

Import guide

# Importing from China to the EU

A practical route from factory floor to warehouse door — the seven decisions that shape your cost, your timeline, and whether your goods clear customs on the first pass.

|                                  |                                 |                                   |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>25-40</b> days<br>Sea freight | <b>5-10</b> days<br>Air freight | <b>18-22</b> days<br>Rail freight |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|

# The import process, step by step

Seven stages between choosing a supplier and goods leaving your warehouse. Each one is expanded below with the details that usually decide whether a shipment goes smoothly.

## 1 Sourcing & supplier selection

Find a manufacturer or trading company, verify they're legitimate, and agree on samples, pricing, and minimum order quantity (MOQ) before committing.

- **Manufacturer vs. trading company** — a factory gives better pricing and control over quality, but a trading company can be faster for smaller or mixed orders and often speaks better English.
- **Verify legitimacy** — check the business license, ask for a factory audit or video walkthrough, and consider a third-party verification service (SGS, Bureau Veritas, or similar) for larger commitments.
- **Samples before commitment** — always test physical samples against your specification before placing a full order, not just photos or a supplier's own claims.
- **Payment terms** — a common structure is 30% deposit up front, 70% before shipment; negotiate this alongside price and MOQ, not after.

## 2 Product classification

Determine the correct HS/TARIC code before you order — it dictates your duty rate, whether anti-dumping surcharges apply, and which compliance certifications you'll need.

- **Look it up early** — use the EU's TARIC database to find the exact code and third-country duty rate that applies to China-origin goods.
- **Watch for anti-dumping duties** — on top of standard duty, categories like ceramics, steel, e-bikes, solar panels, and some chemicals can carry significant additional surcharges. Check both before you order, not after.
- **Get certainty if the code is unclear** — a Binding Tariff Information (BTI) ruling from customs locks in the classification in advance, useful for high-volume or borderline products.

affects duty rate + certifications

## 3 Cost calculation

Factor in product cost, shipping, insurance, import duties, anti-dumping duties where applicable, and VAT — the landed cost is what matters, not the FOB price.

- **Landed cost** = product cost + freight + insurance + duty + VAT + broker/handling fees. Two suppliers with the same unit price can land very differently once duty and freight are added.
- **Incoterms shape who pays for what** — EXW puts most logistics and risk on you; FOB shifts export handling to the supplier; DDP means the supplier delivers duty-paid, which simplifies your side but usually costs more per unit.
- **Low-value consignments** — from July 2026, a temporary customs duty of €3 applies to low-value parcels up to €150, on top of import VAT. Relevant mainly for small sample or trial shipments.

**Rule of thumb:** compare suppliers on landed cost per unit, not FOB price — the gap between the two is often larger than the price difference between suppliers.

## 4 Quality control & production

Arrange a pre-shipment inspection and verify product specs, packaging, labelling, and compliance markings before goods leave China.

- **Pre-shipment inspection** — a third-party inspector checks a statistical sample (AQL sampling) against your agreed specification before the goods are loaded, catching defects while they're still cheap to fix.
- **Compliance markings** — confirm CE marking, REACH compliance for chemicals, or RoHS for electronics is correctly applied, not just promised, before shipment.
- **Labelling** — check country-of-origin marking and any language requirements for consumer-facing products in your target market.

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## Shipping & logistics

Choose sea freight (25–40 days), air freight (5–10 days), or rail (18–22 days), and arrange a freight forwarder to handle booking and insurance.

- Sea freight — lowest cost per unit, standard choice for full container loads (FCL) or consolidated less-than-container loads (LCL).
  - Air freight — fastest, but priced by weight; usually reserved for urgent, high-value, or lightweight shipments.
  - Rail freight — a middle ground on both cost and speed, increasingly used for China–Europe trade lanes.
  - Cargo insurance — arrange this regardless of Incoterm; freight forwarders can usually add it directly to the booking.
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## Customs clearance

Submit the customs declaration with all supporting documentation, pay import duties and VAT, and clear the goods for free circulation in the EU.

- Entry Summary Declaration (ENS) — your carrier or forwarder submits this electronically before the goods arrive, covering cargo details for security screening.
  - Import declaration — covers the importer of record, HS code, customs value, origin, and procedure code; this is where duty and VAT are calculated.
  - Physical inspection risk — most shipments clear in 1–3 business days with correct paperwork; if selected for inspection, add 2–5 days. Missing or incorrect documents are the most common cause of delay.
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## Last-mile delivery

Once cleared, goods move to your warehouse or directly to your customers — and within the EU, goods cleared in one member state circulate freely to the rest.

- Free circulation — once duty and VAT are paid and the goods are released in any EU member state, they can move to any other member state without further customs formalities.
  - Bonded warehousing — if part of the shipment will be re-exported outside the EU, consider a bonded/customs warehouse to defer duty and VAT on that portion.
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# Documents you'll need

The core paperwork customs will ask for on every shipment, plus what applies depending on your product category.

| Document                           | Status      | What it covers                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Commercial invoice                 | required    | Buyer and seller details, product description, quantities, unit prices, total value, currency, Incoterms, and country of origin. The basis for customs valuation.               |
| Packing list                       | required    | What's in each box or pallet — item counts, weights, and dimensions. Used by customs to verify the commercial invoice and to select shipments for inspection.                   |
| Transport document                 | required    | Bill of lading (B/L) for sea freight, air waybill (AWB) for air freight. Proof of shipment, and for ocean freight, also a document of title.                                    |
| EORI number                        | required    | Economic Operators Registration and Identification number for your business. Free to obtain from your national customs authority, and mandatory for any EU customs declaration. |
| Entry Summary Declaration (ENS)    | required    | Electronic pre-arrival declaration submitted by the carrier or forwarder, covering cargo and consignee details for security screening.                                          |
| Customs declaration                | required    | Covers the importer of record, HS code, country of origin, customs value, and procedure code. Submitted electronically to release goods into free circulation.                  |
| Certificate of origin              | conditional | Required for some regulated goods or for commercial reasons. Doesn't reduce the duty rate for China-origin goods, since no preferential trade agreement applies.                |
| CE declaration of conformity       | conditional | Required for electrical goods, machinery, toys, and personal protective equipment (PPE) placed on the EU market.                                                                |
| REACH / RoHS documentation         | conditional | REACH compliance for chemicals and chemical-containing products; RoHS for electronics, restricting hazardous substances.                                                        |
| Phytosanitary / health certificate | conditional | Required for plant-based goods (phytosanitary) or animal-origin products (health certificate plus a Border Inspection Post entry).                                              |

This is general guidance, not an exhaustive or legal checklist — exact requirements vary by product, HS code, and change over time. Confirm the precise document set with a customs broker before every shipment.