern technology and defence industries. For the United States, Ukraine's mineral wealth represents a major opportunity to recalibrate the global balance of power. At present, China holds a near-monopoly over the supply chain for these critical materials, a dominance that has left Western nations vulnerable to economic and strategic coercion. By cultivating ties with Ukraine, the US aims to diversify its sources of these essential minerals, consequently reducing its reliance on Beijing and bolstering its own technological and military independence.

But this endeavour is far from straightforward as Ukraine remains embroiled in a long and violent conflict with Russia in a struggle that has left its eastern regions badly scarred by war and its sovereignty perpetually under threat. Adding to the challenge is Ukraine's internal political instability, which has seen periods of upheaval and uncertainty, further complicating efforts to establish reliable partnerships. For Western powers, engaging with Ukraine is a high-risk, high-reward proposition—a gamble that could bring immense strategic and economic dividends, but one that also has the potential for significant setbacks.

In the meantime, the world's largest island, has become another major focal point. Greenland's vast frozen plains are believed to hold some of the largest untapped reserves of rare-earth elements and other critical minerals. The US, under both the Trump and Biden administrations, has shown keen interest in Greenland, even offering to buy the island—a proposal that was promptly rejected by Denmark, which has controlled the island for the past 300 years. Jens-Frederik Nielsen, whose centre-right "Demokraatit party" won a surprise victory following legislative elections in March,

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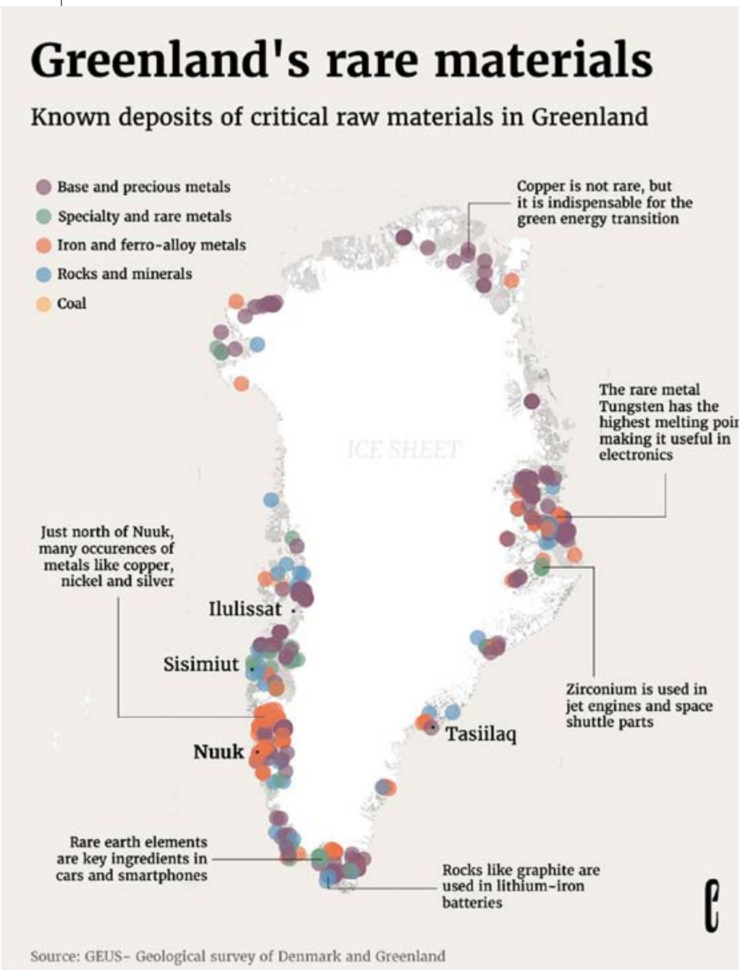
Jens-Frederik Nielsen



and who must form a coalition government, countered President Trump's persistent assertions that the United States would annex the island. In a declaration to the press, he said *'We don't want to be Americans. No, we don't want to be Danes. We want to be Greenlanders, and we want our own independence in the future. And we want to build our country by ourselves."*

Greenland's wealth of natural resources isn't just a tempting opportunity for the United States; China and Russia have also been steadily increasing their presence there. Through investments in mining ventures and infrastructure projects, Beijing in particular has been carving out a role for itself in the region.

This has raised concern in Washington, where officials are growing uneasy about China's expanding influence in the Arctic. As climate change continues to melt ice and open up new possibilities in the far north, the strategic importance of the Arctic is becoming harder to ignore, and the competition for control is heating up.

Canada also plays a crucial role in the global competition for resources. Blessed with enormous mineral reserves and a steady, dependable political climate, the country has been a natural partner for the United States in building a secure and reliable supply chain for essential minerals. Canadian mining firms are already leading producers of key materials like nickel, cobalt, and lithium, and the country is well on its way to becoming a central hub for processing rare earth elements (REEs).

However, the American president has recently expressed a desire for Canada to become the 51st state of the United States, sparking significant controversy and confusion. This stance is part of a broader trade conflict and economic pressure campaign against Canada, which includes imposing tariffs on Canadian goods and suggesting that the US does not need Canada's resources. Canadian officials, including former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and new Prime Minister Mark Carney, have firmly rejected Trump's suggestions, emphasising Canada's sovereignty and independence

Be that as it may, Canada's resource industry isn't without its hurdles. Environmental worries and the need to respect indigenous land rights add even more complexity to mining operations. These issues often slow down or complicate the extraction process, highlighting the delicate balance between economic ambitions and ethical responsibilities.

Rich Ground, Poor Hands: Africa's Mineral Paradox

Africa, frequently hailed as the planet's most resource-rich continent, has become a focal point in the global scramble for minerals. Take the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, which provides more than 70% of the world's cobalt—a vital ingredient in lithium-ion batteries used in everything from smartphones to electric vehicles. But the DRC's vast mineral wealth has been as much a burden as a boon. It has often been linked to corruption, violent conflicts, and serious human rights violations, leaving many to question whether the country's riches have truly benefited its people.

Artisanal miners in a cobalt mine, Lualaba Province, Democratic Republic of Congo

China, in particular, has been making significant investments in Africa, pouring billions into mining ventures and infrastructure development as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. This has given Beijing a strong foothold in the continent, allowing it to exert considerable influence over the global supply of critical minerals. This growing dominance has not gone unnoticed, causing unease among Western nations, who are increasingly wary of China's tightening grip on resources essential to modern technology and green energy. As Africa's mineral wealth continues to draw global attention, the continent finds itself at the heart of a complex and often contentious geopolitical struggle.

Like China, Russia also enjoys cordial relations with a significant number of African nations which have given it the opportunity to extend its control over strategic mineral reserves. But while China overwhelmingly dominates the global non-fuel critical minerals market, Russia has a similar influence over fossil fuels and some critical minerals.

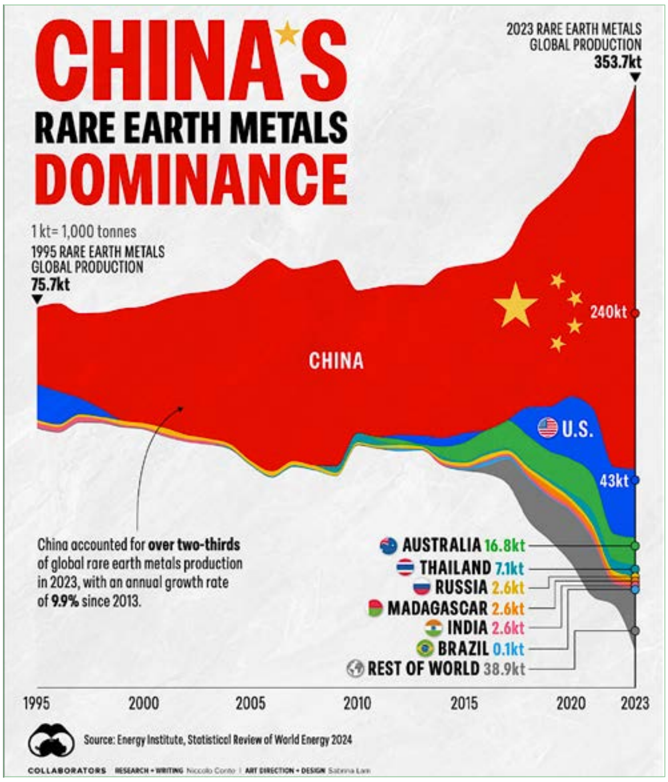
Russia, in fact, holds the world's fourth largest reserves of rare earth elements after China, Vietnam and Brazil. About 30 per cent of the global supply of platinum-group elements, including palladium, comes from Russia. It accounts for 13 per cent and 11 per cent of the global supply of titanium and nickel, respectively. Russia is also a major source of neon. There was a significant increase in the global prices of nickel, palladium and neon, alongside the increase in the prices of energy and food products, immediately after the outbreak of the conflict with Ukraine in 2022.

The China-Russia alliance, in this regard, is a serious concern for the US and its allies. Following the conflict and imposition of western sanctions, China-Russia trade saw a sharp increase. If China and Russia decide to work together on critical mineral supply chains, the US and its allies will likely face tremendous challenges.

China's Dominance and the Global Supply Chain

China's influence in the global market for minerals and rare earth elements is absolutely monumental. The country commands roughly 80% of the world's capacity for refining REEs and is a dominant force in producing lithium, cobalt, and other critical minerals essential for modern technology. This isn't a stroke of luck—it's the outcome of a carefully crafted, long-term strategy. For decades, China has poured resources into mining projects, processing plants, and cutting-edge research, consolidating its position as the central pillar of the global supply chain for these vital materials.

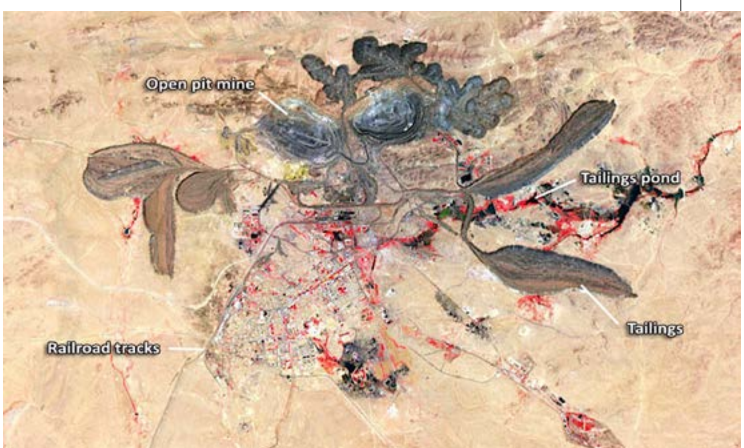
This control isn't just about economics; it's a powerful tool of geopolitical influence. A stark example came in 2010, during a territorial dispute with Japan, when China suddenly limited its exports of REEs to the country, causing some panic across global markets. More recently, Beijing has wielded its dominance in the REE sector as a strategic weapon in its ongoing trade tensions with the United States. These actions have pushed Washington and its allies to scramble for alternative sources of supply. However, loosening China's grip is no simple task. The complex infrastructure and specialised expertise needed to extract and process these materials are largely



concentrated within China.

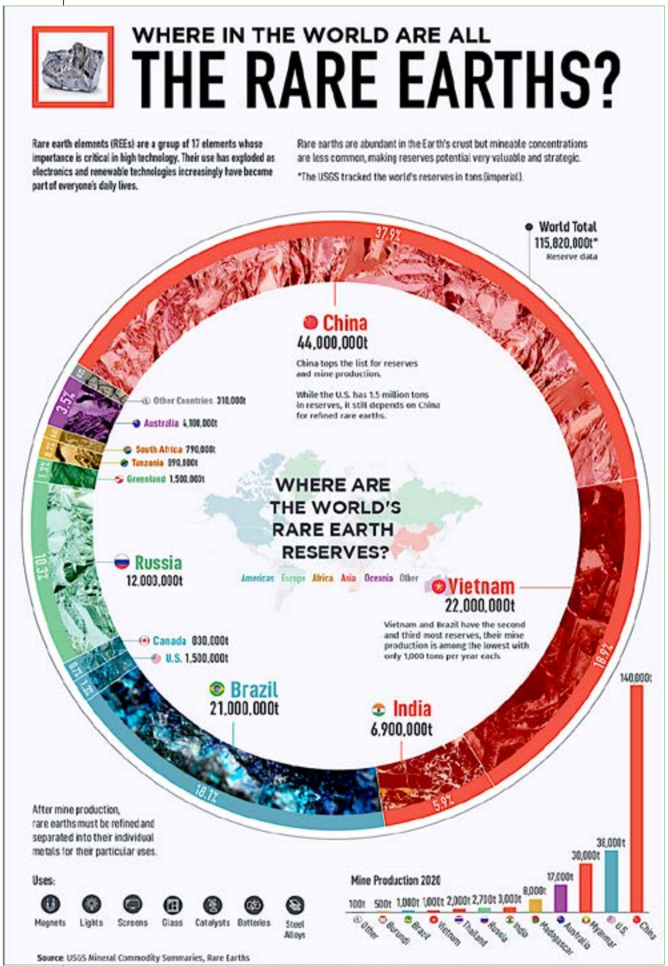
In March, the South China Morning Post claimed it had seen a declassified report of a geological survey in 2020 that had found enough supplies of thorium which could power the country for 60,000 years. According to the Hong Kong-based English language newspaper, the Bayan Obo mining complex in the Inner Mongolia region of China could yield 1 million tonnes of thorium from mining waste. Thorium is a naturally occurring, slightly radioactive metal, primarily found in minerals like monazite. It is a potential alternative to uranium in nuclear reactors, as it can be used to produce nuclear energy through thorium-based fuel cycles. Thorium is more abundant than uranium and produces less long-lived radioactive waste. Beyond energy, it has other uses, such as in certain high-temperature materials and coatings.

The survey, led by senior engineer, Fan Honghai with the National Key Laboratory of Uranium Resource Exploration in Beijing, identified 233 thorium-rich zones across China, clustered in five key belts from the inland Xinjiang Province to Guangdong on the southeastern coast.



© NASA

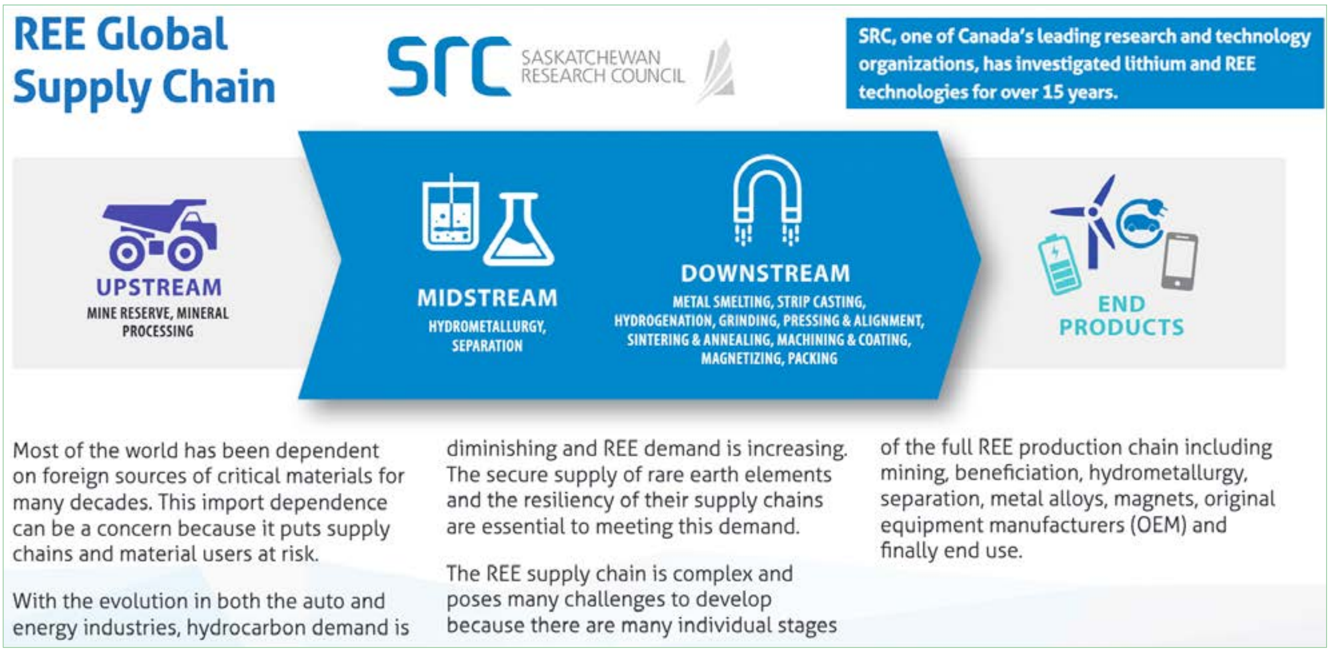
Satellite photo of Bayan Obo mines



This would mean that China has the world's largest thorium reserves, and would put it on top of the list, ahead of India, Australia, Brazil and the United States. If thorium does become an important natural resource, it would give an immense boost to China's already overwhelming economic power. And there's every chance that thorium will join the list of other critical minerals, because it can be used for nuclear fission; it's basically a vast supply of carbon dioxide-free energy. Creating rival supply chains is a mammoth undertaking—one that could take years, if not decades, to achieve. So, for now, China remains the undisputed heavyweight in the world of critical minerals.

The Global Impact: Power, Inequality, and the Climate Question

The scramble for minerals and REEs has had far-reaching implications for global politics, economics, and the environment. On the geopolitical front, it is increasing tensions between major powers, particularly the US and China, as



the competition for resources is not just about economic gain but also about strategic advantage. Control over critical minerals is seen as essential for maintaining technological and military superiority, and this has led to a new form of tension that can be described as "resource nationalism". Resource nationalism and protectionism are certainly on the rise with countries like Zimbabwe and Indonesia imposing export restrictions to encourage local processing. Chile has also made moves to nationalise its lithium industry, reflecting a global trend toward greater state control over critical resources.

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Donald Trump at a rally in Potterville, Michigan, August 2024

At the same time, the exploitation of these resources is deepening global inequalities. Many of the countries that possess rich mineral deposits and REEs are among the poorest and most politically unstable. The wealth generated from mining often benefits foreign corporations and local elites rather than the broader population, and in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the mining sector is rife with corruption, child labour, and environmental destruction. This situation has raised serious ethical questions about the true cost of the green energy transition, which relies heavily on these materials.

The environmental impact of mineral extraction is another major concern. Mining is an inherently destructive activity, often leading to deforestation, water pollution, and the displacement of communities. The processing of REEs, in particular, is highly toxic, generating large amounts of radioactive waste, and although these materials are essential for renewable energy technologies, their extraction and processing contribute to the very environmental degradation that green energy aims to diminish. Basically, we need to save the planet without wrecking it even more. That's the problem that must be solved.

Hidden Impact of Donald Trump's Mineral Strategy

Since taking office, President Trump has withdrawn the US from the Paris Climate Agreement, considered by many experts in the field, the most important climate pact. His administration has also started to remove or downplay references to the climate crisis across various government departments with websites of several key agencies, including the Department of State, Department of Defense and Department of Agriculture and Department of Transportation, seeing climate-related content removed. He also dismissed his predecessor's efforts in the field of green technology as nothing more than a *"green new scam"*. And he famously repeated the slogan *"Drill, baby drill"* during his 2024 presidential campaign as well as at his 2025 inaugural address.

Yet, despite his track record of downplaying climate concerns, the American president has shown a surprising eagerness to strike deals with world leaders on the issue of critical minerals. For instance, he has actively pursued agreements with Ukraine's president to secure access to these vital resources. His interest doesn't stop there—he's also turned his attention to Greenland and Canada, both of which are treasure troves of the minerals essential for modern technology and green energy. It seems that, even as he dismisses climate action, Trump recognises the strategic importance of these resources in shaping the future of energy and geopolitics.

In fact, since taking office, Trump has made securing critical minerals a top priority. As we have seen, these minerals are essential for a range of industries, particularly aerospace and defence, where they play a vital role in building advanced technologies. But there's another, perhaps surprising, use for these resources: they're also key ingredients in the production of green technology, such as wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles.

This raises an interesting question: could Trump's push to secure these minerals actually have a positive side effect? By focussing on building up the US's supply of critical minerals, might he help unlock the country's potential in the green technology sector? After all, having a steady, reliable source of these materials could give American companies the edge they need to innovate and compete in the growing global market for clean energy solutions. It's a twist that could turn a strategic move into a win for both national security and the environment.

Trump's close ally, Elon Musk, knows better than most just how crucial critical minerals are for the green energy revolution. The companies he leads—SpaceX and Tesla—depend heavily on these materials. Graphite is a key component in electric vehicles, lithium powers the batteries that keep them running, and nickel is essential for building rockets. Without these minerals, the cutting-edge technologies Musk is known for simply wouldn't exist. Dr Elizabeth Holley, an associate professor of mining engineering at the Colorado School of Mines, explains that while each country has its own list of what it considers "critical minerals," they typically include rare earth elements and metals like lithium. She points out that demand for these materials is skyrocketing. In 2023 alone, the demand for lithium surged by 30%, driven largely by the explosive growth of the clean energy and electric vehicle industries.

© COLORADO SCHOOL OF MINES

Dr Elizabeth Holley

© TESLA

An LFP battery such as this Tesla battery is a lithium iron phosphate battery that uses iron phosphate as the cathode material

According to the International Energy Agency, within the next 20 years, these sectors will account for nearly 90% of the demand for lithium, 70% for cobalt, and 40% for rare earth elements. The numbers paint a clear picture: the future of energy and transportation is deeply tied to these minerals. Musk himself has been so concerned about securing a steady supply of these resources that, three years ago, he took to Twitter to voice his frustrations. *"Price of lithium has gone to insane levels!"* he tweeted. *"Tesla might actually have to get into the mining & refining directly at scale, unless costs improve."* He added that while there's no shortage of lithium in the ground, the speed at which it's being extracted and processed is far too slow to meet the growing demand. This isn't just a challenge for Musk or Tesla; it's a global issue. As the world races toward a greener future, the ability to access and process these critical minerals will play a defining role in who leads the charge and who gets left behind.

The US Position in the Global Race

A report published by a US Government Select Committee in December 2023 highlighted the urgent need for the United States to rethink its approach to securing critical minerals and REEs. The report warned that relying too heavily on China for these resources poses serious risks. The committee cautioned that failing to act could have dire consequences, potentially bringing defence production to a standstill and disrupting the manufacturing of advanced technologies.

China's dominance in this market didn't happen by accident. It stemmed from the country's early

© LSE

Bob Ward

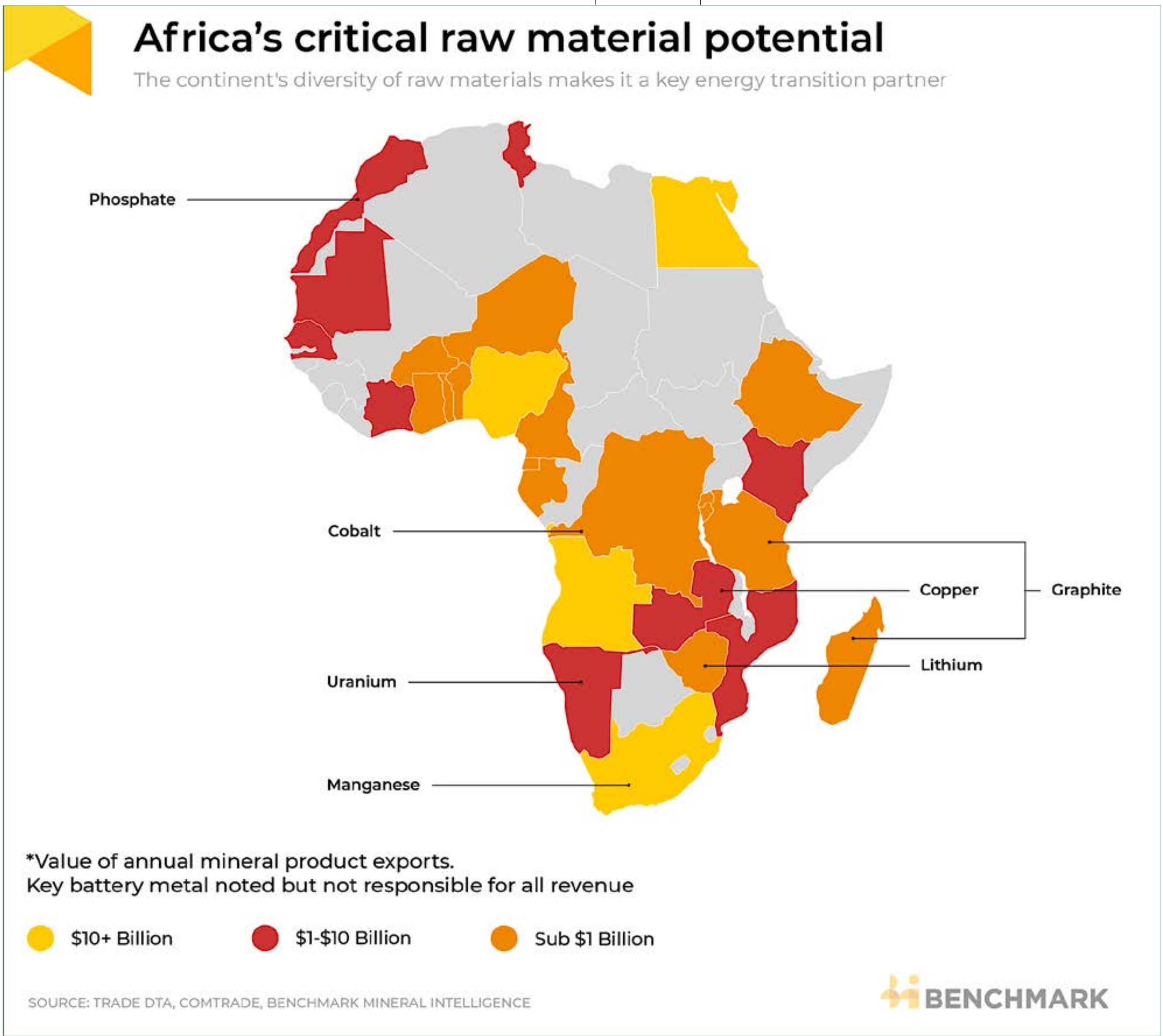
realisation of the economic potential tied to green technology. *"China made a decision about 10 years ago about where the trend was going and has strategically pursued the development of not just renewables but also electric vehicles. Now, it dominates the market,"* explained Bob Ward, policy director at the London School of Economics (LSE) Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. In short, China saw the future and acted on it, leaving other nations playing catch-up in the race for critical resources.

Trump on the horizon. Insiders working in the sector have hinted that discussions within the White House suggest he might soon issue a "Critical Minerals Executive Order" which could channel even more investment into securing the US's supply of these vital resources. While the exact details of the executive order are not yet known, experts familiar with the matter believe it could include steps to speed up mining activities within the US. This might involve streamlining the permit process to make it faster and easier for projects to get off the ground, as well as funding to build new processing plants. Such measures would aim to reduce the country's reliance on foreign sources and strengthen its position in the global race for critical minerals. If these plans come to fruition, they could mark a significant shift in how the US approaches its mineral supply chain, with potential significant ripple effects across industries and geopolitics.

The EU's Roadmap for Critical Minerals

The war in Ukraine served as a stark reminder to Europe about the risks of relying too heavily on Moscow for its gas. As a result, and with the world situation becoming increasingly unstable, the European Union now finds itself needing to carefully examine where it obtains crucial materials for its shift to cleaner energy, including of course, critical minerals and RRE's. The challenges are significant because of the EU's heavy reliance on China which dominates global processing for many of the required materials.

To address these challenges, the EU introduced the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) in 2023, a landmark policy that lays out clear goals for how the EU should handle critical raw materials. By 2030, the plan is for the EU to source at least 10 per cent of what it needs each year from its own mines, recycle 25 per cent, and process 40 per cent of its requirements within its borders. On top of that, the EU wants to avoid relying too much on any one country—no single nation should supply more than 65 per cent of the EU's annual needs. It's all about building a more self-sufficient and secure supply chain for the future.



The EU is also working to strengthen its supply chains by building strategic partnerships and making deals with trusted allies. These collaborations include countries like the United States, Japan, and South Korea. On top of that, the EU is exploring the idea of creating a Critical Raw Materials Club. This club would bring together like-minded nations to share investments and improve coordination, making it easier to secure the resources needed for the future. It's all about teamwork and finding smarter ways to reduce reliance on a handful of suppliers.

The EU is also boosting its ability to handle shocks in the supply chain by running stress tests and building up strategic reserves. It's pushing for sustainable investment and trade, while speeding up the use of cutting-edge technologies for critical raw materials. Efforts are also underway to create a more circular economy, recovering materials from mining waste and improving labour, human rights, and environmental standards. In short, the EU's strategy focuses on diversifying supplies, ramping up local production and recycling, and building sustainable, resilient supply chains through global partnerships.

In whichever direction we look around the world, the scramble for minerals and REEs stands out as a defining feature of 21st century geopolitics, with profound implications for the future of our planet. Superpowers like China, the US, and Russia are competing for control over these vital resources, but as the backbone of green technologies, defence systems, and advanced industries, these materials are not just economic assets but tools of power and influence. While China currently dominates the global supply chain, the US and its allies are working to reduce their reliance through diversification, innovation, and strategic partnerships. Meanwhile, resource-rich nations and regions, from Africa to the Arctic, find themselves at the centre of this high-stakes game. The challenge lies in balancing the urgent need for these resources with the ethical, environmental, and social costs of their extraction. As the competition intensifies, the choices made today will shape not only the future of global power dynamics but also the sustainability and equity of the world we leave for generations to come. The race for critical minerals is more than a geopolitical contest—it's a test of humanity's ability to collaborate in the face of shared challenges.

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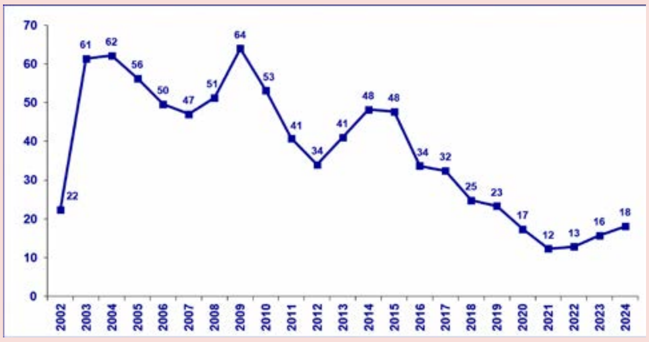
NEWS IN BRIEF

NUMBER OF COUNTERFEIT EURO BANKNOTES CONTINUES TO BE LOW IN 2024

- 554,000 counterfeit euro banknotes withdrawn in 2024 representing, by historical standards, small proportion of total banknotes in circulation
- €20 and €50 most counterfeited denominations, accounting for over 75% of all counterfeit notes withdrawn
- Euro banknotes remain safe and trusted means of payment
- Authenticity of euro banknotes can be verified using "feel, look and tilt" method

Some 554,000 counterfeit euro banknotes were withdrawn from circulation in 2024. The likelihood of receiving a counterfeit is low, as the number of counterfeits is very small in proportion to genuine euro banknotes in circulation. In 2024, 18 counterfeits were detected per million genuine banknotes in circulation, which is very low compared with the levels observed following the launch of the euro (see chart).



Number of counterfeit euro banknotes detected annually per million genuine notes in circulation

Although the proportion is very small, the actual number of counterfeits has increased compared with the past few years, when the number of counterfeits was exceptionally low following the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the number of counterfeits remains lower than in the years leading up to the pandemic.

€20 and €50 denominations continued to be the most commonly counterfeited, together accounting for more than 75% of the total (see table). 97.8% of the counterfeits were found in euro area countries, while 1.3% were found in non-euro area EU Member States and 0.9% in other parts of the world.

Breakdown of counterfeits by denomination in 2024

Denomination	€5	€10	€20	€50	€100	€200	€500
Percentage of total	1.3	6.8	36.0	43.6	7.9	3.8	0.6

The public does not need to be concerned about counterfeiting but should remain vigilant. Most counterfeits are easy to detect, as they have either no security features or only very poor imitations of the existing features. Notes can be checked using the simple "feel, look and tilt" method described on our dedicated security features web page or on the websites of the euro area national central banks. The Eurosystem also helps professional cash handlers by ensuring that successfully tested machines for handling and processing banknotes can reliably identify counterfeits and withdraw them from circulation.

If you receive a suspicious banknote, compare it side by side with one you know to be genuine. If your suspicions are confirmed, please contact the police or – depending on national practice – your national central bank or your own retail or commercial bank. The Eurosystem actively supports law enforcement agencies in the fight against currency counterfeiting.

Judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union

AIR PASSENGER RIGHTS: A BOARDING PASS MAY BE SUFFICIENT TO PROVE A CONFIRMED RESERVATION ON A FLIGHT

AI generated image

Payment by a third party of the price of the package tour, including a flight, does not exclude the right to compensation in the event of long delay of a flight

An air carrier offering charter flights concluded a contract with a tour operator. Under that contract, the carrier operated, on specific dates, flights for which that tour operator, after paying for the flights, sold tickets to air passengers.

Two air passengers participated in a package tour, including a flight from Tenerife to Warsaw, the arrival of which was delayed by more than 22 hours. The contract relating to the package tour was concluded between a third company, on behalf of those passengers, and that tour operator.

The passengers concerned claimed compensation from the air carrier under EU law. The latter refused to pay that compensation. It argued that those passengers are not in possession of a confirmed and paid reservation for that flight and copies of boarding passes are not sufficient in that regard. According to that carrier, the package tour in which those passengers participated was paid for by a third company on preferential terms. Consequently, they travelled free of charge or at a reduced fare, which excludes their right to payment of compensation.

The Polish court, before which those passengers brought an action, referred the matter to the Court of Justice. It wishes to ascertain whether, contrary to the position of the air carrier, those passengers should be compensated under EU law.

The Court has replied in the affirmative.

It considers that a boarding pass may constitute other proof that the reservation has been accepted and registered by the air carrier or tour operator for the flight concerned. Thus, apart from in abnormal circumstances, passengers who presented themselves for check-in and who took the flight concerned, with a boarding pass for that flight, must be regarded as having a confirmed reservation on that flight.

Moreover, the Court does not consider the passengers in question to have travelled free of charge or at a reduced fare not available directly or indirectly to the public. Such a situation would arise only if it were the air carrier itself which granted them such a possibility. Accordingly, the fact that a third party paid the price of the package tour to the tour operator and that the latter, in turn, paid the price of the flight to the air carrier in accordance with market conditions does not prevent the passengers from enjoying the right to compensation.

The Court also states that it is for the air carrier to demonstrate, in accordance with the rules laid down by national law, that a passenger has travelled free of charge or at such a reduced fare.

U.S. MILITARY BETS BIG ON AI

In the tech world, quantum computing and artificial intelligence are set to be the next big game-changers. China recently revealed its new superconducting chip, Zuchongzhi 3.0, and now the U.S. is stepping up its game by investing more in these key areas. In March, the White House announced it is pushing Congress to double the funding for AI research, boosting it from $973million to almost $2 billion. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense is teaming up with a startup called Scale AI for the "Thunderforge" project, which will use AI to help make military decisions faster.

AI is increasingly being used in military systems. While many big tech companies avoided having their innovations used for military purposes, they're now changing their tune. Take OpenAI, for instance—it once banned military use of its tech but has recently updated its rules.

In December 2024, OpenAI, led by Sam Altman, announced plans to create advanced AI tools for national security. They've teamed up with Anduril, a defence tech company started by Palmer Luckey, to boost U.S. anti-drone systems and better detect airborne threats in real time.

This shift started a year ago when OpenAI changed its policy to allow military partnerships. Adding the former head of the National Security Agency, General Paul Nakasone to its board was another big move. A recent internal report also shows that national security is now a top priority for the company.

Anthropic has joined the trend too. In November 2024, they teamed up with Palantir Technologies to give the U.S. military special access to their AI. At the same time, Palantir and Anduril, two big names in defence tech, started a group to make sure the U.S. stays ahead in military AI.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Cyberdefence

"Thunderforge": a strategic programme?

These recent moves show a big change in policy: Silicon Valley is now teaming up with the Pentagon. A good example is Scale AI, a startup that supplies training data to big names like OpenAI, Google, Microsoft, and Meta. They're set to play a key role in the Thunderforge project. On March 5, they signed a deal with the Department of Defense, taking another step towards bringing AI into the military.

Run by the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), Thunderforge plans to use AI to make military decision-making faster and more efficient. Big tech players like Microsoft and Anduril are part of the project, which could include things like simulations, mission planning, helping with strategic decisions, and automating some military tasks.

The project will start with the U.S. military's Indo-Pacific and European commands and then slowly roll out to other areas.

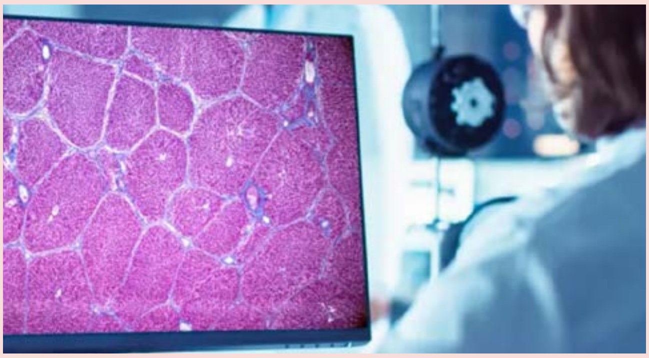
EMA QUALIFIES FIRST ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOL TO DIAGNOSE INFLAMMATORY LIVER DISEASE (MASH) IN BIOPSY SAMPLES

Artificial intelligence tool reliably identifies disease severity and reduces variability

European Medecines Agency ‘s human medicines committee (CHMP) has issued the first Qualification Opinion (QO) on an innovative development methodology based on artificial intelligence (AI). The tool, called AIM-NASH, helps pathologists analyse liver biopsy scans to identify the severity of MASH (metabolic dysfunction associated steatohepatitis; formerly known as non-alcoholic steatohepatitis NASH) in clinical trials.

MASH is a condition where fat builds up in the liver, causing inflammation, irritation and scarring over time, without significant alcohol use or other reasons for liver injury. MASH is linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol, and belly fat. If untreated, it can lead to advanced liver disease.

The AIM-NASH tool is expected to enhance the reliability and efficiency of clinical trials for new MASH treatments by reducing variability in measuring disease activity (inflammation and fibrosis).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Following a public consultation, CHMP issued an opinion to qualify this method, which means that the committee can accept evidence generated by the tool as scientifically valid in future applications. CHMP agreed that the tool can increase reproducibility and repeatability in assessments for new MASH treatments. It can help researchers obtain clearer evidence on the benefits of new treatments in clinical trials that include fewer patients. Ultimately, this can bring effective treatments to patients faster.

Testing new MASH treatments often relies on liver biopsies, where small pieces of liver tissue are taken to confirm inflammation and scarring. These biopsies are the gold standard for demonstrating the efficacy of new, investigational medicines. However, high variability in MASH/NASH clinical trials is a challenge, as specialists who review biopsy samples may not always agree on the severity of inflammation or scarring.

The evidence submitted to CHMP shows that AIM-NASH biopsy readings, verified by one expert pathologist, can reliably determine MASH disease activity with less variability than the current standard used in clinical trials, which relies on a consensus by three independent pathologists.

AIM-NASH is an AI-based system that employs a machine learning model trained on more than 100,000 annotations from 59 pathologists who assessed over 5,000 liver biopsies across nine large clinical trials.

The qualified tool is 'locked,' which means the machine learning model cannot be modified or replaced. CHMP encourages the optimisation of the model, acknowledging that major changes may require re-qualification of the tool.

All EMA's activities on AI are coordinated under the multiannual AI workplan by EMA and the Heads of Medicines Agencies, aiming to ensure safe and responsible use of AI across the European medicines regulatory network.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT APPROVES NEW SUPPORT PLAN FOR MOLDOVA

- New €1.9 billion facility to accelerate Moldova's socio-economic reforms, strengthen resilience, and advance EU integration
- Designed to mitigate the profound impact on Moldova of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine
- Agreement secures more grants, accelerated funding and robust oversight by Parliament

The European Parliament gave its green light to a new support facility for Moldova, focusing on better financing and democratic oversight.

MEPs approved a provisional agreement reached by Parliament and Council negotiators on the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova. Through grants and low-interest loans, the Facility seeks to help Moldova deal with the major challenges it is facing, in particular the profound impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on the country's security, economy and people. The instrument should also strengthen Moldova's resilience against Russian hybrid attacks and interference targeting its democratic processes and institutions.

Key improvements secured in negotiations between MEPs and Council:

Increased grant-based support: negotiators agreed to allocate €520 million in grants – a €100 million increase compared to the initial proposal – alongside €1.5 billion in low-interest loans. This adjustment will enable Moldova to reform without accumulating unsustainable debt.

Accelerated funding access: the Facility envisages 18% pre-financing of total support, up from the originally-proposed 7%, enabling rapid deployment of resources to boost energy security, anti-corruption infrastructure and public service modernisation.

Administrative capacity building: 20% of grant funds will be earmarked to shore up Moldova's institutions through digital governance systems, civil service training, and judicial reforms – prerequisites for effective EU fund management.

Reinforced oversight framework: to ensure full parliamentary scrutiny, the agreement establishes a dialogue between Parliament and the Commission to review implementation progress regularly.


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The agreement also allows for voluntary contributions by other donors, such as international financing organisations, to offer Moldova additional financial support. Finally, the Facility cannot support activities or measures that would undermine the country's sovereignty or territorial integrity.

MEPs approved the Facility with 499 votes, 117 against and 44 abstentions.

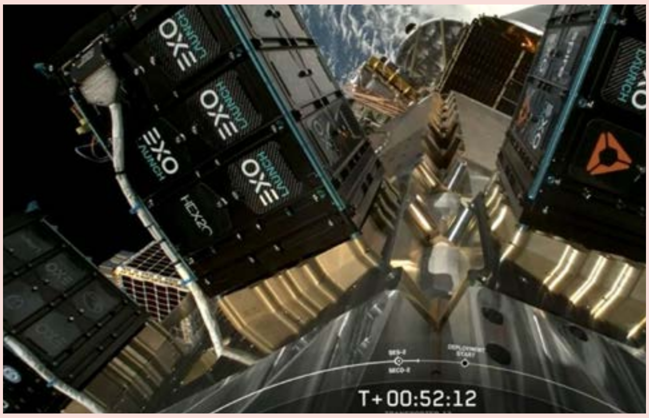
Quotes

Siegfried Mureșan (EPP, Romania), co-rapporteur for the Committee on Budgets, said: "Given recent geopolitical developments, the EU is ready to act. With today's vote on the €1.9 billion Moldova Reform & Growth Facility, we are boosting pre-financing from 7% to 18% and adding an extra €100 million in grants. This is our commitment to doing more and acting swiftly to support Moldova and our neighbours in these challenging times."

Background

Between 2025 and 2027, the Facility will give Moldova access to a maximum of €1.885 billion (in current prices), which includes up to €1.5 billion in concessional loans. The Facility also provides €520 million in grants, of which 385 million is in the form of non-repayable financial support and €135 million set aside to provision the loans, retained in the EU budget as a guarantee for investors. The Reform and Growth Facility is part of a broader EU Growth Plan for Moldova, aimed at doubling its economy within a decade while fostering socio-economic stability. The instrument is modelled on similar initiatives in other EU candidate regions, such as the Western Balkans Facility. It represents a significant step forward in Moldova's path towards EU membership.

EUROPEAN SATELLITE LAUNCHED TO TEST SPACE-BASED AIR TRAFFIC COMMUNICATIONS



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IOD-1

SESAR JU partner, Startical has launched its first satellite, IOD-1, as part of ECHOES, a SESAR Digital Sky Demonstrator showing how satellite-based communications can enhance air traffic management (ATM). Co-funded by the EU through the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency and supported by the SESAR Joint Undertaking, ECHOES aims to improve flight efficiency, safety, and sustainability.

Manufactured by GomSpace, IOD-1 is equipped with VHF and ADS-B capabilities to test real-time communication between aircraft and air traffic control from space. The project seeks to address coverage gaps over remote and oceanic regions, where real-time voice and data links are currently unavailable. By enabling continuous aircraft monitoring and optimised routing, this technology could reduce fuel consumption and CO_2 emissions.

A second demonstrator, IOD-2, is also set for testing. Both satellites will undergo trials in the South Atlantic region, with the involvement of air navigation service providers from Europe, Africa, and South America. The results will inform the potential development of a scalable satellite network, supporting more resilient and efficient air traffic operations.

Aircraft flying over the ocean no longer appear on ground-based radars once they are about 350 kilometres from the coast. To monitor and stay in touch with these flights, controllers today rely on high frequency radio and data link communications, through which aircraft can also report their position. While these technologies allow controllers to maintain contact and assure safe separation, their high levels of latency mean that communications is slow and results in significant time lapses. It also means that to ensure safety, controllers must increase separation minima between the aircraft.

Although global navigation satellite systems and space-based automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast (ADS-B) already exist for some parts of the world, there is still limited use of satellite-based technologies for communication, which in turn limits airspace capacity and flight efficiency.

The overall objective of ECHOES is to demonstrate the feasibility of space-based solution for very high frequency (VHF) communications (voice and datalink) in air traffic management. Building on initial technical proofs of concept carried out by the VOICE project, the ECHOES Digital Sky Demonstrator will investigate some key functionalities, such as inter-satellite links, on-board processing of data in the satellite or simultaneous transmission and reception of VHF communications. In addition, the Demonstrator will focus on operational aspects of the technologies will also comprise operational topics, involve more stakeholders (airlines and ANSPs) and contribute to the regulatory and standardisation of the space-based VHF technology based on the analysis of end-to-end system performances.

In order to provide the required services and test this technology, in addition to deploying all the needed ground infrastructure, ECHOES will develop, manufacture and launch two satellites in a low earth orbit. These satellites will serve as the platform to test the technologies and services aimed at improving the air navigation services.

NETWORK SMUGGLING MIGRANTS BETWEEN SPAIN AND FRANCE BUSTED IN MARSEILLE

The criminal network is suspected of smuggling over 1 700 migrants from Spain to France

Europol supported the French National Police (Police Nationale/OLTIM) and the Spanish National Police (Policía Nacional) in dismantling an organised criminal network smuggling migrants from Spain to France.

The investigation was initiated in November 2022 and targeted individuals, based in Marseille, suspected of smuggling migrants between Spain and France. Europol's analysis of the operational data made it possible to identify additional suspects linked to this criminal organisation and further advance the case.

The action day on 16 March 2025 led to:

- 19 arrests
- 17 house searches
- Seizures including a semi-rigid boat, 4 vehicles and about EUR 20 000 in cash

Over 1 700 migrants smuggled in nearly 500 operations

Migrants were picked up near train stations in Catalonia, Spain and then transported to the French city of Marseille. Each member of the criminal network had a specific task. Some recruited migrants, others arranged transport and some provided temporary accommodation. During car smuggling operations, the criminal network used forerunner vehicles to detect potential law enforcement checkpoints along the route to help them bypass police or customs controls.

The smuggling network operated in a structured way to prepare and execute the smuggling activities. The criminal network charged between EUR 150 and EUR 250 per migrant, depending on the departure point and destination. The suspects smuggled migrants from the Maghreb region, but also from the Middle East, mainly from Syria and from Sub-Saharan Africa. Between May 2023 and August 2024, more than 500 smuggling operations were organised with an estimated turnover of between EUR 250 000 and EUR 427 000 from about 1 700 migrants transported to France.

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Europol facilitated the exchange of information and provided operational coordination and analytical support. During the action day, Europol deployed an expert to France to enable the real-time exchange of information and cross-check operational information against Europol's databases to provide leads to investigators in the field.

THE US FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION ESTABLISHES COUNCIL ON NATIONAL SECURITY TO FIGHT FOREIGN THREATS, FOCUS ON CHINA.

The FCC has established a new Council for National Security within the FCC. The Council will leverage the full range of the Commission's regulatory, investigatory, and enforcement authorities to promote America's national security and counter foreign adversaries, particularly the threats posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

These actions are attributed to Salt Typhoon, an advanced persistent threat actor thought to be affiliated with China's Ministry of State Security (MSS). The group has engaged in prominent cyber espionage operations, particularly focussing on infiltrating and compromising multiple U.S. telecommunications networks.

"Today, the country faces a persistent and constant threat from foreign adversaries, particularly the CCP," said Chairman Carr. "These bad actors are always exploring ways to breach our networks, devices, and technology ecosystem. It is more important than ever that the FCC remain vigilant and protect Americans and American companies from these threats. Because these threats now cut across a range of sectors that the FCC regulates, it is important that the FCC's national security efforts pull resources from a variety of FCC organizations."

The Council will have a 3-part goal: (1) Reduce the American technology and telecommunications sectors' trade and supply chain dependencies on foreign adversaries; (2) Mitigate America's vulnerabilities to cyberattacks, espionage, and surveillance by foreign adversaries; and (3) Ensure the U.S. wins the strategic competition with China over critical technologies, such as 5G and 6G, AI, satellites and space, quantum computing, robotics and autonomous systems, and the Internet of Things.

AI GENERATED IMAGE

The Council will be comprised of representatives from eight Bureaus and Offices within the FCC, fostering cross-agency collaboration and information sharing. The Council will facilitate the Chairman's ability to implement a comprehensive national security agenda and facilitate the Commission's engagement with national security partners across the Executive Branch and in Congress.

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EU SEAS: POLLUTING SHIPS CAN STILL SLIP THROUGH THE NET

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Oil spill response volunteers clean a beach in Spain

A report published by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) sounds the alarm: ships and vessels continue to pollute EU maritime waters. Even though EU legislation is improving and is sometimes even tougher than international rules, implementation by the 22 coastal EU member states is far from satisfactory. Actions to prevent, tackle, track and penalise various types of ship-source pollution are not up to the task, the auditors warn.

EU legislation incorporates relevant international rules – sometimes with even stricter requirements – in areas such as oil pollution, shipwrecks, and sulphur emissions. However, the EU auditors also warn of gaps that the EU still needs to fill, particularly as regards pollution risks. For instance, it is still possible for shipowners to circumvent their recycling obligations by adopting a non-EU flag before dismantling their ships. The data speak for themselves: while 1 in every 7 ships in the world was flying the EU flag in 2022, the figure for the end-of-life fleet was 50% lower. Similarly, EU rules on containers lost at sea are far from watertight. First, there is no guarantee that all losses are declared; and second, very few containers are recovered.

"Pollution at sea caused by ships remains a major problem, and despite a number of improvements in recent years, EU action is not really able to steer us out of troubled waters", said Nikolaos Milionis, the ECA Member responsible for the audit. "In fact, with over three-quarters of European seas estimated to have a pollution problem, the zero-pollution ambition to protect people's health, biodiversity and fish stocks is still not within sight."

The auditors also note that EU countries underuse tools – such as a network of standby oil-spill response vessels and drone detection – with which the EU provided them to help tackle ship-source pollution. A striking example is the European Satellite Oil Monitoring Service (CleanSeaNet) for surveillance and early detection of possible pollution incidents. In 2022-2023, it identified a total of 7 731 possible spills in EU seas, mostly in Spain (1462), Greece (1367) and Italy (1188). However, the EU auditors found that member states acted on fewer than half of these alerts and confirmed pollution in only 7 % of cases, one reason for which was the time that elapsed between the satellite image being taken and the pollution actually being checked.

The auditors also found that member state authorities do not carry out enough preventive inspections of ships, and penalties for polluters remain low. Those responsible for illegally discharging polluting substances into the sea rarely face effective or dissuasive penalties, and prosecutions are rare. Similarly, few member states report breaches relating to the retrieval of abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear.

Overall, the auditors conclude that neither the European Commission nor the member states fully track the EU money used to combat seawater pollution. They do not have an overview of the results actually achieved, or of how they could be replicated on a larger scale. At the same time, the audit reveals that the EU has difficulties monitoring ship-source pollution. The actual amount of oil spills, contaminants and marine litter from ships remains largely unknown, as does the identity of polluters.

HOW THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION MONITORS EU FUNDS GRANTED TO GREECE IN THE CONTEXT OF BORDER MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

The case concerned how the European Commission ensures fundamental rights compliance in the context of EU funds granted to Greece for border management. The complainants, several non-governmental organisations, raised concerns that the Commission had failed effectively to monitor and evaluate EU-funded border management activities, against a background of persistent allegations of serious human rights violations by the Greek authorities.

The inquiry identified areas that the Commission should address to improve how it monitors and ensures compliance with fundamental rights in this area. However, as the Commission is currently conducting its own assessment of one of the individual cases of alleged fundamental rights violations raised in this inquiry, and will also assess Greece's spending under the relevant programme, the Ombudsman closed the case, finding that no further inquiries were justified. She nevertheless set out some suggestions to the Commission to address the issues identified in the course of the inquiry.

In particular, the Ombudsman urged the Commission to put in place guidelines for assessing compliance with fundamental rights throughout the course of the programme implementation, notably regarding the related 'enabling condition' for accessing funds. As part of these guidelines, the Commission should establish criteria to determine under what circumstances it will withhold or suspend EU funds for non-compliance with fundamental rights and the related funding condition, and publish these criteria. In its assessment of credible complaints about fundamental rights violations and of the overall Greek programme, the Commission should consider whether Greece continues to fulfil the fundamental rights condition related to the funds in question. The Ombudsman also made suggestions about the transparency of the monitoring process and measures to strengthen the involvement of civil society.

A Chinese cargo ship at Port of Rotterdam, The Netherlands

NAVIGATING POWER

Is China's Maritime Dominance a Threat?

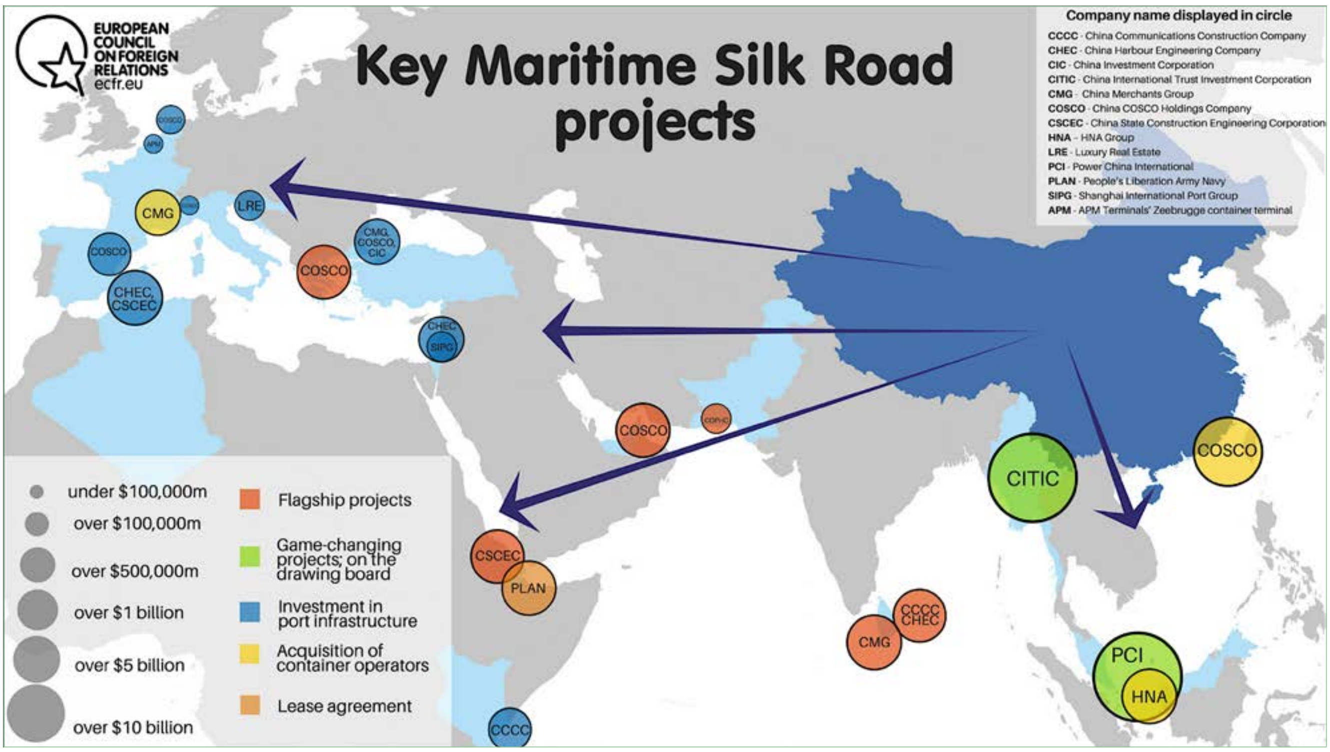
There are lots of poems about the sea and sailors. My grandfather was a sailor, as an officer in the British Royal Navy, although I never knew him because he died before I was born. I've known others, though, who have sailed the Wild Blue Yonder for a living. As a result, there have been a great many poems written about "life on the ocean waves and a home on the rolling deep", my personal favourite being Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", about the crewman on a whaling vessel who shoots dead an albatross, thus bringing bad fortune (and death, of course) to his ship and all his crew mates. Just goes to illustrate the dangers of crossbows and nautical superstition.

Go back three millennia and the eastern Mediterranean was popular as a watery transport route for such people as the Hittites, the Mycenaeans and the Egyptians, among others, until the waters were overrun by a violent bunch known as "the sea peoples", which suggests they did quite a lot of sailing, too, in order to get to the places they wanted to attack and rob. Until they were ultimately defeated, this group, whoever they were, attacked the various empires and mighty cities bordering the Mediterranean and, despite ultimately losing, they weakened the naval powers of the large and important nations of that time, which never fully recovered. Although nobody knows for sure the identity of these late Bronze Age marauders, they certainly caused a lot of fear and havoc Seagoing powers of today might be well-advised to look carefully at China and its nautical ambitions, especially if transportation by sea is vital to their economies.

So just what is China up to today? Well, Xi Jinping, who is General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and who has led his country rather successfully since 2012, has ambitions to expand his influence further, and who can blame him? Certainly, China's maritime influence has been increasing quite dramatically. At the time of Barack Obama's first inauguration as President, Chinese influence only reached a bare 2% in the world, whereas now it stands at more than 11%, placing China second only to the United States in terms of Overseas Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI). What's more, in three of the last five years Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Europe has exceeded the sum invested in the United States. Additionally, China has been buying up European ports, along with political and commercial influence. And why not? After all, three millennia ago the Eastern Mediterranean was already a popular route for anyone who reckoned they could possibly turn a profit there, so there is potential for a well-run China to do so, too.

In 2013, Beijing inaugurated an ambitious and far-reaching project known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that includes a wide-ranging strategy designed to extend China's economic reach, investments, and influence westwards, with a particular focus on controlling strategic seaports capable of handling large volumes of trade. Across the Indo-Pacific region, Chinese firms have acquired substantial stakes—and in some cases, complete ownership—of ports that serve both commercial and, potentially, military purposes. This network, often described as a "string of pearls," stretches across the Indian Ocean, connecting critical maritime bottlenecks like the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea to the Suez Canal, leading to the Mediterranean.

In Europe, China has already established itself as a major force in the operations of key North Sea ports. For instance, it holds a 35% stake in Euromax, the operator of Rotterdam, Europe's largest and busiest port. It also owns 20% of Antwerp, the continent's second-busiest port, and



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Partial view of the Port of Rotterdam

has full ownership of Zeebrugge, the world's largest roll-on/roll-off vehicle handling facility. These investments are a clear sign of China's growing influence in global maritime infrastructure.

However, influence doesn't always require total ownership. Take the port of Hamburg, Europe's third-largest port, as an example. Here, the volume of Chinese goods passing through exceeds the combined traffic from all other countries. A controversy was sparked in 2017, when China's Communications Construction Company was awarded a contract to build a new container terminal capable of accommodating Ultra Large Container Vessels (ULCVs). German and other European bidders accused the process of being unfair, highlighting the tensions that can arise as China expands its presence in critical global infrastructure projects. This mix of investment, trade dominance, and strategic port acquisitions illustrates the ways in which China is becoming a key player in global trade and international politics.

The European Union has stepped up its measures aimed at excluding Chinese investment from Europe's ports, although results suggest that Europe has benefitted from them. Research shows that European ports benefitting from Chinese investments saw increases in their container shipments, not only with ports in China but also with ports in other countries. Ports that have benefitted especially include those of Piraeus, Antwerp, Rotterdam, Barcelona and Le Havre. Other research has shown that inward investment from China has helped to rebalance shipping activities in Europe to the advantage of Mediterranean ports which have developed into transshipment and gateway hubs with heterogeneous profiles (that's what the report says, anyway). Attempts to stem this source of inward investment would cost Europe dearly and hamper the growth of its ports.

When we talk about the countries that host seaports, it's clear that the benefits of Chinese investments go far beyond just the immediate economic and political gains that come from partnering with one of the world's leading economies. China's influence in the global seaport industry is nothing short of remarkable. Over the past twenty years, China has dominated the world in the trade of goods, and its container handling capacity have ranked at the very top in global terms. In fact, when you look at the list of the world's top 20 ports in terms of trade flow or container handling, 13 of them are located in mainland China. This isn't just a proof of China's economic might—it's also a reflection of how critical these ports have become to the global economy.

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A COSCO Shipping Company vessel in the Port of Antwerp


© POOL

Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Chinese President, Xi Jinping tour COSCO's facilities at the Piraeus Container Terminal in the Port of Piraeus, Greece

One of the key players behind China's growing presence in the global port industry is China COSCO Shipping. This giant shipping company, which started as a state-owned enterprise in 1961, began making its mark internationally in the late 1980s. By 2000, it had become the first Chinese company to join the World Economic Forum, a clear sign of its rising global influence. Over the years, COSCO has invested in numerous ports around the world, and its strategic partnerships have been crucial to its success. For instance, its connection with ONE, one of the three major container shipping alliances, has been a game-changer. Allowing a carrier like COSCO to have a stake in a container terminal is one of the best ways to ensure that the port attracts more ships and higher volumes of cargo. Today, alongside China Merchants Port—another major Chinese maritime financial group—COSCO handles roughly 24% of the world's total container capacity, measured in TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units). That's a massive chunk of the global market.

In Europe, China's presence in the port industry spans seven countries, with Germany standing out as its main European partner. The trade volume between China and Germany alone is staggering, amounting to nearly €300 billion annually. What's interesting is how China has approached its investments in Europe. In most cases, it has acquired minority or majority stakes in container terminal operations, rather than outright ownership. The exception to this rule is Greece, where China was given the unique opportunity to purchase a majority stake in the managing entity of the Port of Piraeus. This deal has allowed China to play a decisive role in shaping the port's present and future, making it a standout example of Chinese influence in European maritime infrastructure.

Since 2008, the volume of containers handled there has skyrocketed to record-breaking levels, and its connectivity within the liner shipping network has grown exponentially. Today, Piraeus isn't just a port—it's a major transhipment hub, a busy gateway that connects Europe, Asia, and beyond. In fact, it's now the fifth-largest container port in all of Europe, trailing only behind giants like Rotterdam, Antwerp-Bruges, and Valencia. And if we narrow our focus to the Mediterranean, Piraeus holds the third spot, right after Valencia and Tangier Med in Morocco.

What's particularly interesting here is the role of Chinese investments in this success. It's not just Piraeus that's seen Chinese

Chinese investments in European Ports

Port (country)	Type of Investment	Shares	Investor	Year
Antwerp (Belgium)	Container Terminal	25%	China Cosco Shipping	2004
Piraeus (Greece)	Container Terminal	Concession	China Cosco Shipping	2008
Marseille (France)	Terminal Link	49%	China Merchant Group Intl	2013
Zeebrugge (Belgium)	Container Terminal	24%	China Cosco Shipping	2014
Rotterdam (The Netherlands)	Container Terminal	35%	China Cosco Shipping	2016
Vado Ligure (Italy)	Container Terminal	40%	China Cosco Shipping	2016
Vado Ligure (Italy)	Container Terminal	9.9%	Qingdao Port Intl	2016
Piraeus (Greece)	Purchase of Port Authority	67%	China Cosco Shipping	2016
Zeebrugge (Belgium)	Container Terminal	76%	China Cosco Shipping	2017
Bilbao (Spain)	Container Terminal	51%	China Cosco Shipping	2017
Valencia (Spain)	Container Terminal	51%	China Cosco Shipping	2017
Hamburg (Germany)	Container Terminal	24.99%	China Cosco Shipping	2023

www.porteconomics.eu/chinas-investments-in-seaports-along-the-maritime-silk-road

involvement—every single one of these major container ports, from Rotterdam to Valencia to Tangier Med, has benefitted from Chinese capital and expertise. This isn't a coincidence; it's a clear reflection of China's strategic vision to embed itself in the global shipping network. By investing in these key ports, China isn't just boosting its own trade capabilities—it's also helping to modernise and expand critical infrastructure that keeps the world's economy moving.

All of this highlights just how intricately connected China has become to the global port industry. It's not just about money or trade—it's about building connections, forging alliances, and creating a network that spans the globe. For the countries hosting these ports, the benefits are clear: access to one of the world's most dynamic economies, increased trade volumes, and a stronger position in the global market. And for China, it's a strategic move that solidifies its role as a key player in shaping the future of global trade.

As far as other parts of the world are concerned, it's truly staggering to see how far-reaching China's influence has become. Take, for instance, projects like the Melaka Gateway in Malaysia and Port Darwin in Australia—both of which are key examples of China's strategic investments in maritime infrastructure. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. If we zoom in on the Bay of Bengal, we see a strong Chinese presence in countries like Myanmar, where they're involved in the Kyaukpyu port, as well as in Sri Lanka, where they've played a major role in developing Hambantota and Port Colombo. Over in Bangladesh, the bustling Chittagong port also bears the mark of Chinese investment and expertise.

Moving over to Southwest Asia, the list of Chinese-backed port projects grows even longer. In Pakistan, the strategically significant Gwadar port is a cornerstone of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Over in the Middle East, China has made its mark in Saudi Arabia with Jeddah Port, in the UAE with Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi, and in Oman, where they've also established a presence.

Heading down to Eastern Africa, China's footprint is equally impressive. Countries like Kenya, Sudan, and Tanzania have all seen significant Chinese involvement in their port infrastructure, helping to boost trade and connectivity in the region. Over in the Maghreb, nations like Algeria and Morocco have also welcomed Chinese investments in their ports. And if we look at the non-European Mediterranean, the story continues—from Egypt, where China is involved in ports like Damietta and Suez, to Turkey, where they've made strategic moves in Kumport.


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China Merchants Port Holdings Company (Kumport) in Ambarli, Turkey

What's fascinating here is how these investments aren't just about building ports—they're about creating a vast, interconnected network that ties China to some of the most strategically important regions in the world. For the countries involved, these projects often bring much-needed infrastructure development and economic opportunities. But for China, it's about becoming an important part of global commerce, ensuring that its influence is felt far beyond its own shores. It's a bold strategy, and one that's reshaping the world's maritime landscape.

Meanwhile, the tariffs being imposed by the Trump administration will have global repercussions, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), largely because of the 20% increases in tariffs imposed by the United States on imports from China, which have in turn led to retaliatory action on the part of Beijing. Trump's new tariffs, according to the OECD, will slow growth in China but also in several other places. The OECD predicts that China's economy will grow by 4.8% this year, slowing to 4.4% next year. The OECD blames this on the increase in US tariffs and the resulting if inevitable repercussions. Some experts have predicted this skirmishing with economics could lead to a protracted trade war that nobody seems to be addressing or even showing a potential interested in trying to address.

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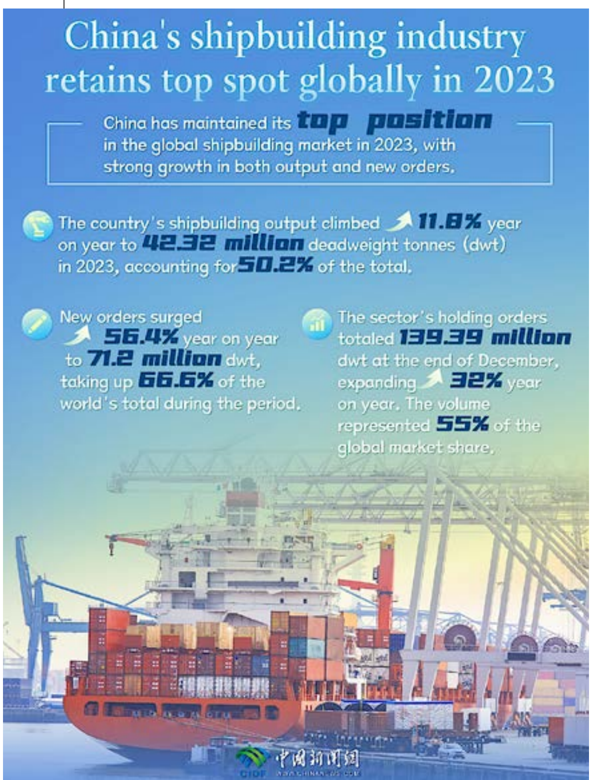
US President, Donald Trump during a campaign rally

Inevitably, Europe gets caught up in this complicated and stupid game. China is, after all, one of the EU's largest trading partners after the United States, although the absolute volume dropped in 2023-24. Even so, China was the third largest partner for EU exports of goods, taking 8.3%. Imports have recently declined, but at 21.3% are still well ahead of the United States on 13.7%. According to the EU, it views China as "a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival", and there is concern in Europe over the systemic imbalances that characterise China's economy. China's industrial policies have been described as unfair in competitive terms, "with what Europeans view as unfair support for the manufacturing sector", while some say European businesses cannot compete fairly because the playing field is too uneven. Another aspect that worries Europeans is that China seems to be increasingly determined to be self-sufficient. In January 2023, EU exports to China stood at €19.2-billion, falling to €16.8-billion by December 2024. Is it a pattern or just a natural fluctuation? Looking at imports from China, they stood at €46.4-billion in January 2023 but had dropped to €35.6-billion by January 2024. As I recall from my economics lessons very many years ago, fluctuating figures for imports and exports among trading nations tended to reflect the fast-changing politics of the time. They still do.

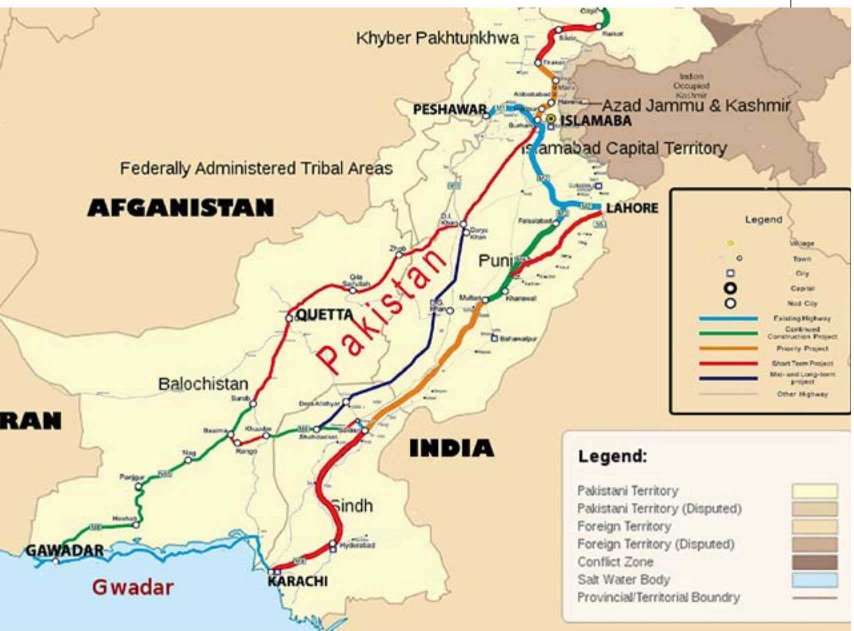
Even so, a number of European companies seeking to compete with Chinese rivals have argued that China's business environment has become too "politicised", which probably doesn't surprise you. They also say that there has been no easing of the various regulatory obstacles that exist, while there is (they say) a complicated and "non-transparent" legal framework on cybersecurity, as well as restrictive rules on the cross-border flow (or leak, in some cases) of data. Even so, and despite these many and varied obstacles, the EU says it's committed to "de-risking" in its dealings with China, not cutting itself off.

Trade between the two remains important for both, and that means trade in many different commodities, from agricultural produce and raw materials, such as chemicals and naturally-occurring minerals, to manufactured goods. EU officials are finding it much harder to do business with a United States headed by Donald Trump, who has threatened to put a 200% tariff on all wines, champagne and alcoholic products originating in the EU. This is unlikely to go down well with America's billionaires, who seem to be very influential, but EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has already threatened to impose tariffs worth €18-billion on exports from the United States. Perhaps with so much arguing and bluster between the sides, someone should invent a board game about it, although the name "Monopoly" has already been taken.

As the European Commission proudly boasts, "For Europe, maritime transport has been a catalyst for economic development and prosperity throughout its history." It would not help to interfere with that. It is, of course, why China is so interested in investing in Europe's mercantile ports. More than 80% of the world's merchandise is transported by sea, so maritime transportation remains the backbone of trade globally. Some EU experts fear that the risks of heavy Chinese investment in nautical transport around Europe



are too little understood and could pose a risk. Some fear that financing investment with loans under China's Belt and Road" initiative would give China considerable leverage over future directions and policy decisions. The idea, adopted in 2013, would give China influence in some 150 countries, especially if it provides the finance to the various countries involved as loans. It's been suggested (not unreasonably) that it's really a response to the US "Pivot to Asia" policy and a bid to gain the initiative. China's biggest investment so far in this policy (at the time of writing, at least) has been $62-billion (€57,305,290,014) for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is in fact a collection of various related projects linking China with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. China is thought to have spent an estimated $1-trillion (€0.92-trillion) on this project alone, although experts say Chia's costs over the entire project could reach $8-trillion (€7,388,282,409,600.00).I must confess, not being a mathematician, that I find quite so many zeroes quite incomprehensible and beyond the grasp of my brain, whether they're in dollars, euros or plastic ducks.



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The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

If the result turns out to be the modernisation of commercial ports and the mechanics of handling a throughput of merchandise in each, then there is no perceivable downside to Chinese investment. But things are never that simple, of course. It could mean that everything in each port is owned by the Chinese government, who can then control exactly what goods and in what quantities are allowed to pass through. That's a different story, of course, because it would mean that Beijing would be in total control of all mercantile sea traffic, deciding exactly what goes where, for how much money, and what China could extract in return. It would mean that all world trade would be entirely at the whim of whoever is in power in Beijing.

Of course, China's motivation (other than sheer naked power) could be to boost China's global economic links to its western regions, thus also promoting economic development in the western province of Xinjiang, where there have been outbreaks of separatist violence. That is certainly one powerful motive, along with making sure of long-term energy supplies from Central Asia and the Middle East along routes that would be immune to American interference, should any be attempted. Alternatively, a more generous interpretation could be to promote the more assertive China under Xi, who wants to make China a central and pivotal player in global affairs. China has already achieved a lot under Xi's leadership, and it seems likely that future maps of world trade could place Beijing at the centre, rather than Washington (or Brussels, of course). China has been taking some massive economic risks to raise its mercantile profile, its outstanding loans coming to more than 25% of its gross domestic product. That's daring, especially in today's explosive and somewhat unpredictable world. China is driven by its geopolitical and economic motives, so it has taken great courage, as well as great ambition, to get to where it now finds itself. But if it all works out as Xi intends, then history may record the 21st century as being China's. Only time will tell, but so far Xi has not demonstrated a desire to own the world. Unlike Moscow and Washington, he has not talked of wanting to conquer or take over any foreign countries. If he's simply out to make a profit without a war and without harming anyone, as he claims, I can only wish him luck.

© XINHUA

Chinese President Xi Jinping

In any case, Xi's Belt and Road Initiative seems to be selling itself, with 147 countries – that's two-thirds of the world population – having already signed up to its various related projects or expressed an interest in doing so. Certainly, it serves as a poke in the eye for Trump's "Pivot to Asia" project, as China seeks out and secures new trade linkages and develops new export markets for China 's many goods, which it is inclined to over-produce so that it needs profitable ways to dispose of it all. Certainly, today's busy, bustling China under Xi's leadership, has already established itself as a strong and ever-stronger power in the world. As it is, as long as Xi's motives are shown to be innocent (assuming they are) then all I can say is "祝你好运，祝地球好运 or Zhù nǐ hǎoyùn, zhù dìqiú hǎoyùn. It means: "Good luck to you. Good luck to the earth". We may need it.

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The Transnistrian Honour Guard at the Victory parade in Tiraspol

TRANSNISTRIA

The Land That Never Was

"Can you tell me the way to Somewhere?" wrote the poet Walter de la Mare in his children's verse about a mysterious and never-identified land whose sole occupants are a cat and a mouse. His poem, called "Somewhere", never explains where it is, but people who think they may know are squabbling over it right now.

It's not called "Somewhere" in real life, of course. It's called Transnistria, and there are fierce disagreements over whether or not it's part of Moldova (it is…sort of). Or even if it really exists, at least as a real, extant or simply separate entity. Its inhabitants do not comprise solely a car and a mouse, either. Moldovans say the place is real. Vladimir Putin seems to think that it's really a part of Russia, but then he thinks that about everywhere, even if he seems genuinely disinterested in trying to acquire it.

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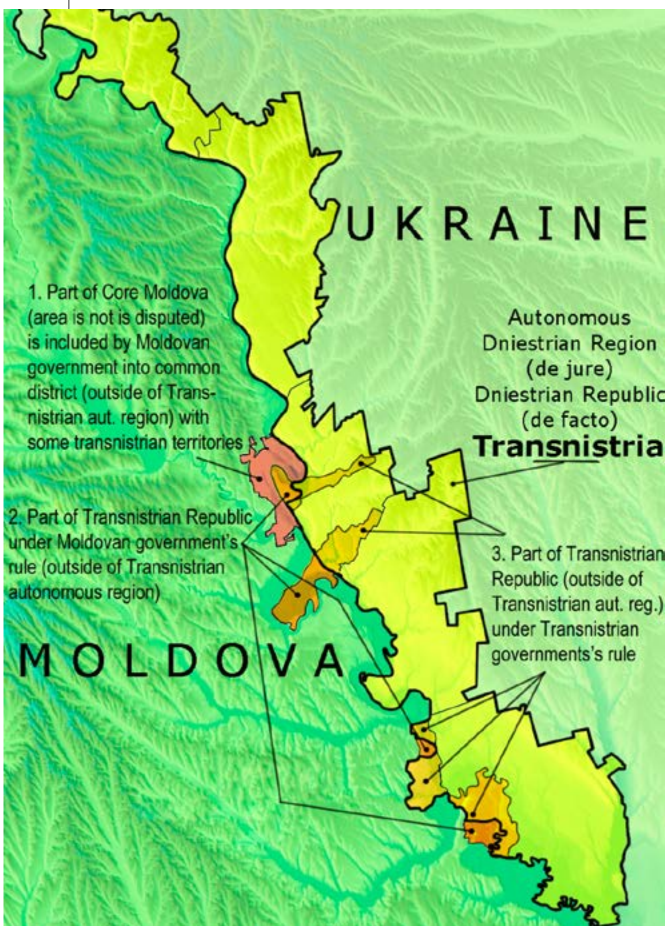
President of PMR, Vadim Krasnoselsky (left) with Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu during a visit to Pristina

For the ruthlessly ambitious the world presents a wealth of opportunities, although it's true to say that they generally involve rather a lot of blood being spilled. It's seldom been the blood of the power-hungry themselves, of course. When they're on the way to the top, people may well offer to die for them, but in the case of the over-ambitious, the object of their affection tends to take them seriously when they say things like "I would give my life for you!" By way of reply, they're more likely to ask if they can have it gift-wrapped. So perhaps we should begin with explanations. Ill-justified ambitions can come later. As for the mysterious Transnistria, it is officially known as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic and locally as Pridnestrovie, and it's a landlocked breakaway state viewed by most other countries as part of Moldova. It's defined in Wikipedia as "Russian-occupied territory in Moldova", a definition that at least has the benefit of simplicity. It has responsibility (in most sensible people's minds, at least) for almost all of the narrow strip of land between the Dniester river and the Moldova-Ukraine border. Sadly, it isn't really recognised as an independent state outside of its own borders, which somewhat limits its influence in the wider world. Strangely (one might say uniquely) it seems destined to remain a separate state because Russia has repeatedly declined to annex it, despite invitations, even requests, from those in charge of the place. It could be labelled as "Transnistria: the country no-one wants". Or not enough to bother trying to grab it, anyway. Transnistria has a substantial ethnic Russian population, and the vast majority of its people speak Russian, but even so Moscow has not taken up Transnistria's offer to allow Russia to annex it. The real reason is that it does not want to be annexed to (nor taken over by) Romania. Why do they so dislike Romania. What on Earth is going on there? The territory itself is heavily reliant upon Russian financial support. Education and the legal system there are fully interrelated with Russia.

In 2006, the first President of Transnistria, Igor Smirnov, held a referendum on his country's future, offering a choice of re-absorbance into Moldova or independence that would lead to the country being taken over by Russia. The Russian option won, although not everyone is convinced the vote was fair. Many suspect the votes were tampered with; Russia is not without previous form in such activities, after all. Indeed, it's clear that Russia interferes heavily in day-to-day affairs, simply to retain control and to continue to exclude others. It's like a complicated game of chess with Putin constantly moving the pieces to more advantageous squares whenever nobody is looking. Take the supply of gas, for instance. We must not forget, of course, that Transnistria, as a state, does not enjoy widespread recognition. It broke away from Moldova in 1990, since when it has been regarded in many quarters as "a Russian outpost". Moscow would like very much to force (if persuasion fails) Transnistria and Moldova to reunite. Gas supplies to the place were cut off in January, because Ukraine had decided to prevent the transit of Russian gas across its territory. Thus, the breakaway "republic" was left without heat,



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Political map of Transnistria with the differences between the Autonomous Dniestrian Region (de jure) and the Dniestrian Republic (de facto)

without fully functioning public transport and without power for its relatively few industries.

I'm afraid we just have to accept, it seems, that Vladimir Putin is not a very nice person. We also know that Transnistria, a place bright with Russian flags, full of statues of Russian Tsars and where the sound of people speaking in Russian can be heard all over the place, is fully dependent on Moscow's whims.

The country (if you can call it that) remains loyal to the Kremlin in everything (it doesn't have much choice in truth). Russia doesn't distinguish between Transnistria and Moldova. It also – through Gazprom – supplies gas to the left bank of the Dniester River (Transnistria, in other words) free of charge, as it has done since the end of 2024, whilst continuing to charge people and industry on the other side of the river – the rest of Moldova, in other words – for all its gas supplies. It's an interesting and effective policy for Putin: "support Russia and Russian policies or freeze to death in a lifeless land without light, energy, work or transport." It would have been possible for Gazprom to continue its supply of Russian gas by sending it through Turkey, which had expressed a willingness to serve in this way, but Russia chose not to accept that offer. There was nothing in it for Moscow. There is the little matter of debt, however, and entangled with that is some disagreement over the amount owing.

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Statue of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, outside the parliament building in Tiraspol

There was an interesting and instructive headline on the Carnegie Politika website: "Moscow Sees Transnistria Gas Crisis as an Opportunity to Wreak Havoc in Moldova", an activity that would seem to be a hobby for Putin. With a ground area of 13,068 square miles which equates to just a little over 33,845.96 km2, Transnistria makes an ideal sort of playground for a power-mad despot like Putin. According to EuroNews, Transnistria will receive gas from Russia, but as "humanitarian aid," which would seem to underline the "kindly" and "generous" aspect of it all, (rather like putting money into a beggar's hat) while the rest of the country remains cut off from Moscow's supply line, according to the Kremlin-supporting separatist leader, Vadim Krasnoselsky.

It's easy to forget (or ignore?) the fact that we're talking here about people's lives, even their survival. Such things simply don't seem to interest Putin. It's the politics that matters, not the survival of ordinary people. In 2016, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Transnistria could only continue to exist because of Russian support: military, economic and political. If Moscow says "jump" the correct response from Transnistrians would be: "how high?" It's a situation that inevitably complicates the issue

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Transnistrian President, Vadim Krasnoselsky

of Moldovan and Transnistrian indebtedness to Moscow, the details of which are disputed.

This is further complicated by the fact that Russia still regards Transnistria and Moldova as a single entity, although it supplied gas to Transnistria, on the left bank, for free whilst it continued to charge for gas going to the other side, which counted as the rest of Moldova. Effectively, Russia stopped charging Transnistria for the gas arriving from Gazprom, although Moldova, on the opposite bank was supposed to pay.

At the point at which Transnistria stopped paying, its debt for gas had reached an alleged \$11.1-billion (€10.2-billion), while Moldova owed some \$709-million (€651.27-million), a figure disputed by Chișinău, which admits only to a debt of \$8.6-million (€7.9-million). Chișinău stopped paying for Gazprom's gas in 2022. The amount theoretically owed by Transnistria reached some \$11.1-billion (€10.93-billion), but payment is never discussed. In economic terms, Putin always plays a very odd game whose sole aim seems to be to deliver total control to him. No surprises there, then. It is odd, though, that Russia effectively subsidized Transnistria through supplies of free gas, as well as heavily discounted gas to the public at large, as well as to various enterprises and services. With the Moldovan State Power Plant established in Transnistria, it can supply gas free of charge to its own immediate area and at a sizeable discount elsewhere, earning it valuable foreign currency. It provides a bonus for both Chișinău, Moldavia's capital and Tiraspol, Transnistria's capital. The cutting of gas supplies is blamed by Moscow on Kyiv (of course) and also on Chișinău, which did not wish (or was unable) to settle its debt. It's unlikely it would have been able to pay in full,certainly.

As seems inevitable in this and similar regions, the current difficulties are the result of Putin's never-ending ambitions. He's an ambitious, one might even say greedy, man. He has always been someone who would seize upon the weaknesses of any country (or pseudo-country) in his vicinity. With Transnistria, he finds a perfect foil for his limitless ambitions: problems with politics, military issues, economic issues and humanitarian ones, including differences of language. It must have appeared like a political playpen to him. What's more: underneath all these issues there was an economic core to exploit. It was linked to Moldova's perception of Transnistria as a transit route for goods, raw materials and

© GAZPROM

The Gazprom Amursk gas processing plant

money. That's what has made it irresistible to the greedy, and there was no shortage of such people following the breakup of the old Soviet Union. The region's problems were listed by the first Vice-Chair of the government of Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR), V. Sinev (first names seem to be in short supply there): "During these years," (1990 and the years shortly following) he said, "we experienced real upheavals: denomination of Soviet money; not quite successful transition to the country's own currency and hyper-inflation." Salaries tumbled, including those of civil servants, while production and output fell. After a decade of dubious development, Transnistria had at least established a legal basis for its shaky economy, along with legal norms for the economy, for banks, for monetary circulation, taxes, regional systems of production, social infrastructure and foreign economic relations. It was clearly a lot of very hard work. It succeeded, too, although question marks remain over the viability of the TMR economy now and into the future.

Both sides sometimes forget how much the other side is needed. One contemporary statement said: "The Republic of Moldova needs Transnistria for its survival as badly as air, because Transnistria has a still-functioning and relatively strong industrial complex." That doesn't suggest a merger of the two entities. "Transnistria, with its industry and agricultural sector should not become a magic wand for those who turned (the) once flourishing Moldovan Republic into a poverty-stricken country of semi-colonial type." The statement, made in October 2001 went on bluntly to refute the ideas of a merger. "We assert that, from the economic point of view, there is no need to unite the TMR and the RM, and moreover to place it under Moldovan authority. If we do it, the TMR will live even worse than it does now." That would, of course, be terrible, because the situation there is not a happy one. As it is, recession continued throughout that decade, and it became increasingly clear that Transnistria, Moldova and other post-Soviet economies remain unstable and have yet to overcome a lingering depression.

Other countries and regions that have found themselves to be "objects of desire" for power-hungry politicians have been able to boast geological riches of one sort or another. In Transnistria's case, however, there's not much there. There are some rare exposures of pre-Neogene rock along the Dniester River and the area lies on top of East European platform rocks from the pre-Cambrian era, including granite, gneiss and gabbro from the Archean and Palaeozoic rocks which lie under Triassic and Jurassic conglomerate,

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A military parade on the main square of the capital, Tiraspol

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his Moldovan counterpart Maia Sandu said after their talks in Kyiv on Jan. 25 that they were ready to meet the energy needs of Moldova's Russian-occupied Transnistria region

sandstone, siltstone and limestone, all of which lack much in the way of fossils. In case you're unsure about exactly what the Neogene era was, it was a period of 20.45 million years, beginning 23.03 million years ago and lasting until the start of the current Quaternary period, 2.58 million years ago. It was a time of cooling temperatures, while the resulting changes in plant life inevitably had a knock-on effect for wildlife, too. Horses, for instance, developed longer teeth to cope with the increasing spread of grasses and grasslands (and lack of alternative food), and the grass itself of course was less nutritious, so some animals became extinct. Predators had to become faster to catch their faster-moving prey (horses can move at quite a speed), while some animals evolved to have more than one stomach. They were the ruminants, who could extract more goodness from the grasses. That's how sheep, camels and giraffes (among other similarly-equipped creatures) came to evolve. The entirety of the Moldovan countryside is overlaid by Quaternary deposits laid down over the last 2.5-million years. In other words, it's pretty dull and not much worth taking your geologist's hammer to. I haven't used mine in years, despite such Earth-shattering events as continents colliding and mountains rearing up (the Himalayas among them), while apes and hominids also evolved who would one day take over the whole planet.

You can go there for a holiday, if you fancy the idea, with the place being advertised on-line as a kind of trip back in time to the Soviet era. The advertisement cites it as "the place where the old USSR is still alive and flourishing". Polish up your hammer and sickle. How can potential holidaymakers resist such a place? Actually, it would be very interesting, I think. After all, while media attention has mainly focused on NATO member states, it's easy to forget such places as Georgia and, of course, Moldova, where Russian influence is strong. Given Putin's seeming ambivalence towards Transnistria it's quite hard to understand, although there remain some 1,500 Russian troops based there and there have been some odd events, such as the fatal shooting of a top opposition leader, together with the shooting down of a military helicopter, as well as explosions at a radio facility not far from the border with Ukraine.

© ITAR-TASS / ALEXANDER POPOV

Russian forces in Transnistria

Transnistrian officials have alleged that it was a Ukrainian drone that brought down the helicopter, but Moldovan officials say it was a Russian action designed to heighten tensions. In that case, it clearly worked: the Transnistrian Congress has appealed to Moscow for "protection" against the Moldovan government. Unnecessary? I'd have thought so, but it's amazing how much inexplicable nonsense passes for diplomacy and common sense in such places. Interestingly (and, perhaps, disturbingly) Moldova views Ukraine as its first line of defence against Russian aggression. Russian elites, meanwhile, have called on Moldova to "avoid Western Influence", even referring to the autonomous region as "the next Ukraine". I suppose we must simply assume that Putin and his fans and followers are really looking forward to a large-scale war, with lots of shattered human bodies to see. I have no idea why unless they simply want to take over the world, ending free speech and freedom of action at a stroke.

© NRF

Statue of Russian General Alexander Suvorov in Pristina

The odd thing is, to me, Putin's seeming determination not to absorb Transnistria. Unless it's just a pretext to keep Russian troops in a state of high alert beside the border, perhaps in the hope that they will see action. For Moldova, Ukraine's continued independence is vital. The idea that Transnistria needs Russian protection from potential Moldovan aggression is clearly laughable. On the other hand, if Russia were to invade (or want to invade) Moldova, it would have to secure the city of Odessa and Ukraine's Black Sea coast. The Moldovan Foreign Minister, Mihai Popșoi has said that as long as Ukraine holds firm in the belief that Ukraine has the support of the West, Moldova would stay safe. We have to remember the history of the area: following the collapse of the old Soviet Union, a war began between Transnistria and what is now Moldova. That ended in 1992, with Transnistria claiming independence from Moldova. In 2006, 95% of Transnistrians allegedly voted for their country to become part of Russia. Few people outside Russia or Transnistria believe it was a fair vote, although it may have been. Politics in that area can be very odd indeed.

© HOUSES OF THE OIREACHTAS

Mihai Popșoi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, arriving at Leinster House (Irish Parliament), 26 July 2024

The plain fact is that people develop a fervent, if sometimes irrational, love for their home country, which thereafter can do no wrong in their eyes. There is no serious doubt that Putin's adoring followers believe they're displaying patriotism, showing the world just how much they love their country. The original creator of the phrase "My Country, Right or Wrong, was a US naval officer called Stephan Decatur, famous for various courageous exploits, including the burning of an American frigate, the USS Philadelphia, which had fallen into the hands of pirates. Even the famous British admiral Horatio Nelson was full of admiration. Decatur first uttered the famous expression in a toast on his success in getting a peace treaty with Algeria. "Our country!" he is alleged to have said, "In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!" These days, such unalloyed patriotism might be seen as needlessly nationalistic, even bombastic, but the sentiment is, at least, clear and to the point, if somewhat to the political far right.

The expression was rendered more reasonable and less jingoistic by the British writer G.K.Chesterton, who wrote in his book "The Defendant" that: "My country right or wrong is a thing that no patriot would think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying 'My mother, drunk or sober'." The English novelist Patrick O'Brian wrote in his seafaring novel "Master and Commander" that if the famous expression means "my country is always right, which is imbecile" (one assumes he meant "imbecilic"). Looking at current events and thinking in the Transnistria-Moldova theatre if politics suggests that the "imbecile" explanation has merit. But that would also mean that President Putin is an imbecile, wouldn't it? Who am I to argue?

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Stephen Decatur

There are certainly some politicians over there who want to keep the pot of warfare nicely simmering, ready to boil over at any moment. Whether anyone's country is right or wrong would then appear irrelevant. We'd be deep in a war that some people (naming no names) seem keen to provoke. I hope those same people will be happy to go and visit the wives, sweethearts, children and parents to the many, many victims and explain how (if?) the world is a better place for their sacrifice. The irony is that even if we avoid a war in the present time and on the present pretexts, one will inevitably happen somewhen because somebody with power wanted more. Perhaps that person can then explain exactly how the world is now better, fairer, safer or better run than if the war had never happened. I would bet that they can't, at least not convincingly.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin

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The Rise of Drones in Today's Skies

The history of drones (unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs) dates back over a century. The concept emerged in the mid-19th century, with experiments involving balloon-based bomb delivery systems. However, the first practical UAVs were developed during World War I. The first pilotless aircraft was the Ruston Proctor Aerial Target, designed in Britain in 1916 by Archibald Low. It was intended as a flying explosive device to take down enemy Zeppelins or ground forces, but was never actually deployed in combat. Around the same time, the U.S. Army developed the Kettering Bug, an early cruise missile designed by Charles Kettering, which could fly a predetermined distance before dropping its payload but was also never used in battle before the war ended. A bit later, in the 1930s, the British developed the DH.82B Queen Bee, a remote-controlled target drone for military training. The U.S. followed in the 1940s, producing radio-controlled drones such as the Radioplane OQ-2, the first mass-produced UAV (over 15,000 units made) used as a target drone for military training. After World War II, drones evolved rapidly, due to the increased interest and need for intelligence gathering.

The U.S. Ryan Model 147 'Lightning Bug' became one of the first long-range reconnaissance UAVs used extensively in the Vietnam War (1964–1975). The Soviet Union also experimented with UAV technology but focussed more on missile-based systems. The Israeli military played a key role in modern drone warfare, developing UAVs used effectively in conflicts such as the 1982 Lebanon War (IAI Scout and IAI Pioneer). The U.S. adapted Israeli technology, developing the MQ-1 Predator, which later became a cornerstone of drone-based warfare. By the 1980s, drones were already being equipped with better cameras, infrared sensors, and real-time data transmission capabilities. The 1991 Gulf War, when the U.S. extensively used the RQ-2 Pioneer, demonstrated the effectiveness of drones in battlefield surveillance. The first modern surveillance drone used in extensive military operations, the RQ-1 Predator, was developed in 1994 by General Atomics. A weaponised version, the MQ-1 Predator, was first used in Afghanistan after 2001, marking the beginning of drone-based warfare.

The explosion of consumer drones began with DJI, a Chinese company founded in 2006, which launched the Phantom series in 2013, making drones widely accessible to the general public.

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In 1944, Japan launched some 9,000 balloon bombs against North America

Today, drones are used in all kinds of activities, from journalism, agriculture, disaster relief, and law enforcement to surveillance and delivery services. Military drones have also become autonomous, with models like the MQ-9 Reaper, capable of independent operations.

The war in Ukraine has shown how low-cost drones and consumer drones modified for combat can effectively change modern warfare.

The ever-increasing use of drones also presents ethical and security concerns. Governments and private companies use drones for surveillance, raising privacy concerns (for example, China's use of drones for population monitoring). The use of drones in warfare (such as U.S. strikes in the Middle East) has raised concerns over accuracy and accountability. Others wonder whether AI-powered drones should be allowed to make life-or-death decisions in live combat. In more recent years, drones have also been used for smuggling, illegal surveillance, and even attacks, like the 2018 Venezuelan presidential drone attack, when two small drones carrying explosives were detonated while President Maduro delivered an outdoor speech. Consumer drones can be hacked and hijacked, posing security risks.

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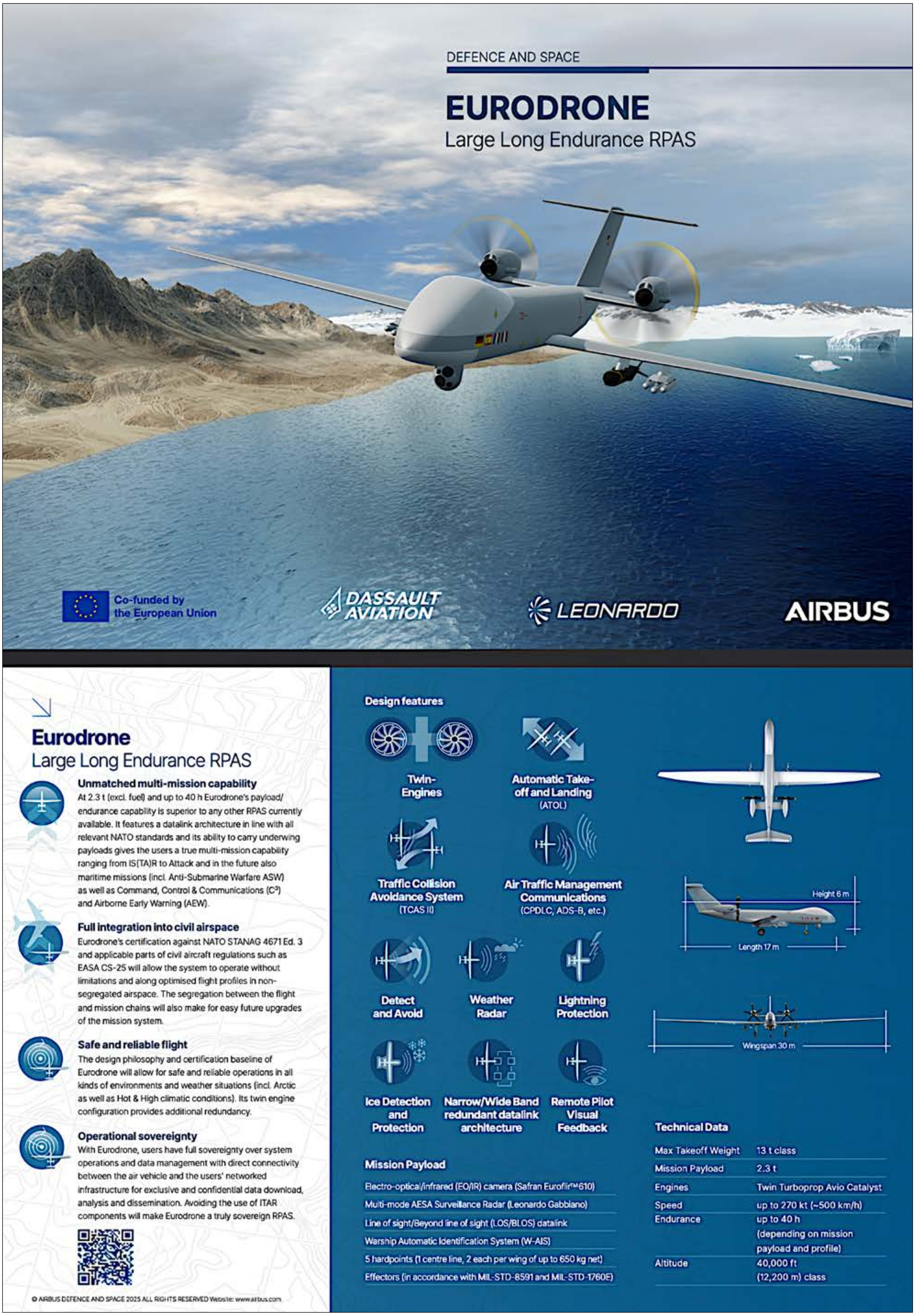
Today, we see a rise in self-flying drones that use AI for navigation, object detection, and target tracking, while the military is experimenting with autonomous drones, which are set to revolutionise warfare.

While companies like Amazon, Google, and UPS have started to implement drone deliveries, Japan and the UAE are flirting with the idea of using drones for passenger transportation (air taxis) to reduce traffic congestion.

Drones could also be used for environmental and humanitarian purposes. Reforestation drones can plant up to 100,000 trees per day. Medical drones (like those already used in Rwanda) can transport blood and vaccines to remote areas.

The Syma X5C © symatoys.com

Drones also became popular as toys starting in the early 2010s, thanks to advancements in battery life, miniaturisation, and lower production costs.


DEFENCE AND SPACE
EURODRONE
Large Long Endurance RPAS
Co-funded by the European Union
DASSAULT AVIATION
LEONARDO
AIRBUS
Eurodrone
Large Long Endurance RPAS
Unmatched multi-mission capability
At 2.3 t (excl. fuel) and up to 40 h Eurodrone's payload/endurance capability is superior to any other RPAS currently available. It features a datalink architecture in line with all relevant NATO standards and its ability to carry underwing payloads gives the users a true multi-mission capability ranging from IS(TA)R to Attack and in the future also maritime missions (incl. Anti-Submarine Warfare ASW) as well as Command, Control & Communications (C³) and Airborne Early Warning (AEW).
Full integration into civil airspace
Eurodrone's certification against NATO STANAG 4671 Ed. 3 and applicable parts of civil aircraft regulations such as EASA CS-25 will allow the system to operate without limitations and along optimised flight profiles in non-segregated airspace. The segregation between the flight and mission chains will also make for easy future upgrades of the mission system.
Safe and reliable flight
The design philosophy and certification baseline of Eurodrone will allow for safe and reliable operations in all kinds of environments and weather situations (incl. Arctic as well as Hot & High climatic conditions). Its twin engine configuration provides additional redundancy.
Operational sovereignty
With Eurodrone, users have full sovereignty over system operations and data management with direct connectivity between the air vehicle and the users' networked infrastructure for exclusive and confidential data download, analysis and dissemination. Avoiding the use of ITAR components will make Eurodrone a truly sovereign RPAS.
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Design features
Twin-Engines
Automatic Take-off and Landing (ATOL)
Traffic Collision Avoidance System (TCAS II)
Air Traffic Management Communications (CPDLC, ADS-B, etc.)
Detect and Avoid
Weather Radar
Lightning Protection
Ice Detection and Protection
Narrow/Wide Band redundant datalink architecture
Remote Pilot Visual Feedback
Height 6 m
Length 17 m
Wingspan 30 m
Mission Payload
Electro-optical/infrared (EO/IR) camera (Safran Euroflir™610)
Multi-mode AESA Surveillance Radar (Leonardo Gabbiano)
Line of sight/Beyond line of sight (LOS/BLOS) datalink
Warship Automatic Identification System (W-AIS)
5 hardpoints (1 centre line, 2 each per wing of up to 650 kg net)
Effectors (in accordance with MIL-STD-8591 and MIL-STD-1760E)
Technical Data
Max Takeoff Weight 13 t class
Mission Payload 2.3 t
Engines Twin Turboprop Avio Catalyst
Speed up to 270 kt (~500 km/h)
Endurance up to 40 h (depending on mission payload and profile)
Altitude 40,000 ft (12,200 m) class

The Parrot AR Drone, launched in 2010, was one of the first toy drones controlled via a smartphone, making drones more accessible beyond military or industrial use. Three years later, the Syma X5C became a best-seller due to its affordability and built-in camera. The launch of DJI's mini drones allowed children to fly drones with beginner-friendly controls. Companies started adding altitude hold, obstacle avoidance, and auto-hover features, making them easier and safer for children. Toy drones also became part of the educational process, teaching children about coding and robotics. By the late 2010s, drones had already become a mainstream toy category, available in most stores, despite the relatively many potential accidents, ranging from propeller cuts and crashes to property damage and even battery explosions.

© DJI

Chinese company DJI recently launched DJI Dock 3, the company's first "Drone in a Box" solution that supports vehicle mounting, empowering 24/7 remote operations for various environments

However, when we talk about drones, we should also consider some major aspects shaping their impact today. First, we need to address the need for clear international regulations regarding their use. Drones, including toy models, can pose a serious threat to aviation if flown near airports or flight paths. Drones can get sucked into jet engines or crash into the windshields of airplanes or helicopters. A drone flying too close to a plane may distract the pilot or cause an emergency manoeuvre. Some drones operate on frequencies that may overlap with aviation communication signals, causing navigation issues. That is why several international institutions regulate their presence. ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) works on integrating drones into controlled airspace. EASA (European Union Aviation Safety Agency) sets drone operation rules in the EU; the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration, USA) requires drone registration for commercial use and restricts flights near airports. Most countries have set the maximum altitude limit for flying drones to 120 metres. There are no-fly zones near airports, government buildings, or military bases. Commercial drone operators are required to register and license their drones. Both the EU and the US require drones over 250 grammes to be registered by their pilots. Geo-fencing technology is used in many areas to automatically block drones from flying in restricted zones. Some countries, like China, Russia, or the UAE, have even more severe restrictions.

China and India imposed strict drone bans in their capitals, Beijing and New Delhi. In 2022, the UAE banned all recreational drones after reports that they were used for unauthorised surveillance. As of January 2025, the General Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA) and other UAE authorities lifted the conditional ban on individual drone use. However, only UAE residents and citizens are permitted to fly drones, provided they are registered, approved by the GCAA, and hold a certified drone pilot training certificate. The EU has elaborated its own regulations to safely integrate remotely piloted drones into European airspace. Additionally, in June 2018, the European Council adopted new proportionate and risk-based rules that enable the EU aviation sector to grow and make it more competitive. One regulation refers to the registration threshold for drone operators: if the drones can transfer more than 80 joules of kinetic energy upon impact with a person, then they should be registered. Meanwhile, the European Commission predicts that by 2035, the European drone sector will directly employ more than 100,000 people and have an economic impact of over €10 billion per year.

Chinese drone maker DJI is the world's largest drone manufacturer, with a market share of more than 70 percent worldwide. The company offers a wide range of drones for both professional and consumer use in almost 100 countries. China has the most cost-effective drones for domestic use and export, while it is also the spare parts supplier to most other drone manufacturers in the world.

Military drones represent a significant part of the global drone market; its size is expected to grow by 13.1 percent between 2022 and 2028. (Source: https://brandessenceresearch.com)

The US holds over 13,000 military drones, making it the largest military drone fleet globally.

A US Army MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle flying a combat mission over southern Afghanistan © Lt. Col. Leslie Pratt

Lockheed Martin and Boeing are among the top five producers worldwide. Lockheed Martin, a leading U.S. defence contractor founded in 1995,

A US Army MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle flying a combat mission over southern Afghanistan

develops high-tech military drones for surveillance, reconnaissance, and combat operations. The company also produces autonomous systems, including AI-driven UAVs, to enhance battlefield capabilities. Boeing manufactures advanced military drones, such as the MQ-28 Ghost Bat, a loyal wingman drone designed to support manned fighter jets. Boeing integrates cutting-edge AI and swarm technology into its drone programmes, enhancing operational efficiency in combat scenarios. Northrop Grumman is another leading defence contractor, developing and producing military drones and unmanned systems. The company's Global Hawk and Triton high-altitude long-endurance drones provide critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to the U.S. military.

Israel is also one of the world's leading producers and exporters of military drones. The country has been at the forefront of such technology for decades, developing a wide range of UAVs for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and combat roles. Israel's defence exports have doubled in less than a decade, reaching a record of $12.5 billion in 2022, according to the Israeli Ministry of Defence.

Turkey is already a recognised supplier of innovative yet affordable drones and has become a strong exporter. While many Turkish companies, such as Baykar, Turkish Aerospace, and STM, produce drones, the combat drones produced by Baykar—especially the Bayraktar TB2 and AKINCI—are in high demand due to their low prices and high efficiency, which they have proven in conflicts where they have been successfully used in recent years.

While Iran has banned any kind of use of drones, which are immediately confiscated when entering the country, locally manufactured ones like the Shahed-136 are considered some of the most cost-effective today. Their price, between US$20,000 and US$50,000 per unit, is significantly lower than most other precision-guided missiles and makes them very attractive to potential buyers.

Europe is slowly trying to keep up with this trend in drone production, fuelled also by the recent years' complicated situation on the continent and also by the even more recent and alarming declarations and moves of US President Trump. AltiGator is a European drone manufacturer company from Belgium, founded in 2008. Drone Volt, based in the Paris region, has been manufacturing drones since 2011. The company has 60 employees and subsidiaries in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Canada. Tekever from Portugal designs and builds drones for aerial surveillance that can serve as the communication and navigation hub for swarms of smaller drones. WB Group is currently Poland's leader in designing and production of drones. The country has invested immensely in recent years in military equipment.

Lithuanian drone manufacturer RSI Europe was founded after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Tomas Milašauskas, its CEO and co-founder, told Business Insider that 'the company was born out of fear of what a Ukrainian defeat could mean for Europe's future security'. In the same context, the German drone manufacturer Quantum Systems, which opened its first facility in Ukraine in April 2024 and currently operates two plants in Ukraine, is planning to double its drone production in the country. 'We stand for everything that defines our free and democratic societies', it is stated on their own website.

Bayraktar TB2 drone

The completion of German AI start-up Helsing's first Resilience Factory (RF-1) in the southern part of the country marks a significant milestone in bolstering Ukraine's defence capabilities amid its ongoing conflict with Russia. This facility is the first step in a series of planned Resilience Factories across Europe, designed to provide sovereign and scalable manufacturing capacities for advanced defence technologies. These drones are equipped with artificial intelligence, enabling resilience against electronic warfare, boasting a range of up to 100 kilometres and designed for precision strikes against armoured vehicles and infrastructure. In addition to Helsing's contributions, the international Drone Capability Coalition, co-led by the UK and Latvia, has placed contracts worth 45 million pounds to supply 30,000 drones to Ukraine. The combination of advanced technology, scalable manufacturing, and international cooperation is poised to play a crucial role in strengthening Ukraine's defence posture.

Helsing plans to 'take a distributed approach towards mass manufacturing these systems across Europe, allowing individual nation states to produce locally and ensure sovereignty of production and supply chain'. (Gundbert Scherf, co-founder of Helsing)

Sweden's Saab and Helsing have established a strategic partnership to integrate Helsing's advanced artificial intelligence technologies into Saab's defence systems, enhancing its capabilities across various platforms, including drones. Although Saab primarily develops drones for reconnaissance and surveillance rather than armed ones, given the increasing demand for UAVs in modern warfare, it could expand its portfolio in the future.

The Eurodrone, a remotely piloted aircraft system developed by Airbus, is designed to carry out long-endurance missions for intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and anti-submarine warfare. The Eurodrone will be able to fly in non-segregated airspace, carry weapons, offer naval anti-submarine warfare as well as electronic warfare capabilities, featuring a 2.3-tonne payload, 40 hours of autonomy, and a maximum altitude of 45,000 feet. Expected by mid-2027, it has already received orders from Germany, France, Italy, and Spain.

The establishment of Resilience Factories underscores a broader European initiative to achieve self-sufficiency in defence manufacturing. By localising production, these facilities aim to rapidly scale manufacturing rates to tens of thousands of units in response to conflicts, thereby reducing reliance on external suppliers. The problem is that most drones assembled in Europe still inevitably use spare parts imported from China, which is a significant liability in trade or war scenarios.

China dominates the global supply chain for drone components. Many drone parts, including motors, batteries, flight controllers, and cameras, are produced in Shenzhen, the heart of the global electronics industry. Chinese suppliers offer high-quality components at very competitive prices. However, some manufacturers in the U.S., Europe, and Israel have recently started to find alternatives for specialised components from South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (for sensors and semiconductors) or Germany and Switzerland (for precision engineering parts). Considering the recent trade tensions between China, Europe, and the U.S., it is a matter of security for Europe to be able to produce its own drones without any outside interference in the supply chain. Europe is aiming to produce drones entirely with European-made components. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has emphasised the importance of integrating the European Drone Strategy with the European Defence Industrial Strategy to support domestic production of high-quality drones. This strategy, introduced in 2022, prioritises the development of a safe and efficient drone ecosystem while creating a large-scale European drone market, valued at more than €20 billion and potentially generating 145,000 jobs by 2030.

However, achieving complete self-sufficiency presents challenges because of the fragmentation of the European drone industry and limited cross-border cooperation. Europe needs standardisation and cross-border investments, incorporating cutting-edge techniques like 3D printing to improve efficiency. The increase in military spending, partly driven by geopolitical threats, has spurred investment in European defence, including in companies focused on drone technology. This market is projected to grow by nearly 40 percent annually.

In the context of recent geopolitical events, enhancing Europe's independent defence capabilities is imperative. Developing strong and advanced indigenous drone manufacturing can address some of these concerns by providing superior surveillance and combat capabilities tailored to the continent's defence needs. It is also essential for ensuring strategic autonomy, fostering economic growth, and enhancing Europe's position on the global stage.

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Helsing's HX-2 is a new type of strike drone capable of engaging artillery, armoured and other military targets at beyond-line-of-sight range (up to 100km)

GARANTEX CRYPTOCURRENCY EXCHANGE DISRUPTED IN INTERNATIONAL OPERATION

The Justice Department announced a coordinated action with Germany and Finland to disrupt and take down the online infrastructure used to operate Garantex, a cryptocurrency exchange that allegedly facilitated money laundering by transnational criminal organizations — including terrorist organizations — and sanctions violations. Since April 2019, Garantex has processed at least $96 billion in cryptocurrency transactions.

In conjunction with the operation targeting Garantex, the Department also announced the unsealing of an indictment in the Eastern District of Virginia against Aleksej Besciokov, 46, a Lithuanian national and Russian resident, and Aleksandr Mira Serda (previously Aleksandr Ntifo-Siaw), 40, a Russian national and United Arab Emirates resident. Mira Serda and Besciokov are charged with money laundering conspiracy, and Besciokov is charged with conspiracy to violate sanctions and conspiracy to operate an unlicensed money transmitting business.

According to court documents, between 2019 and 2025, Besciokov and Mira Serda controlled and operated Garantex. Besciokov was Garantex's primary technical administrator and responsible for obtaining and maintaining critical Garantex infrastructure, as well as reviewing and approving transactions. Mira Serda was Garantex's co-founder and chief commercial officer.

Garantex received hundreds of millions in criminal proceeds and was used to facilitate various crimes, including hacking, ransomware, terrorism, and drug trafficking, often with substantial impact to U.S. victims. According to the indictment, Besciokov and Mira Serda knew that criminal proceeds were being laundered through Garantex and took steps to conceal the facilitation of illegal activities on its platform. For example, when Russian law enforcement sought records relating to an account registered to Mira Serda, Garantex provided incomplete information in response and falsely claimed the account was not verified. In reality, Garantex had associated the account with Mira Serda's personal identifying documents, even while disclosing identifying information related to other accounts requested by Russian law enforcement.

On April 5, 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Garantex for its role in facilitating money laundering of funds from ransomware actors and darknet markets. According to court documents, despite the widespread publicity of the sanctions and Garantex administrator's personal knowledge of them, Besciokov and his co-conspirators violated those sanctions by continuing to transact with U.S.-based entities. Further, Besciokov and his co-conspirators redesigned Garantex's operations to evade and violate U.S. sanctions and induce U.S. businesses to unwittingly transact with Garantex in violation of the sanctions. For example, Garantex moved its operational cryptocurrency wallets to different virtual currency addresses on a daily basis in order to make it difficult for U.S.-based cryptocurrency exchanges to identify and block transactions with Garantex accounts.

Despite doing substantial business in the United States and operating as a money transmitting business, Garantex failed to register with the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) as required.

On March 6, U.S. law enforcement, led by the U.S. Secret Service (USSS), executed a seizure order authorized by a judge in the Eastern District of Virginia against three website domain names used to support Garantex's operations. According to court records unsealed today, Garantex.org, Garantex.io, and Garantex.academy were associated with the administration and operation of Garantex. The seizure of these domains will prevent these sites from being used for money laundering and additional crimes. Individuals visiting those sites now will see a message indicating that the site has been seized by law enforcement.

As part of the coordinated actions, German and Finnish law enforcement seized servers hosting Garantex's operations. U.S. law authorities have separately obtained earlier copies of Garantex's servers, including customer and accounting databases. In addition, U.S. law enforcement has also frozen over $26 million in funds used to facilitate Garantex's money laundering activities.

Besciokov and Mira Serda are each charged with one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison. Besciokov is also charged with one count of conspiracy to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, and with conspiracy to operate an unlicensed money transmitting business, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

This action has been taken in coordination with the U.S. Department of Justice's Criminal Division, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Europol, the Dutch National Police, the German Federal Criminal Police Office, the Frankfurt General Prosecutor's Office, the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation, and the Estonian National Criminal Police

Tomb of Napoleon, Church of the Dome at Les Invalides

NEARLY 20,000 LIVE ANIMALS SEIZED

365 Suspects Arrested in Largest-Ever Wildlife and Forestry Operation

38 countries and regions join forces to target fauna and flora trafficking worldwide

Nearly 20,000 live animals, all endangered or protected species, have been seized in a global operation against wildlife and forestry trafficking networks, jointly coordinated by INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization (WCO).

Operation Thunder 2024 brought together police, customs, border control, forestry and wildlife officials from 138 countries and regions, marking the widest participation since the first edition in 2017.

Authorities arrested 365 suspects and identified six transnational criminal networks suspected of trafficking animals and plants protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Such species are illegally trafficked to meet specific market demands, whether for food, perceived medicinal benefits, "luxury" and collector items or as pets and competition animals.

The live animals, which included big cats, birds, pangolins, primates and reptiles were rescued in connection with 2,213 seizures made worldwide.

Where possible, wildlife forensic experts collected DNA samples before transferring the animals to conservation centres, where their health was assessed while awaiting repatriation or rehabilitation, in line with national frameworks and relevant protocols.

The collection of DNA is a crucial part of supporting prosecutions, as it helps confirm the type of species and its origin or distribution, shedding light on new trafficking routes and emerging trends.

Large-scale trafficking of animal parts, plants and endangered species

In addition to the live animals, participating countries seized hundreds of thousands of protected animal parts and derivatives, trees, plants, marine life and arthropods.

Timber cases represent the most significant seizures, primarily occurring in sea cargo container shipments, while most other seizures took place at airports and mail processing hubs.

Authorities also investigated online activities and found suspects


© INTERPOL

This primate was rescued in Indonesia during Operation Thunder

using multiple profiles and linked accounts across social media platforms and marketplaces to expand their reach.

More than 100 companies involved in the trafficking of protected species were also identified.

Valdecy Urquiza, INTERPOL Secretary General said:

"Organized crime networks are profiting from the demand for rare plants and animals, exploiting nature to fuel human greed. This has far-reaching consequences: it drives biodiversity loss, destroys communities, contributes to climate change and even fuels conflict and instability.

"Environmental crimes are uniquely destructive, and INTERPOL, in cooperation with its partners, is committed to protecting our planet for future generations."

Ian Saunders, WCO Secretary General, said:

"Operation Thunder continues to shed light on a crime that is often not a priority for enforcement actors. Through our joint efforts we have established cooperation mechanisms that facilitate the exchange of information and intelligence, and we have refined our enforcement strategies.


© INTERPOL

Python skin products, such as this belt seized in Italy, are considered high-end luxury items

"The illegal wildlife trade is still rapidly growing, highly lucrative and has devastating effects. The WCO remains committed to supporting its members and partners to effectively combat this serious crime."

Significant seizures include:

- Indonesia: 134 tonnes of timber headed to Asia via ocean freight.
- Kenya: 41 tonnes of exotic timber headed to Asia via ocean freight.
- Nigeria: 4,472 kg of pangolins scales
- Türkiye: 6,500 live songbirds discovered during a vehicle inspection at the Syrian border.
- India: 5,193 live red-eared ornamental slider turtles concealed in passenger suitcases arriving from Malaysia at Chennai Airport.
- Peru: 3,700 protected plants intercepted en route from Ecuador.
- Qatar: Eight rhino horns found in a suspect's luggage while transiting from Mozambique to Thailand.
- United States: One tonne of sea cucumbers, considered a seafood delicacy, smuggled from Nicaragua.
- Hong Kong, China: 973 kg of dried shark fins originating from Morocco seized at the airport.
- Czech Republic: Eight tigers, aged between two months and two years, discovered in a suspected illegal breeding facility.
- Indonesia: 846 pieces of reticulated python skin, from the world's longest snake species, concealed on board a ship.
- Australia and the United Kingdom reported seizures of bear bile, often used in traditional medicine.
- More than 300 firearms, vehicles and poaching equipment.


© INTERPOL

Rescued pancake tortoises placed in crates for their journey to Tanzania

Building a global intelligence picture of wildlife and timber trafficking

Regular operations such as Thunder enable investigators to build a comprehensive global intelligence picture and detailed offender profiles, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of enforcement efforts and resolution of cross-border cases.

Cooperation between various stakeholders is essential for effectively combating transnational criminal networks, from seizure to arrest and prosecution, as the data collected enable customs administrations to refine their risk management and compliance strategies, and stay one step ahead of criminals, ensuring that their contribution to the fight against wildlife crime is dynamic and responsive.

Ahead of the operation, countries exchanged actionable intelligence on ongoing cases and high-value targets, updating critical information on 21 INTERPOL Red Notices for suspected traffickers wanted internationally. This exchange continued throughout the operation, with officers using the secure channels provided by both INTERPOL and the WCO to communicate in real time.

The Operation Thunder series is backed by the CITES Secretariat and carried out under the partnership framework of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC). The 2024 edition was co-funded by the European Union, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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Artist's impression of the Hera spacecraft approaching the binary asteroid system of Didymos and Dimorphos

GERMAN-BUILT ESA SPACE PROBE HERA

Ready to take a closer look at near-earth asteroids

The Hera spacecraft will study the binary asteroid system, comprised of Didymos and Dimorphos, for six months in 2026 to find out exactly how the orbital period and shape of the asteroids have changed since the impact of NASA's DART probe in 2022. Hera is equipped with 12 measuring instruments for this purpose. The most important of these are the two asteroid framing cameras – two redundant, monochromatic cameras – which will be used to determine the position of the space probe in the asteroid system. They are essential for navigating the probe. Hera is also carrying two CubeSats, Juventas and Milani, each the size of a shoebox. They will move closer to Dimorphos and even attempt to land on it in the final phase of the mission to determine its interior structure, surface properties and gravitational field.

The history of Earth has repeatedly shown the danger that asteroids can pose, and even today, the devastating impact of a celestial body on our planet cannot be ruled out. Science fiction films feature technologies to prevent impacts, but can asteroid deflection also succeed in real life? These and many other questions are to be answered by the Hera mission of the European Space Agency (ESA), which embarked on a two-year journey to study the Didymos and Dimorphos binary asteroid system for six months.

Hera lifted off on a SpaceX Falcon 9 from Cape Canaveral in Florida, USA, on 7 October 2024 at 10:52 local time (16:52 CEST) with its solar arrays deploying about one hour later. Hera is now on the way to the double asteroid Dimorphos and Didymos.

On 12 March 2025, the European Space Agency (ESA) Hera space probe conducted a flyby of Mars and its moons, Phobos and Deimos. During the flyby, Hera used Mars's gravity to optimise its trajectory. Its closest approach to Mars occurred at a distance of approximately 5000 kilometres, but the probe passed even closer to Deimos, coming within approximately 1000 kilometres and allowing it to capture detailed images of both the Red Planet and its mysterious smaller moon from a new perspective. The Asteroid Framing Camera (AFC) system, built by Jena-Optronik and scientifically supervised by the German Aerospace Center (Deutschen Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR), was used for imaging. The newly gathered data will contribute to the scientific study of Deimos, while also allowing

© SPACEX

A Falcon 9 rocket lifts off, carrying the Hera spacecraft for ESA, October 7, 2024

calibration of Hera's instruments ahead of its primary mission in the Didymos system.

Germany is the largest contributor to the mission. The German Space Agency at the German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR) coordinates Germany's ESA contributions with funds from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK). DLR is involved in terms of science through its Microgravity User Support Centre (MUSC) in Cologne and the DLR Institute of Planetary Research. The spacecraft was developed and built by the company OHB in Bremen, and Hera will send its data to Earth using a newly developed German antenna. Last but not least, two cameras produced in Jena will provide images of Didymos and Dimorphos.

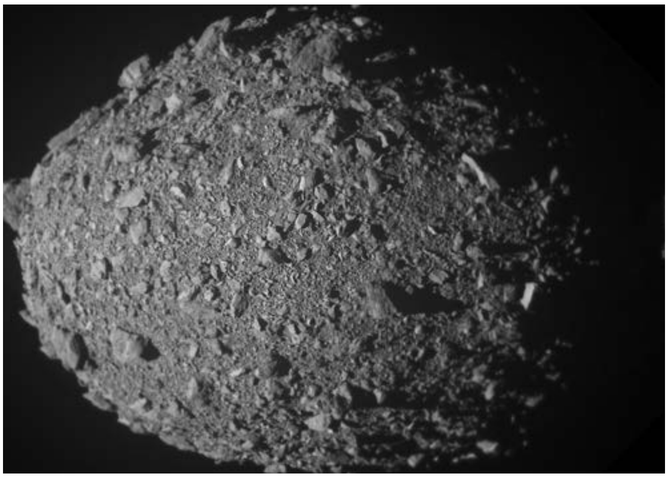
"Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid struck Mexico and was very probably the cause of the extinction of the dinosaurs. If large asteroids were to hit Earth, it would pose a real threat to our planet and all of humanity. With the Hera mission, we are expanding our knowledge of asteroids and, together with NASA, JAXA, ESA and other space agencies, are making a major contribution to effective planetary defence," says Walther Pelzer, DLR Executive Board member and Director General of the German Space Agency at DLR.

© DEUTSCHE RAUMFAHRTAGENTUR IM DLR

Artist's impression : What would happen if an asteroid like Dimorphos entered Earth's atmosphere? A possible scenario: The celestial body would partially burn up and break into fragments of varying sizes before these smaller pieces struck the Earth. However, such an event is almost entirely ruled out for this century.

Planetary defence against asteroids

Asteroid impacts on Earth are very rare but can have serious consequences. On 15 February 2013, around 1500 people were injured when a small asteroid measuring 20 metres across entered Earth's atmosphere near Chelyabinsk, a Russian city with a population of over one million. Most of it vaporised, but what remained triggered an explosion at an altitude of around 30 kilometres, sending a shock wave that caused injuries in the city from countless shattered window panes. "Chelyabinsk was an event that serves as a warning, and to prevent dangerous incidents in the future, we need the data from the Hera mission," explains Manuel Metz, Hera project manager at the German Space Agency at DLR. "The consequences of an impact by a larger celestial body would be much more severe and could even threaten entire ocean coasts or continents. This would have existential consequences for the survival of humanity," emphasises Stephan Ulamec of MUSC, who is involved in the Hera mission's science tea. "The remains of the almost 200-kilometre-wide Chicxulub crater in what is now Mexico are a testament to this."



© NASA/JOHNS HOPKINS APL

This high-resolution view of Dimorphos was created by combining the latest ten full-frame images from the Didymos Reconnaissance and Asteroid Camera for Optical Navigation (DRACO) on NASA's DART spacecraft. Dimorphos is orientated so that its north pole is at the top of the image

Preparing to ward off near-Earth objects

The good news is that none of the approximately 36,000 known near-Earth objects (NEOs) with a diameter of more than 100 metres are currently on a collision course with Earth. The Apophis asteroid, discovered in 2004, will fly past Earth in 2029 and at its closest approach will be just 31,750 kilometres away, closer than geostationary satellites. Apophis is around 350 metres in diameter, which would have extreme consequences in the event of an impact. Based on what we know today, such a collision can be ruled out for the 21st century, but the fact that Apophis will pass so close to Earth shows that we must always be prepared for such events. In order to develop methods for effectively countering such dangers, NASA and ESA are conducting the 'Asteroid Impact and Deflection Assessment' (AIDA) joint project, consisting of NASA's DART and ESA's Hera missions.

The DART and Hera missions

© ESA-SJM

Hera spacecraft with solar wing deployed

NASA began the project with the DART (Double Asteroid Redirection Test) space probe. The chosen target was the Didymos and Dimorphos binary asteroid system, where the much smaller Dimorphos (around 150 metres in diameter) orbits the larger Didymos (around 800 metres in diameter). The aim was to influence the time that it takes for the asteroids to orbit each other. To do this, DART collided with Dimorphos at a controlled speed of over six kilometres per second (22,500 kilometres per hour) on 26 September 2022. Measurements with telescopes were able to determine that the orbital period had been shortened by 33 minutes from the original 11 hours 55 minutes, surpassing the 10-minute reduction predicted by prior modelling.

Hera is sent to the binary asteroid system to investigate exactly how the orbital period and shape of the asteroid has changed. The probe is equipped with 12 measuring instruments for this purpose. Among the most important ones are the two Asteroid Framing Cameras (AFC), two redundant monochromatic cameras built in Jena, which will be used to determine the position of the space probe in the asteroid system. They are essential for the navigation of the spacecraft and will also contribute to further exploration of the asteroids.

Digital terrain model of the asteroid

The Hera science team will use the images from the AFCs to calculate a digital terrain model of the asteroid and search for changes caused by the DART impact on Dimorphos (in fact the asteroid's name derives from the Greek for 'two forms', referring to its changed shape after the impact). "Was a crater created on Dimorphos? Was the entire asteroid altered? Was Didymos' surface also affected by ejected material? We want to answer these questions using our digital terrain model," says Principal Investigator for the cameras Jean-Baptiste Vincent from the DLR Institute of Planetary Research.

© JENA-OPTRONIK

The Asteroid Framing Camera, AFC

CubeSats land on Dimorphos

Hera is also carrying two CubeSats, named Juventas and Milani, each the size of a shoebox. The nanosatellites will observe Dimorphos at close range and ultimately attempt to land on it in the final phase of the mission to measure its surface characteristics, interior structure and gravitational field. The measurements are intended to determine the exact mass of Dimorphos, which will have already been determined by the AFCs. The data obtained will then be used to calculate how other celestial bodies could be deflected, forming the basis of a planetary defence mission in the event of an asteroid on a collision course with Earth. The data collected will also mark a further milestone in asteroid research more generally.

German technology featured in a European joint project

Germany is the largest contributor to the ESA mission, providing around 130 million euros (37 percent of the total). The Hera spacecraft was developed and built by OHB SE in Bremen. A newly developed antenna made of carbon-fibre-reinforced plastic was produced by Munich-based HPS, while the two AFCs are from Jena-Optronik. The TUD Dresden University of Technology is heavily involved in the development of the radar experiment on the Juventas CubeSat. German researchers are also working on the Hera Science team to scientifically evaluate the data obtained from the mission. The German Space Agency at DLR is coordinating all of these German contributions to the mission with funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK).

MEASLES ON THE RISE AGAIN IN EUROPE

© JIM GOODSON

Data presented in the monthly measles and rubella update by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) indicate ongoing transmission of measles across a number of countries in EU/EEA, with a steep rise in cases reported during 2024. After a period of unusually low measles activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, an uptick was initially noted in 2023, with 3 973 reported cases in the EU/EEA.

Between 1 February 2024 and 31 January 2025, a total of 32 265 people were diagnosed with measles. During this period, Romania (27 568), Italy (1 097), Germany (637), Belgium (551) and Austria (542) reported the highest number of cases across the EU/EEA. During the period, Romania recorded 18 deaths attributed to measles and Ireland also recorded one death.

The ongoing transmission indicates gaps in vaccination coverage against this preventable illness — among children, adolescents and adults alike.

Measles is a highly contagious disease. It transmits easily from person to person through the air (for example, when an infected person coughs or sneezes) and spreads rapidly in communities among people who have not been vaccinated or are not fully immunised.

In 2024, the peak in measles cases reported across the EU/EEA was observed in the first six months of the year. In line with the seasonal pattern of the disease, a further increase in the number of cases is expected during the spring of 2025.

Sub-optimal measles vaccination coverage across the EU/EEA

Prevention of measles outbreaks and protection of vulnerable populations requires that at least 95% of the population eligible for vaccination receive two doses of the MMR vaccine. However, vaccination levels in the EU/EEA still fall short of this target, with estimates from 2023 showing that only four countries (Hungary, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia) report such coverage for both doses.

This leaves many communities vulnerable to measles, including children who are too young to be vaccinated or those who cannot be immunised for medical reasons and therefore rely on a high vaccination coverage in the overall population.

Based on the available data, young children between one and four years of age and adults aged thirty years and older had their distinctive share among the group of unvaccinated people who contracted measles last year.

Among those diagnosed with measles between the beginning of 2024 and early 2025 with information available on their vaccination status, 25 503 (86%) were unvaccinated — this means that eight out of ten people who fell ill with measles during that period had not been immunised. The same applies to children aged one to four years (even though this age group is the focus of national immunisation programmes): 84% of those children with information available on their vaccination status had not been vaccinated when they contracted measles.

No time for measles: check your vaccination status

A safe and effective vaccine has been used for decades to prevent measles. All EU/EEA countries include the recommended two doses of MMR vaccine in their national immunisation schedule. The first dose is usually given between 12–15 months of age and the second dose between three and seven years of age, with some variation among countries. Two doses of the MMR vaccine are needed to achieve full protection against measles.

An infectious disease such as measles will only be unlikely to spread from person to person if a sufficiently large proportion of the population achieve immunity. This also provides protection for vulnerable groups (so-called herd immunity), such as infants under one year, who are more exposed to measles and its complications because they are too young to be vaccinated.

In outbreak situations, or before travelling to a country where measles is endemic, healthcare professionals might suggest an early dose of the MMR vaccine (i.e. before the child turns one year) in line with national recommendations. However, these children will still need to adhere to the national vaccination schedule (i.e. in addition to the early dose, they should receive the two doses of MMR vaccine at the recommended ages to achieve full immunity).

Measles can also affect adults if they are not immunised – by being fully vaccinated or because they have already had measles. It is therefore equally important for adults to check their immunisation status in order to prevent illness and further transmission.

TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

SPRING'S MOST CAPTIVATING FRAGRANCES

With an extra touch of freshness, a dash of boldness, and the effortless elegance we adore, spring fragrances never fail to impress. Whether you're drawn to floral, gourmand, or something delightfully unexpected, there's a scent ready to become your signature. Here are our top 7 picks, each with its own distinct personality.

These seven fragrances are the ideal way to revitalise your scent collection for spring. Which one is speaking to you?

© PANDORA X AHLUWALIA

Powdery Musk
NARCISO POUDRÉE by Narciso Rodriguez

Why you'll love it: Soft, sensual, and utterly irresistible… this fragrance envelops you in a delicate embrace of jasmine, velvety musk, and warm woods. It's like the olfactory version of slipping into your most cherished cashmere sweater.

Olfactory Pyramid(*): Jasmine, Bulgarian Rose, Orange Blossom / Powdery Musk / Vetiver, Cedarwood, Tonka Bean

Floral Oriental
BORN IN ROMA GREEN STRAVAGANZA by Valentino

Why you'll love it: Picture a bold yet luminous twist on florals, where a vibrant tea accord blends seamlessly with the sophistication of jasmine and a comforting vanilla base. Fresh, radiant, and bursting with energy—this is springtime captured in a bottle.

Olfactory Pyramid: Green Tea, Bergamot / Jasmine, Orange Blossom / Vanilla, Musk

Gourmand
LA VIE EST BELLE L'ELIXIR by Lancôme

Why you'll love it: Lancôme elevates its iconic fragrance with a luxurious infusion of joy, crafting a warm and irresistibly addictive scent.

Olfactory Pyramid: Raspberry, Bergamot / Iris, Orange Blossom / Patchouli, Vanilla, Praline.

Citrus Aromatic
AQUA ALLEGORIA MANDARINE BASILIC FORTE by Guerlain

Why you'll love it: Guerlain enriches its cherished Aqua Allegoria line with a bright and radiant fragrance—a celebration of nature and the invigorating spirit of spring.

Olfactory Pyramid: Mandarin, Basil, Blackcurrant / Rose, Orange Blossom, Vanilla Tincture / Cedarwood, Sandalwood, Musk

Oriental Gourmand
BLACK OPIUM GLITTER by Yves Saint Laurent

Why you'll love it: It captures the essence of the original Black Opium but with an added touch of brilliance. It retains the bold blend of black coffee and vanilla, now enhanced with a playful, glamorous twist. If you live for making a statement, this is the scent for you.

Olfactory Pyramid: Pear, Pink Pepper, Orange Blossom / Coffee, Jasmine, Bitter Almond, Licorice / Vanilla, Patchouli, Cedarwood, Cashmere Wood

Aquatic Floral
ACQUA DI GIOIA by Giorgio Armani

Why you'll love it: If spring had a signature scent, this would be it. Cool, refreshing, and effortlessly captivating, it combines zesty citrus, soft peony, and a subtle touch of woody warmth. It's like the feeling of dipping your toes into the sea on a perfect sunny day.

Olfactory Pyramid: Lemon, Mint / Jasmine, Peony, Pink Pepper / Cedarwood, Brown Sugar, Labdanum

Fruity Floral
ENGLISH PEAR & FREESIA by Jo Malone

Why you'll love it: Light, elegant, and effortlessly chic. The crispness of pear blends with the delicate touch of freesia, crafting a fragrance that's as refreshing as a spring morning yet refined enough to carry you through the day—and into the night.

Olfactory Pyramid: King William Pear, Freesia / Patchouli, Amber / Musk

(*) The listed ingredients are presented in the following order :Top notes, Heart notes and Base notes.

MUST-SEE COLLABO-RATIONS

In the world of clothing and accessories, numerous brands are joining forces to create standout pieces.

Pandora X Ahluwalia: Engraved elegance

Pandora collaborates with rising star Priya Ahluwalia on an exclusive collection of engravable symbols, hand-sketched by the designer. Known for her unique blend of Indian-Nigerian heritage and London cool, Ahluwalia has made a significant impact since launching her eponymous label in 2018, championing responsible fashion with a distinctive edge. (uk.pandora.net)

© PANDORA X AHLUWALIA

Veja X Bimba y Lola: Creative fusion

Merging sustainability with bold creativity, the iconic eco-friendly sneaker brand joins forces with Bimba y Lola, a Spanish collective celebrated for its effortless fusion of art, culture, and fashion. This collaboration results in two exclusive renditions of the Venturi II, showcasing distinctive design details: a redesigned suede label, refined topstitching, and a fresh, surprising colour range. (veja-store.com)

© VEJA X BIMBA Y LOLA

© UNIQLO

Uniqlo X Comptoir des Cotonniers : Effortless elegance

Voila! A perfect description of the collaboration between Japanese 'made for all' clothing brand Uniqlo and the Parisian brand: 'French modernity meets Lifewear'. The collection offers delicate 100% cotton knits, feminine dresses, and linen trousers and blouses, all designed to be effortlessly paired. (uniqlo.com)

© DELSEY X UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON

Delsey X United Colors of Benetton: Back to the 90s

This collaboration merges Delsey's innovative design and technology with Benetton's vibrant aesthetic, drawing inspiration from iconic 90s trends like colour blocking and minimalist pastels. The range, featuring durable cabin suitcases and versatile backpacks, is designed for modern travel while showcasing the unique style of both brands (delsey.com)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