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The Winner Takes It All?

Who Benefits from China's Increasing Presence in Francophone Africa?[1]

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Abstract:

In this paper we explore whether China's presence in Francophone Africa is to the detriment or the benefit of the countries of the region. In each of our five case studies - the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Guinea, Mauritius and Djibouti - we examine the respective countries' motivations to cooperate with China, the advantages and disadvantages derived from the relationship, China's drivers in its Africa-relations, and whether the cooperation can be considered successful for both sides. We find our hypothesis verified. The selected countries are indeed attracted to China primarily by the need for financial resources and infrastructure development and the promise of non-interference in domestic politics. China is motivated primarily by global trade and political ambitions, raw materials and the growing regional market. With certain limitations, the relationship between Francophone Africa and China can indeed be a win-win relationship.

Keywords:

China; Francophone Africa; trade; Chinese loans; infrastructure in Africa; natural resources; raw materials.

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Introduction

Compared with Europe, the People's Republic of China (China) is a new player on the African continent, having been present in the region for less than seven decades. Its presence, however, has become significant in a relatively short period of time, as “the most important set of dynamics to shape Africa’s external relations since the end of the Cold War” (Kopinski, Polus, and Taylor 2011, p. 129). Beijing's economic penetration is the most visible aspect of the relationship, yet it shouldn't necessarily mean that it is driven by purely economic interests. In fact, even at the very beginning of the cooperation, the Sino-African relationship was typically driven by ideological and political motivations, while economic relations were of secondary importance. Economic interests were added to these motivations later on, but it should be stressed that this aspect did not replace but only supplemented the earlier set of motivations (Szunomár et al. 2017).

In many ways, China is becoming a direct competitor of developed country actors in Africa. This tendency is further reinforced by African countries' foreign policy strategies, that seek to diversify their external relations and are in many ways more open to a power that lends money but does not expect reforms in return; builds long-awaited infrastructure but does not wish to interfere in internal affairs; offers affordable technology, youth exchanges and medical training programmes; and has pledged 1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine to African governments at the 2021 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

Several different narratives have emerged in recent years on Africa's relationship with China. The Chinese narrative emphasises the 'win-win' nature of the relationship, that is, cooperation is presented as mutually beneficial (FOCAC, 2018). Furthermore, China also represents a long-awaited, gap-filling source of investments to build infrastructure for African countries (Taylor, 2006) and appears as a positive development model from the Third World (Alden 2005). Meanwhile, most Western narratives typically see China as an exploitative power, an emerging actor in the new scramble for the continent’s natural resources (Lee 2006; Marton and Matura 2011) and markets (Adovor Tsikudo 2021) driving African countries into commodities-export dependence (Sindzingre 2011) or debt traps (Carmody et al. 2021). Others highlight the complementarity between China’s capital abundancy and resource needs and Africa’s natural resource abundancy as well as infrastructure and investment needs (Wilson 2005). Furthermore, Zeleza (2014) points out that China’s increasing weight in global supply chains may curb Africa’s industrialization and development opportunities.Opinions and perceptions of China's presence in Africa are also divided among African people: Beijing is seen either as a saviour or a new coloniser (Dadzie 2012). The truth probably lies somewhere in between these two positions, while the cooperation between Africa and China brings both opportunities and challenges for African countries.

There is no clear demarcation line between Francophone and other African countries' relations with China, i.e. the characteristics and narratives of Sino-African relations also characterise Sino-Francophone African relations. Nevertheless, one can detect a significant difference in the level of economic performance (GDP) and human development between former British and French colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding five North-African countries and South Africa with different historical and development paths and former Portuguese or Spanish colonies). Scholars researching this phenomenon (Crowder 1968, Firmin-Sellers 2000; Grier, 1999; Njoh, 2000) explain the lag of Francophone countries – former French and Belgian colonies – with the legacy of the socio-political systems of colonial governance. If we regard GDP per capita as an indicator (WDI, 2022), this finding is also valid for the recent years. After excluding two high-income outliers, the small countries of Mauritius and the Seychelles Islands, the average GDP per capita of Anglophone countries is nearly one-third higher than that of their Francophone counterparts South of the Sahara for the period of 2015-2019 (See Appendix 1). This implies that French-speaking African countries are more demanding for external investments and infrastructural support that, among others, China can provide. Moreover, as Donou-Adonsou and Lim (2018) highlight, Chinese investments seem to be playing a relatively more important role in the region's income per capita increase compared with those of the traditional economic partners of the continent, namely, developed countries of the West. Besides, they also claim that Chinese investments raise standard of living in Francophone African countries more than French ones (Donou-Adonsou and Lim, 2018). On the basis of these findings, we have decided to focus our research on the relations between Chinese and Francophone Africa.

In this paper we explore whether China's presence in Francophone Africa is actually to the detriment or the benefit of the countries of the region. To ensure higher external validity of our results, we apply a most-different-cases research design (Seawright and Gerring 2008). That is, we selected cases that differ from each other in a number of ways to reflect the variation in the overall sample. In each of our five case studies - the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Guinea, Mauritius and Djibouti - we examine why the respective Francophone African countries decided to cooperate with China, what advantages and disadvantages have been derived from the cooperation, what motivations have driven and continue to drive China in its Africa-relations, and whether the cooperation can be considered successful for both sides. According to our hypothesis, Francophone African countries choose to cooperate with China primarily due to the need for financial resources and infrastructure development (and the lack of political expectations associated with these), while China continues to be driven by political motivations. The access to raw materials and the growing local market are also important aspects: through African countries, Beijing is creating a diplomatic backbone that will boost its international image and thus support China's rise as a great power.

Our article is structured as follows: in the first section, we briefly review the history of Sino-African relations as well as the dynamics of the development of economic relations, supported by statistical data. Then, after briefly summing up our methodology, we present our five cases and analyse them in separate subsections, highlighting the specificities of each relationship. In the conclusion, we summarise our findings and examine the verification of our hypothesis.

China-Africa Relations in Historical Perspective

Although China's rise as a great power in recent years has drawn more attention to China's presence in Africa, in fact the relationship between China and Africa is far from being entirely new. After the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, Beijing showed ideological solidarity with the less developed countries of Africa almost straight away, as early as the 1950s and 1960s, to promote Chinese-style communism as opposed to both Soviet and American ideologies. Beijing sought comprehensive alliances with the countries of the region, which at the time were mainly of diplomatic - rather than economic or political - importance to China, especially on the issue of non-recognition of Taiwan.

Since the 1980s, China has also been involved in economically beneficial cooperation. From this period onwards, many Chinese companies set up operations in Africa to participate directly in, for example, construction projects, often financed by Chinese loans. In addition to the involvement of Chinese firms, the use of Chinese raw materials also characterised the cooperation and was also an important element of Chinese aid programmes. Of course, China did not initiate its support to Africa out of goodwill, but from the beginning it has sought to ensure that cooperation benefits both sides, albeit not equally, for example, through infrastructure development that could not otherwise have been achieved on the African continent. Another benefit of Chinese aid has been to make African political-economic elites more China-friendly. Consequently, the international reaction to the events of 1989 was not really echoed in Africa, as the continent's leaders did not condemn the Beijing government's intervention in Tiananmen Square. But African countries - which tend to vote in a bloc in multilateral fora (Alden 2005) - have been counted on whenever China, Chinese foreign policy or the human rights situation is discussed.

Both China's going global policy (zou chu qu) in the early 2000s and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 was accompanied by a growing Chinese engagement globally. Therefore, China's role in Africa, both economically and politically, has continued to grow since the turn of the millennium. In 2000, for example, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established at China's initiative, while diplomatic visits have also increased. Of Africa's 54 countries, 53 - including all the Francophone African countries - abide by the One China principle, i.e., they acknowledge that there is only one sovereign state under the name China, governed by the PRC and Taiwan is part of it. Meanwhile, China has also made progress on the economic front, accounting for more than 15% of Africa's trade in 2020 and disbursing USD 153 billion in loans to the continent between 2000 and 2019 (Pairault 2021).

In parallel with the expansion of trade, the product structure has also changed: As far as the structure of exports from China to (Francophone) African countries is concerned, it is very similar to the structure of China's exports to other regions and countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese exports consisted mainly of light industry products, foodstuffs, and chemical products, but since the turn of the millennium, exports of machinery, mechanical engineering products, automobiles and electronics have also increased significantly. Chinese exports to

Africa were initially dominated by primary products such as cotton and phosphate, but the export structure has changed significantly in recent years. Today, energy, raw materials and minerals are clearly dominant, which fits perfectly into the African export structure. To put it simply: China needs the same from Africa as any other country.

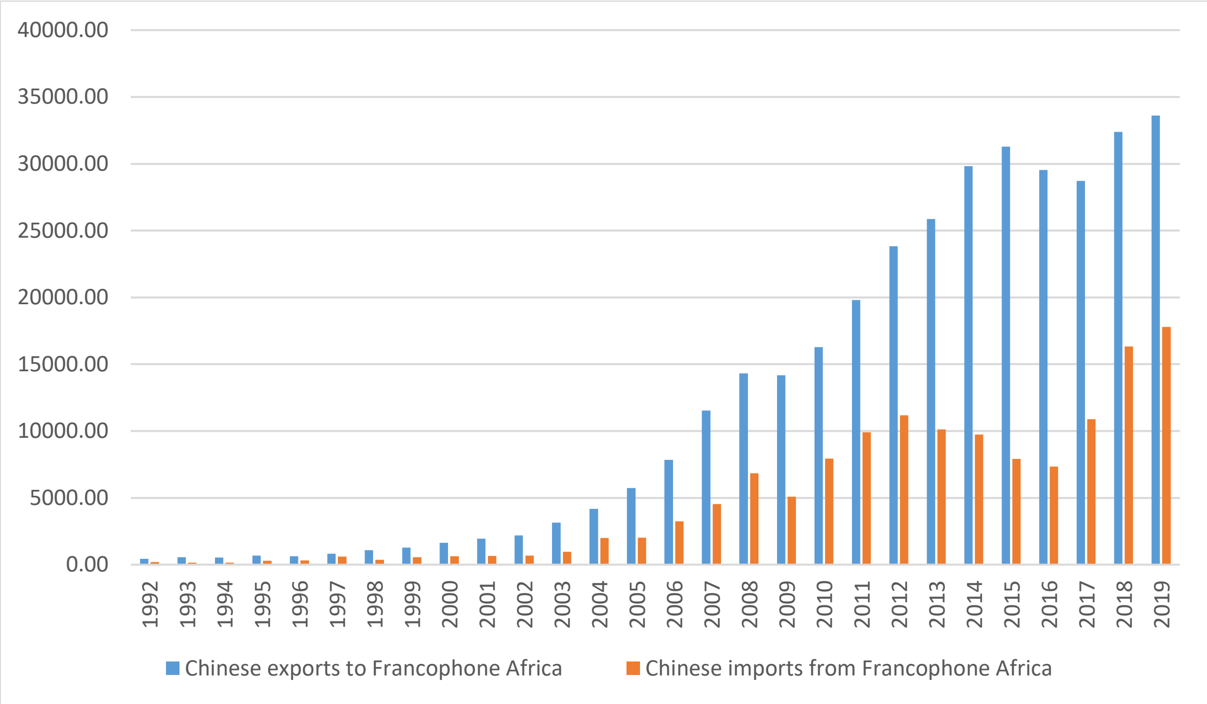

Figure 1. Trade between China and Francophone Africa, mUSD. Source: Authors' own compilation based on statistics from the Johns Hopkins University, SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative Database

As regards foreign direct investment (FDI), Chinese FDI is a less common form of Chinese economic presence in Africa compared with Chinese presence in the developed world. The majority of those foreign direct investment projects that took place are mostly linked to the production of raw materials. Consequently, those Francophone African countries that are rich in raw materials - such as oil, bauxite, iron ore and copper - are the main destinations of Chinese FDI. Such raw materials do not only attract Chinese capital to mining, but also to infrastructure, since raw materials extracted from the acquired mines have to be transported from the mine to the port so as it can be shipped to China.

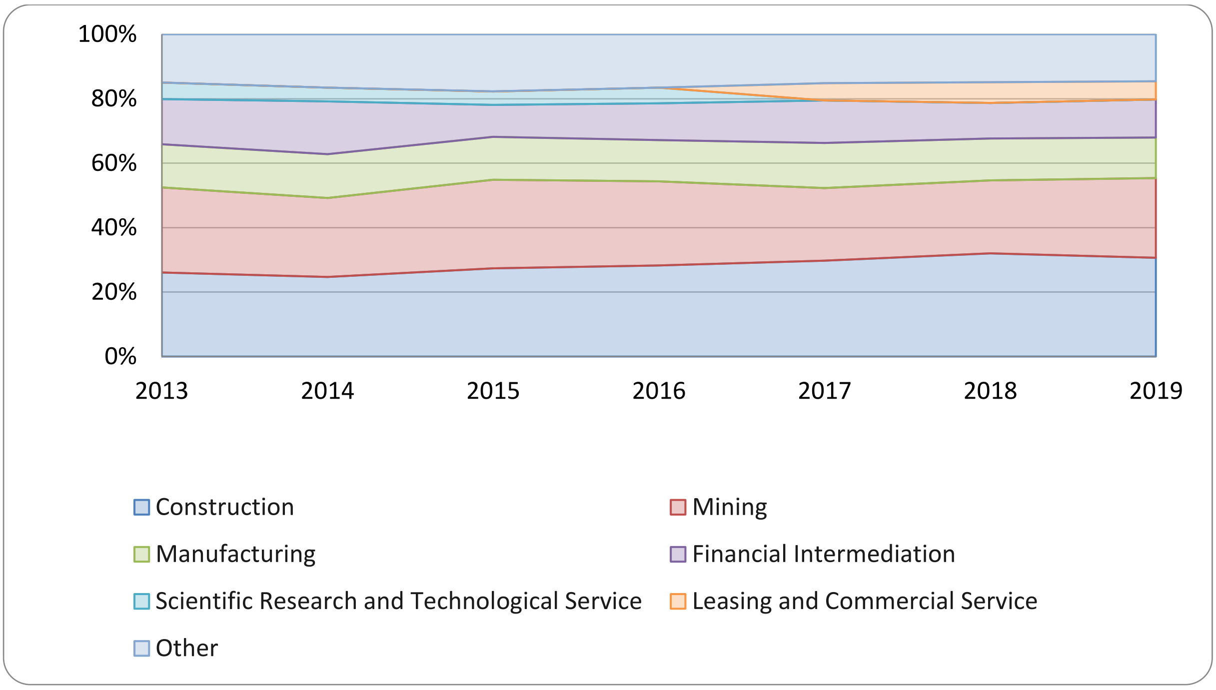

Figure 2. Sectoral distribution of Chinese FDI in Africa (2013-2019). Source: Authors' own compilation based on the database of Johns Hopkins University, SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative.

The primary purpose of most of the infrastructure projects implemented by Chinese construction companies are therefore not necessarily to improve the well-being of the Francophone African population, but to provide the first steps in the supply of raw materials to China. At the same time, investments have also been made in projects such as hydroelectric power stations and public facilities that have a broader social benefit for the analysed African countries. These projects - in addition to generating substantial revenues for the Chinese constructors - have in many cases been financed by Chinese bank loans.

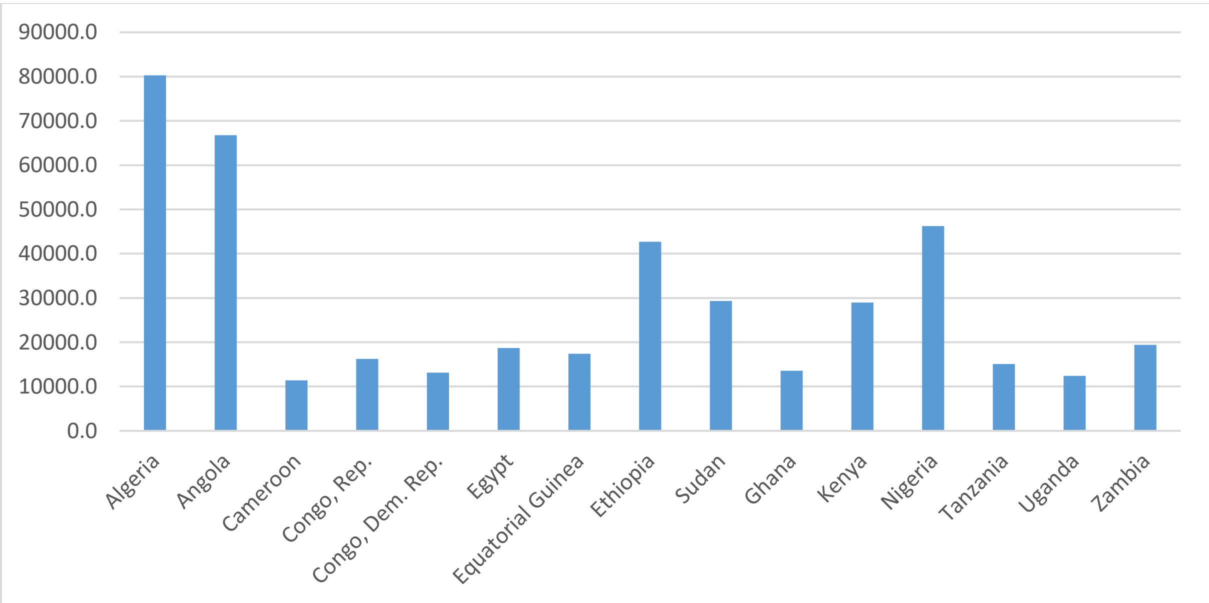

Figure 3. Construction revenues of Chinese companies in African countries, 1998-2019 (mUSD) Source: Authors' own compilation based on the database of Johns Hopkins University, SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative. (To ensure clarity, only values above 10 billion USD are shown.)

Variations of Francophone African and Chinese Relations: Case Studies

Taking stock of the relations between all 25 Francophone African countries and China, we can conclude that the relationship is not a particularly important one, apart from the fact that the Chinese presence is growing there in line with global trends. There are, however, a few Francophone African countries that are strategically important partners for China. In the following, we focus on these relations through case studies, describing the variations in the relations between the selected countries and China. The countries we have chosen to examine, namely the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Guinea, Mauritius, and Djibouti, have been selected on the basis of a most-different-cases research design. That is, we tried to ensure that our case studies reflect variations in the Sino-Franco-African relationship, both in terms of territory, population, and the characteristics of the Chinese presence. We have sought to include countries of all sizes (small, medium, large) and levels of development (relatively more developed, developing, and underdeveloped), that represent all regions of French-speaking Africa and have experienced substantial progress in their economic relations with China in the past years.

As will be shown below, in each of these relations, one can observe substantial development of economic relations, but in most cases in a rather one-sided way. Although there are several similarities between the five cases, there is no uniform pattern. That is, the nature of the relationship, the relevant sectors and African export products are often different, mainly due to the characteristics and specificities of the Francophone African country concerned. There are, however, similarities between the structure of imports from China and the Chinese companies involved in infrastructure and extraction projects in the region.

Each chapter covers the development and characteristics of the trade relationship, the amount of FDI inflows and the sectors targeted, as well as the characteristics of the infrastructure built/under construction by Chinese companies, and the level of related loans.

During the analysis, we faced challenges as regards access to data. On the one hand, it was difficult to find reliable and comparable data on both the Chinese and the African side, while on the other hand, the discrepancy between the two national statistics - that of the respective African countries and the Chinese - was often significant. For these reasons, we tried to use statistics from international databases to ensure comparability. For bilateral trade data, we used data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC, 2021)[4], while for FDI and infrastructure projects we used statistics from the China Global Investment Tracker (CGIT) [5]. For both databases, we have also cross-checked our data with the UN Comtrade and UNCTAD databases whenever it was possible. In addition to showing the amount of money spent and sectoral priorities, the CGIT database also helped us to identify those Chinese companies

[4] https://oec.world/en

[5] https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/

active in the region. Data on the extent of loans granted by Chinese banks was taken from the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI)[6] database.

Guinea

In many ways, the China and Guinea relation is a prime example of the relationships between China and resource-rich developing countries. Guinea has a wealth of valuable resources - it is the world's second largest producer of bauxite, accounting for around 22% of the world's bauxite production and the largest currently discovered deposit (USGS 2021) - but it is very poor. It therefore needs significant investment and technological know-how to take advantage of its potential. This is where China comes in, for which the continued and cheap supply of minerals such as bauxite, iron ore, and nickel is of strategic importance, both in the short and long term. China has a large amount of capital and several construction companies: it can use its capital to invest and buy mining rights, or provide loans to the Guinean government, while its large companies can carry out the necessary infrastructure development. However, this process can ultimately lead to considerable vulnerability and does not necessarily contribute to Guinea's future development.

The above process is well illustrated by the trade relationship between the two countries. Until 2015, Guinea exported almost nothing to the East Asian power, while China exported a very diverse package, typically including clothing, footwear, motorbikes, rice, and electronics, according to the OEC.

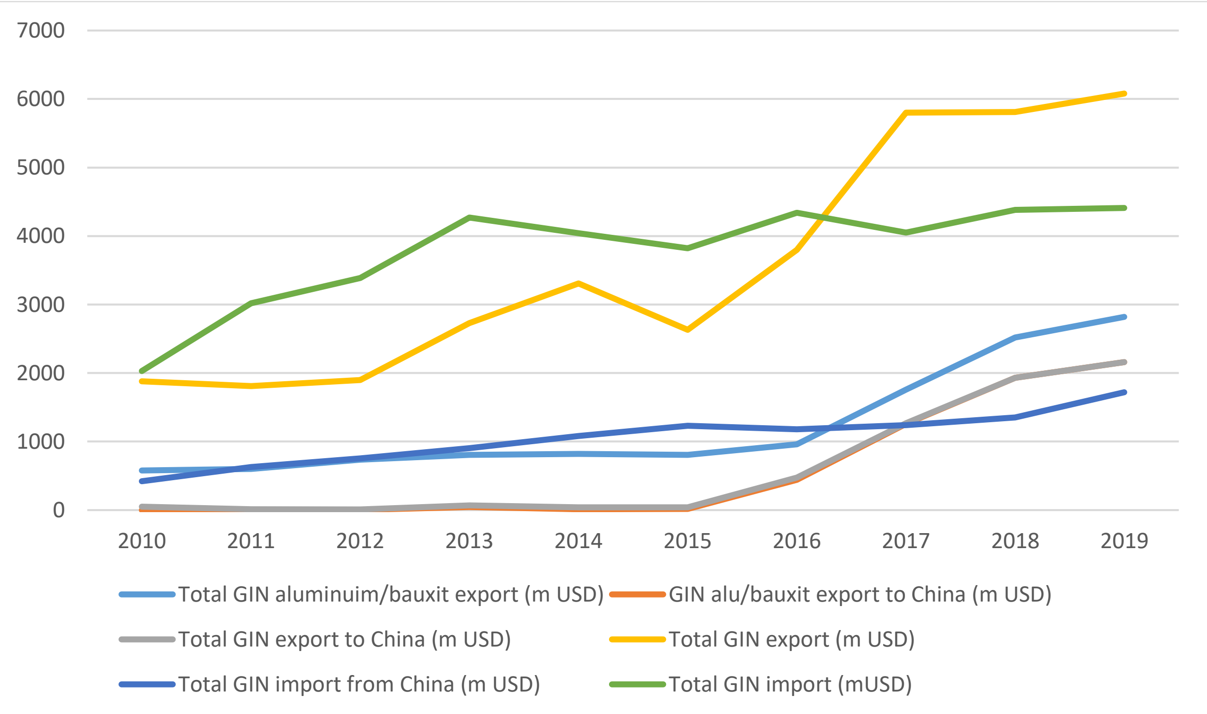

Figure 4. Guinea-Chine trade data 2010-2019 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on OEC data

[6] https://chinaafricaloandata.bu.edu/

However, after 2015, exports to China started to increase significantly, mainly for bauxite - and other processed forms of bauxite - which is the raw material for aluminium production. By the second half of the decade, China had become Guinea's main export partner alongside the United Arab Emirates: while in 2010 exports to China accounted for 2.5% of the country's total exports, in 2019 this figure had increased almost 14-fold. In parallel, the share of bauxite in total Guinean exports rose from 30% to 46%. This significant increase was also reflected in the Guinean trade balance: the deficit that had been present in the first half of the decade turned into a surplus from 2017. The trade balance with China, too, has been positive since 2017.

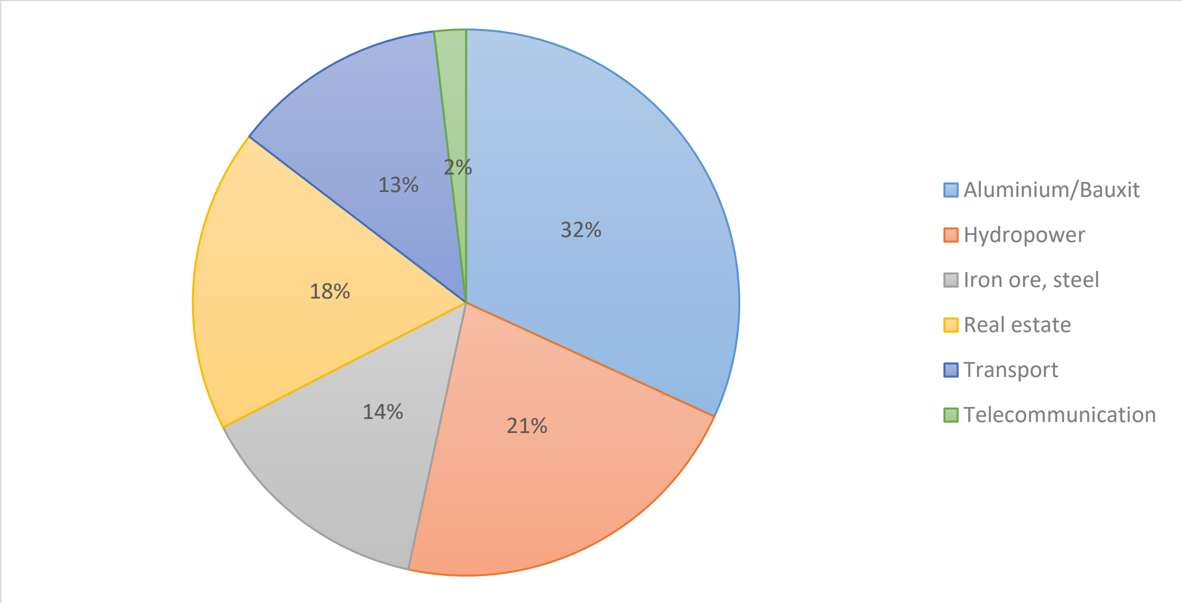

Figure 5. Chinese investments and construction agreements in Guinea 2011-2021 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on CGIT data

Based on CGIT data, a total of USD 12.51 billion of Chinese investment and construction contracts were identified for the period 2011-2021. A slightly larger share of this - nearly USD 7 billion - has been spent on construction and development contracts, while a smaller share was allocated for investments. Considering the above, it is not surprising that one third of the FDI and development projects are related to bauxite extraction. Hydropower and real estate development projects account for roughly 20% each, but iron ore, steel mining and transport have also attracted Chinese companies to the country.

Societe Miniere de Boke (SMB) and Compagnie des Bauxites de Guinee (CBG) are the country's two largest bauxite producers. SMB is owned by a consortium including Shandong Weiqiao, a subsidiary of China Hongqiao, one of the world's leading aluminium producers (SWI 2021). Chinese companies have also acquired mining rights in Guinea on several further occasions. In 2013, China Power Investment Corporation signed a mining rights contract with the Guinean government to explore and extract the Boffa bauxite deposit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014). The extraction was supported by a $590 million investment by Chinalco in 2018, according to CGIT. To facilitate the transportation of bauxite, China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) completed the construction of a railway line from Boffa to Boke in July 2021, doubling the one-way freight capacity (GlobalData 2021). Further phases of the project include the exploitation of bauxite resources in the new mining areas of Santou II and Houda, and the development of an alumina refinery in the Boke Special Economic Zone. Furhermore, in 2019, China Nonferrous Metal Industry Foreign Engineering and Construction signed a $1.1 billion agreement to build the Telimele bauxite mine and related infrastructure. The mine has a planned production capacity of 20 million tonnes per year of bauxite and refined rock suitable for alumina production (Reuters 2019).

Guinea also has the world's largest and one of the highest quality untapped iron ore deposits at the Simandou location. Understandably this has caught the attention of Chinese companies, which have also acquired several interests in Guinean iron ore mines. The Kalia iron ore mine, with an ore reserve of nearly 87.5 million tonnes at an iron grade of 54.1%, reached full capacity in 2018. The project, financed by the China International Fund, cost an estimated USD 4.45 billion and included the associated railways and port infrastructure (Mining Technology 2013). Production has not yet started at the Simandou iron ore mine, but the mining rights are divided into four separate blocks and Chinese companies have interests in each (NikkeiAsia, 2020). However, in order to access the vast quantities of iron ore hidden in Simandou, the mined iron ore must be transported to the Atlantic. This will require the construction of nearly 650 km of railways, 35 bridges, 24 km of tunnels and a deep-sea port at a total estimated cost of USD 23 billion (Reuters 2017). The Simandou project is thus directly linked to the construction of the Trans-Guinea railway line. The railway line is being built by China Railway Construction (China Daily 2020), the same company that built the railway line between the cities of Boke and Kindia, opened in the summer of 2021 (Railway Technology 2021).

In addition to the construction of the railways, the country's two largest hydroelectric power plants (Kaleta and Soupati) were also built by Chinese companies: China International Water & Electric Corporation (Tagmydeals 2022) and Three Gorges Corporation (NS Energy 2022), respectively. The Chinese hydroelectric power plants are also depicted on Guinean banknotes: the new 20,000 Guinean franc banknote of 2015 features the new Kaleta hydroelectric power plant, while the 5,000 franc note shows the Kinkon hydroelectric power plant, also built by the Chinese in 1960. The construction work was financed by a credit line from the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) and - in addition to the two large companies mentioned above - involved several further Chinese subcontractors. Chinese companies have also been contracted by the Guinean government to develop the port of Conakry for $770 million (Reuters, 2016), a housing complex of 5,000 apartments in Kansonyah (CAHF 2018); or a new modern district of Conakry, the 'Guinea Mar Grandioso', yet to be built (Plaza Diamant Website 2022).

In the CARI database, eight loan agreements between China and Guinea are recorded since 2010, for a total of USD 2.6 billion. As an outstanding indication of the country's economic importance to China, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China granted USD 20 billion to Guinea in 2017 for a 20-year term (Barma 2017). This has been a particularly big deal because Guinea's GDP in 2018 was USD 11.857 billion (by 2020 it reached USD 15.681 billion) (World Bank 2022). Hence, China provided almost double the country's GDP.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Diplomatic relations between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (later mentioned as DRC or Congo) and China got off to a turbulent start: in October 1960, the newly independent predecessor of the DRC, then called the Republic of the Congo, established diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2006), changed its recognition to the People's Republic of China in February 1961, and then recognised Taiwan again in September of the same year. Diplomatic relations were finally stabilised in 1972 between the DRC, then known as the Republic of Zaire, and the People's Republic of China (Rockefeller Foundation 2010). Since then, the relationship has been balanced and growing in economic terms, especially since the 2000s.

China is clearly Congo's most important export partner: in 2019, more than half of all exports went to China, according to the OEC database. Copper and cobalt exports accounted for the largest share, with 47% of exports to China being cobalt and 42% copper. However, while copper comes to China from multiple sources, 88% of refined or pre-processed cobalt and 97% of cobalt ore originated from Congo in 2019. Thanks to its significant mineral exports, the DRC, like Guinea, has enjoyed a consistent trade surplus with China in the second half of the decade. Just as in most of the cases in Africa, Chinese imports are very diverse, with the most common import products being automotive and electronics products, as well as clothing and footwear.

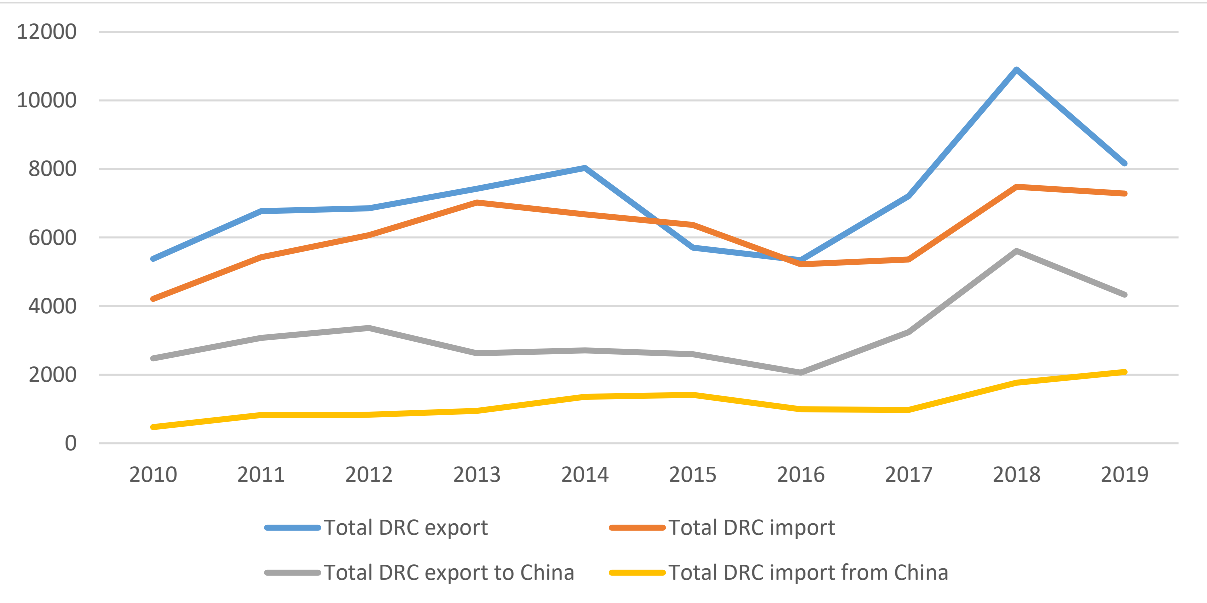

Figure 6. DRC-China trade data 2010-2019 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on OEC data

The cornerstone of the relationship between the DRC and China is the so-called Sicomines Agreement (Jansson 2011). This multi-billion-dollar mineral exchange agreement, concluded in 2009, created the Sino-Congolese mining joint venture Sino-Congolais des Mines (Sicomines) and allocated mining rights to Chinese companies in the mineral-rich south-eastern province of Katanga. In exchange for access to the mining rights, Sicomines promised to build transport and social infrastructure financed by loans from China's Exim Bank. Repayment of the loans is to be covered by profits from the mining venture. Under the agreement, China has committed to invest USD 3 billion to rebuild a disused mine and to invest a further USD 6 billion in infrastructure, including more than 3,000 kilometres of railways, 7,000 kilometres of roads, hospitals, and hydroelectric power stations. In return, Chinese companies have gained access to 10.6 million tonnes of copper and 600 000 tonnes of cobalt. In the years since, however, there have been significant tensions over both the agreement and the project: according to a 2017 Carter Center report, USD 685 million in loans related to Sicomines' infrastructure projects have disappeared and there is no evidence that the money has been used for its intended purpose (The Carter Center 2017). In 2021, the Congolese government initiated a review of mining concessions (Reuters 2021).

According to the CGIT database, between 2008 and 2020 China spent a total of USD 14.34 billion on investment and construction activity in Congo. The bulk of this amount - more than USD 10 billion - is FDI, the rest being construction contracts. Of the total value of projects, 80% are related to copper and cobalt mining and processing. In addition, there is significant activity in hydropower and power network projects.

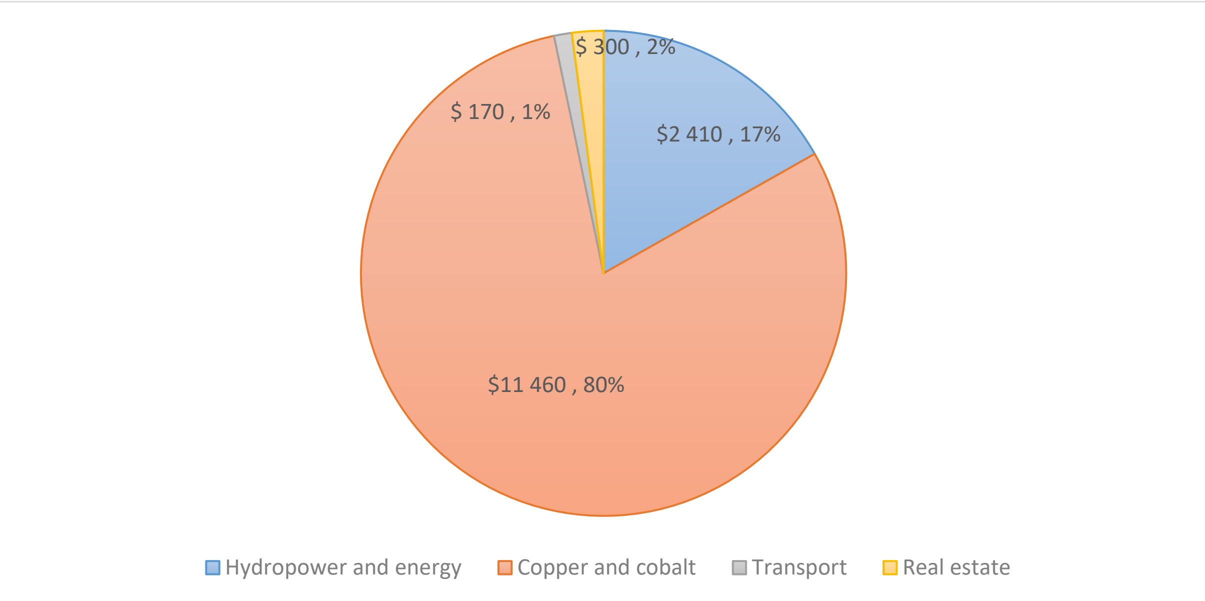

Figure 7. Chinese investment and construction activities in DRC between 2008 and 2020 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on CGIT data

We identified 20 Sino-Congolese mining projects up to 2021. These include operating mines, mines under construction and other sites (see Table 1). Overall, as a result of the Sicomines agreement and the acquisitions that followed in the decade after, Chinese companies and their interests now control nearly 70% of the Congolese mining sector (Reuters 2021).

Year	Acquisition	Affected mines
2011	China Minmentals Group acquired Anvil Mining for USD 1.28 billion	Kinsevere and Mutoshi (Reuters 2012)
2012	China Railway Groups' share in three mining projects	Luishia (72%), KMK 71%, Sicomines (33%) (China Railway Group Limited 2012)
2012	Jinchuan Group acquired Metorex company	Kinsenda, Ruashi, Dilala East and Lubembe (Jinchuan Group 2016,Metorex Limited 2022)
2015	Zijin Mining Group gained a 49.5% stake in Ivanhoe Mines for an investment of USD 412 million	Kamoa-Kalua (Zijin 2015)
2015	DongFang International Mining (subsidiary of Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt) bought mining rights in deposits $52 million	Luiwishi, Lukuni (Reuters 2015)
2016	China Molybdenum acquired stakes from Freeport-McMoran's (56%) and Lundin Mining's (24%)	Tenke Fungurume(Li 2016, Lundin Mining 2016)
2016	Strategic partnership: China Nonferrous and Eurasian Resources Group (ERG)	Frontier (ERG 2016)
2016	ERG Metakol Tailings: 112 million tonne extraction concession	Musono (RRPLC 2019)
2017	China Nonferrous agreed a USD 420 million investment with Yunnan Copper Industry Group to establish a copper smelter (S&P Global 2017)	
2018	Sinomine HK bought subsidiaries and mining rights from Tiger Resources	Kipoi, Lupoto (Tiger Resources Limited 2018)
2020	China Nonferrous Metal Mining's mine (51%) started operation	Deziwa, Kambove, Lualaba copper smelter, Mabende smelter (Reuters 2020a,Bloomberg 2020)
2020	China Molybdenum acquired Freeport McMoran's 95% stake	Kisanfu (Reuters 2020b)

Table 1. Sino-Congolese mining projects. Source: Authors' own compilation based on press reports

Besides mining and related acquisitions, there is also significant cooperation between the two countries on infrastructure projects. In 2009, China's Sinohydro and the Congolese government signed an agreement for the construction of the Zongo II hydropower plant, worth USD 360 million (African Energy 2019). The power plant is in operation since 2018, has an annual capacity of 850,000 megawatts of electricity generation and was fully financed by China's EximBank through a 20-year loan at 5% interest rate. The construction of the high-voltage grid connecting the power plant to Kinshasa and Kinsuka is also financed by China's EximBank (Takouleu 2019). But this is not the only hydropower project involving Chinese companies: in addition to agreements to build smaller-capacity hydropower plants in Busuga (Global Construction Review 2016), Sombwei (Banktrack 2021) and Kolwezi (MarketScreener 2019), there are more ambitious projects in the pipeline. If built, the Grand Inga power plant could be the world's largest hydroelectric power plant, with a planned capacity of 44,000 megawatts (Gnassou 2019). This includes the Inga III dam and power plant with a capacity of 12,000 megawatts. To build it, the Congolese government selected a Sino-Spanish-German consortium of 6 Chinese companies, which together own 75% of the project, including China Three Gorges Corporation, PowerChina and Sinohydro. In 2020, the Spanish partner announced its withdrawal from the project (Takouleu 2020).

Under the Sicomines agreement, credit lending from China started in 2008. CARI's database lists a total of 51 loan agreements for the DRC for the period 2008-2019, worth USD 2.087 billion. These were predominantly spent on transport (USD 1,015 million) and energy projects (USD 676 million), with more significant amounts also going to infocommunications (USD 167 million) and health (USD 115 million).

The importance of good relations with Congo for China is also illustrated by the fact that in January 2021, the Chinese government agreed to cancel USD 28 million of Congolese debt and pledged a further USD 17 million in aid, mainly for development projects.

Beyond economic relations, military cooperation is another area worth mentioning: China has contributed to the reform of the DRC Armed Forces (FARDC). In addition to the provision of military equipment, the FARDC headquarters and a naval base have been built with the support of Chinese companies (Omanyundu 2018). The DRC also joined the BRI initiative (Nyabiage 2021).

Algeria

The relationship between Algeria and China has been shaped by historical factors. When the FLN (National Liberation Front) proclaimed Algeria's provisional government in December 1958, China was the first non-Arab country to recognise it. After Algeria's independence in 1962, China provided substantial support in the form of food supplies, loans and equipment (Byrne 2016; Larkin 1973). The relationship appeared strategic: on the political front, China and Algeria closely coordinated their efforts in the UN on issues ranging from the Arab-Israeli conflict to apartheid in South Africa (Olimat 2014). However, Soviet-Chinese rivalry resulted in the two countries to drift somewhat apart during the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, during the economic and political crises of the 1990s, China sold an estimated USD 100 million worth of arms to Algeria (Grimmett 2003).

For our analysis, it is therefore important to note that economic and political relations between the two countries were already intensive and there was a coomon ground for their cooperation, such as confrontation with the West and the tradition of a similar economic-political structure, that is, the strong state control of the economy.

The spectacular re-appearance of China in Algeria dates back to the beginning of the new millennium. Once the security and political situation in Algeria had stabilised and the country had rapidly gained access to huge amounts of oil revenues, the government began to tackle the two main problems needed to maintain stability: housing and unemployment. The Economic Development Framework Programmes (EDFPs) were mainly used to build infrastructure and housing, backed up by massive public investment, which provided a good platform for Chinese state conglomerates to enter the market (Calabrese 2017). It is therefore not surprising that in 2014 Algeria became the first Arab country to build a comprehensive strategic partnership with China (Li, 2021).

In line with the above, trade between the two countries has also intensified. While Chinese exports were almost negligible in 2000, in the 2010s Algeria became China's largest market in the Maghreb region and China replaced France as Algeria's largest supplier. In 2012 and 2013, for example, the Algerian market was the largest market for Chinese-made passenger cars (Calabrese 2017). At the same time, however, in contrast to the two cases discussed above, a trade deficit has emerged in the relations: while in 2000 imports from China accounted for just over 2% of total annual imports into Algeria, this figure had increased to almost 18% by 2019. Oil products account for literally all (more than 99%) of Algeria's exports to China, while the Chinese export consists mainly of automotive and electronics products.

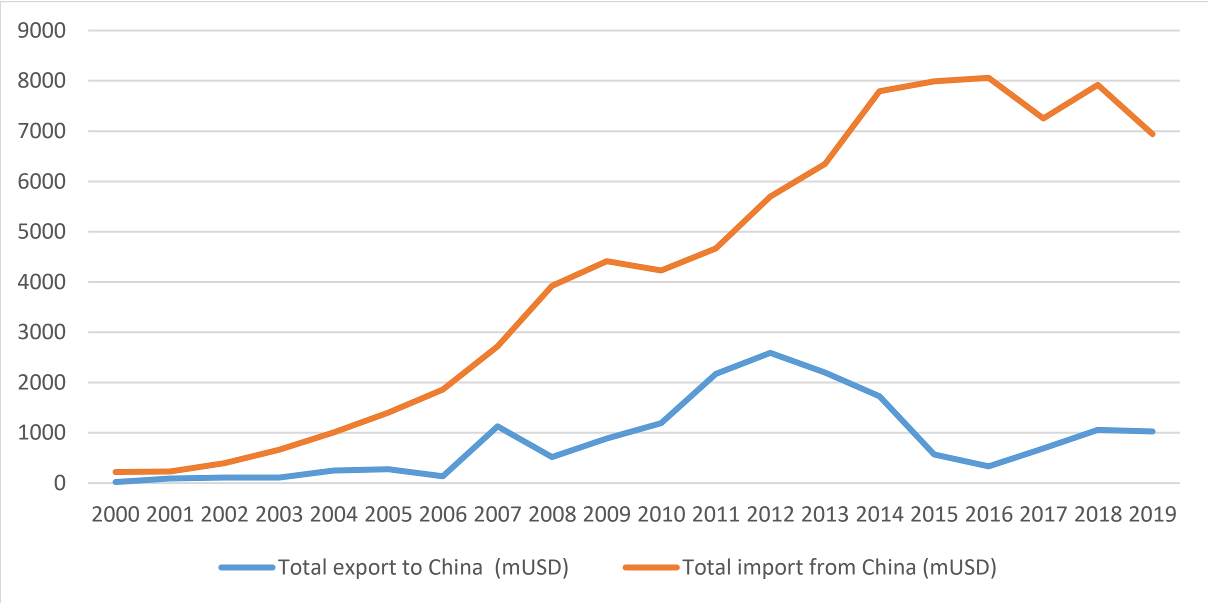

Figure 8. Algeria-China trade data 2000-2019 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on OEC data

As mentioned above, infrastructure development has been a central element of economic development in Algeria since the early 2000s, and China has played a significant role in the local construction boom: between 1998 and 2019, the revenues of Chinese companies from construction contracts in Africa were the highest (80.32 billion dollars) in Algeria according to CARI database. The sharp increase is illustrated in Graph 9 below. Some estimate that Chinese firms accounted for nearly 80% of development contracts in the 2000s (Pairault 2014). The CGIT database shows construction contracts worth USD 24.61 billion between 2005 and 2020, most of which are for transport development (rail and road networks, airport development and port construction) and other construction and energy (oil and gas, but also solar farms) (African Review 2013).

In addition to the above, Chinese companies have completed a number of prestigious projects, including the new Algiers airport (CSCECOS 2022a), the Olympic stadium in Oran

(MCC 2012), the new buildings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Constitutional Court, the country's largest prison and five large hotels, the first shopping mall, the expansion of the railway network (Railway Technology 2009) and several highways (CITIC Construction 2022, CSCECOS 2022b), the longest tunnel in North Africa (ECNS 2017), and a 750 km water pipeline and a nuclear power plant (Pairault 2014). This 'special relationship' with the construction industry is symbolised by the fact that the Great Mosque of Algiers, which is set to become Africa's largest mosque, and the capital's new port were both built by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (The State Council of PRC 2016). In view of the above, Chinese stakeholders could afford to be generous, as the Algiers Opera House, which opened in 2016, was a USD 40 million gift from Beijing to the African country (Khettab 2016).

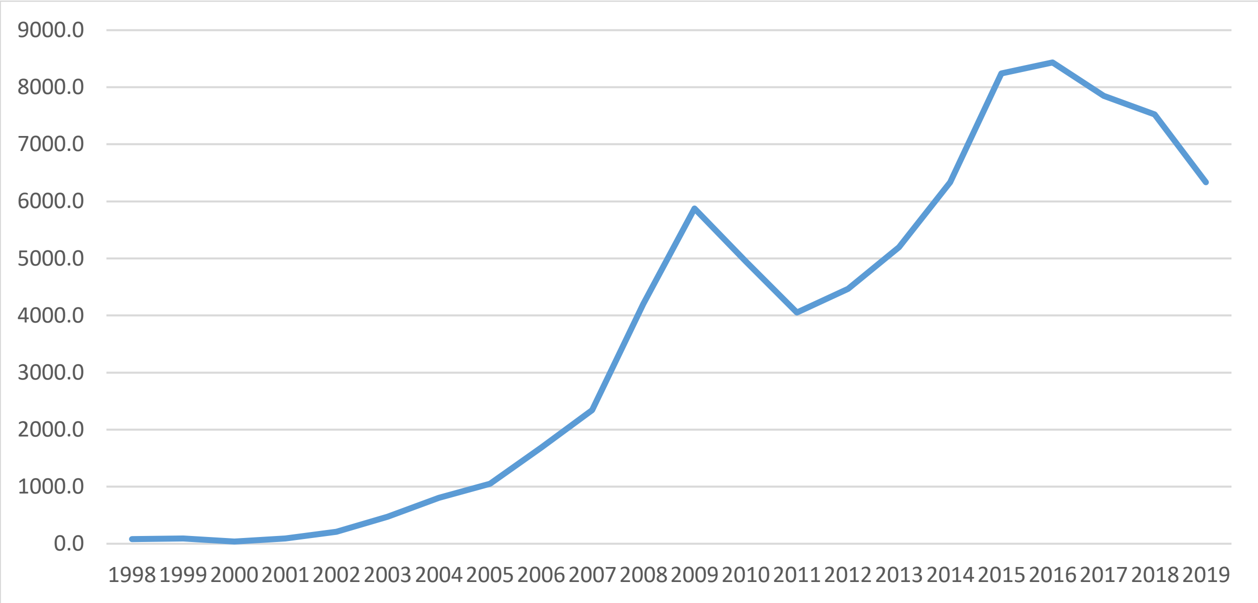

Figure 9. Construction revenue of Chinese companies in Algeria 1998-2019 (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on data from Johns Hopkins University, SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative

Closely linked to the intensive presence in the construction industry is the fact that several Algerian cement factories are owned by Chinese companies (Sinoma Construction Co. Ltd. 2016). Such huge investments and construction works often go hand in hand with the inflow of Chinese workers; there is even a Chinatown in Algiers. However, the issue of 'taking jobs away' caused public outcry, and the government has finally capped the proportion of Chinese workers on construction sites at 20% (Pairault, 2014).

Although construction is clearly the most important element of the economic relationship, the sale and production of cars and commercial vehicles is the second area where Chinese companies have a strong presence in Algeria. However, Chinese operators have already encountered obstacles: In February 2015, Algeria imposed an obligation on all foreign car dealers to set up assembly plants in the country, in order to reduce the country's dependence on foreign vehicles and imports (Economist Intelligence 2015). Accordingly, joint ventures have been set up, for example, between the Chinese Anhui Jiamghuai Automobile Company (JAC) and the Algerian Emin Auto to build a truck assembly plant, and between the Chinese car manufacturer Foton and the Algerian car dealer KIV to build a car and truck assembly plant (Xinhua 2017a).

The third most important area of the Sino-Algerian relationship, and one that has already played a role in the past, is the arms trade. Although Russia remains Algeria's number one supplier of arms and military equipment, the emergence of China in this market has provided an opportunity for diversification and sometimes even competition. Algerians started to buy Chinese weapons in 2007 (Pairault 2014), including, for example, surface-to-air missile systems, anti-ship missiles and naval corvettes (Calabrese 2017).

Unlike the previous two cases, the relationship between China and Algeria is not characterised by intergovernmental loans.

Mauritius

Mauritius is one of China's most favoured African partners. This is mainly because the African island has been one of the world's top offshore and tax havens since the 1980s, making it a central player - and offshore destination - for companies involved in trade between India, China, Africa and the Middle East. Today, Mauritius increasingly becomes a centre for capital flowing back and forth from India to India and from China to China, and a gateway to Africa for Chinese companies (China Offshore 2014). The country's attraction is based on three main factors: stability, access to the huge African (and by extension American and European) market and tax exemption.

Mauritius itself is one of the most stable countries in the world. In 2020, it was ranked No. 1 in the Mo Ibraham Index of African countries' governance performance, No. 13 in the World Bank's Doing Business Index and No. 52 in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. That is why several major Chinese companies, such as Huawei, Shanxi Tianli Group and CAD Fund, have registered their regional headquarters here. In addition, one of China's first African Special Economic Zones - established in 2009 with an investment of USD 750 million by Taiyuan Iron, China Development Bank, Shanxi Tinali Group - is located near the capital, Port Louis (Li 2018).

Foreign trade between the small island and China is almost minimal. According to the OEC, only 1.5% of Mauritius' exports went to China in 2019 (Upton 2019), with copper accounting for more than 80% and frozen fish for nearly 12%. Imports from China accounted for only 4% of total imports, with electronics and textiles being the main product groups. However, the free trade agreement (FTA) signed in 2019 with Mauritius could boost trade relations by reducing tariffs on, for example, several food products, some raw materials and jewellery. The FTA will also open up 130 service sectors in Mauritius to Chinese investors, including communications, education, finance, tourism, culture, transport and traditional Chinese medicine. Indeed, Mauritius could benefit from becoming a base for Chinese exports to Africa, not primarily in goods - for which local manufacturing capacity would be insufficient - but in services: professional services, lawyers, accountants, translators, and import-export agents (Devonshire-Ellis 2021).

Moreover, the FTA seems to be even more important when considering those 50 double tax treaties with other countries (29 of which are African countries) Mauritius has recently concluded. By taking advantage of this framework, Chinese investors registered in Mauritius can achieve tax savings of 10.5 percent on dividends from, for example, Congo and 30 percent on capital gains in Uganda (Li, 2018). Mauritius has also concluded 45 investment promotion and protection agreements with other countries, including 23 African countries. In addition, Mauritius is a member of two African Economic Communities (COMESA - Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and SADC - Southern African Development Community), both of them providing Mauritian-based businesses with easy access to the economies of East Africa. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), entered into force in January 2021, can also give a new boost to the relationship, since it has been signed by all African countries except Eritrea and requires members to eliminate tariffs on 90% of goods and services.

Mauritius can also serve as a facilitator of trade between China and developed countries. Under the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA 2022), nearly 6,500 products from Mauritius can enter the United States if the product is eligible under the Generalized System of Preferences or Normal Trade Relations. This gives Chinese manufacturers (such as textile companies – China Offshore 2014) a way around the anti-dumping and countervailing duty investigations often initiated by the US Department of Commerce. Mauritius also signed an Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union in 2009 (European Union 2012), the key elements of which included the elimination of tariffs and quotas on imports into the EU and rules of origin regulations.

According to official data from the local central bank, China is the third largest investor in Mauritius after France and South Africa (see Figure 10). In addition to FDI, one can also find infrastructure projects. In 2011, China Three Gorges, a company with a presence as a contractor in several African countries, was contracted to build a reservoir near the capital to address water scarcity problems (People's Daily Online 2011). In 2018, Guizhou Transportation Planning was awarded a US$320 million contract for real estate development (Tang 2018).

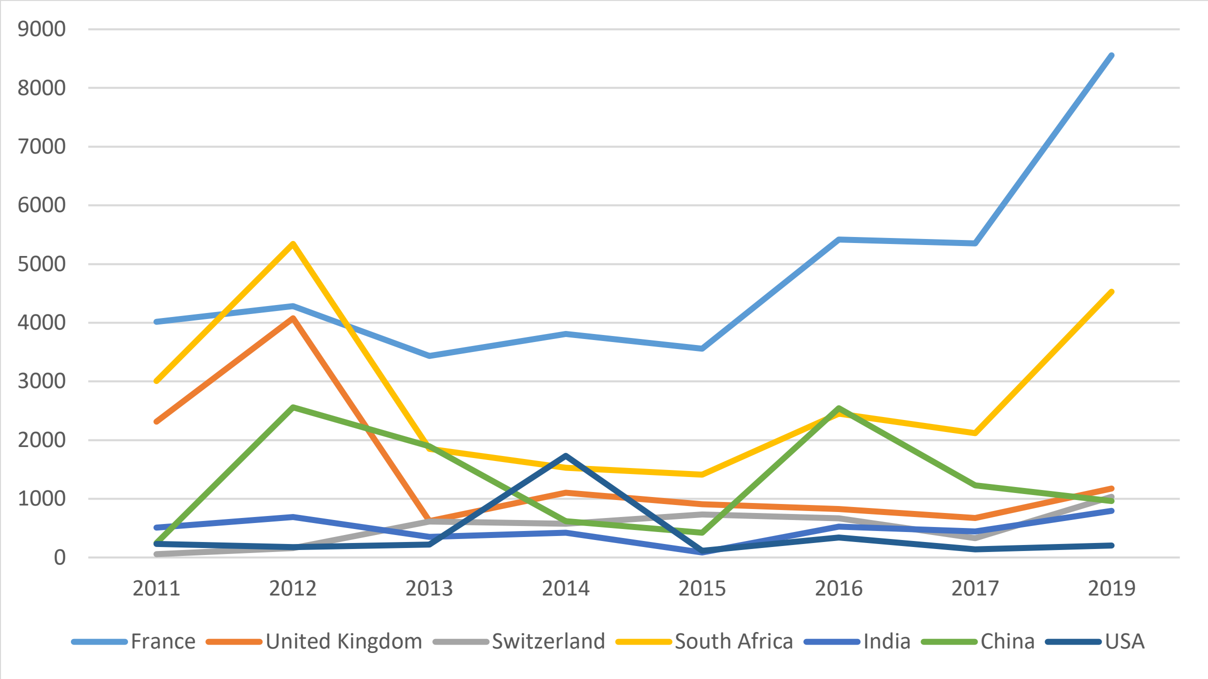

Figure 10. Inward FDI flows to Mauritius, 2011-2019, in millions of Mauritian rupees (missing data for 2018). Source: Authors' own compilation based on data from the Bank of Mauritius (2011-19). The CGIT database for Mauritius has no investment records, as a result we relied on the Bank of Mauritius, which only provides flow data and is partially incomplete, as no data is available for 2018.

In view of the above, it is not surprising that Mauritius is a frequent stopover for Chinese leaders, but it is also a major tourist destination, with nearly 100,000 Chinese tourists visiting the island annually (CGTN 2018). There are direct flights between the two countries, with Chinese flights landing at the Mauritius airport, which was built by China State Construction Engineering (CSCECOS 2022c). To further develop the relationship, there is an ongoing negotiation on abolishing visa requirements for Chinese citizens (China Offshore 2014), while educational and cultural cooperation is also high on the agenda, with the opening of the Confucius Institute at the University of Mauritius in 2016 (CGTN 2018).

As regards loans, 13 agreements were concluded between China and Mauritius between 2009 and 2019, for a total of USD 507 million, according to the CARI database. These typically financed health, ICT, water, and transport projects.

Djibouti

Djibouti is the smallest country in Africa, if excluding the small island nations, but has a strategic geopolitical position, making it an important stop for shipping and maritime freight between Europe and Asia. Djibouti is also a physical gateway to East Africa, especially Ethiopia, with a population of nearly 115 million. It is therefore in China's keen interest to maintain friendly relations with the Djibouti government and to ensure a significant economic and even military presence. The small country is also considered a key player in the maritime component of the BRI: goods arriving by sea and Ethiopian exports enter and leave the continent via Djibouti.

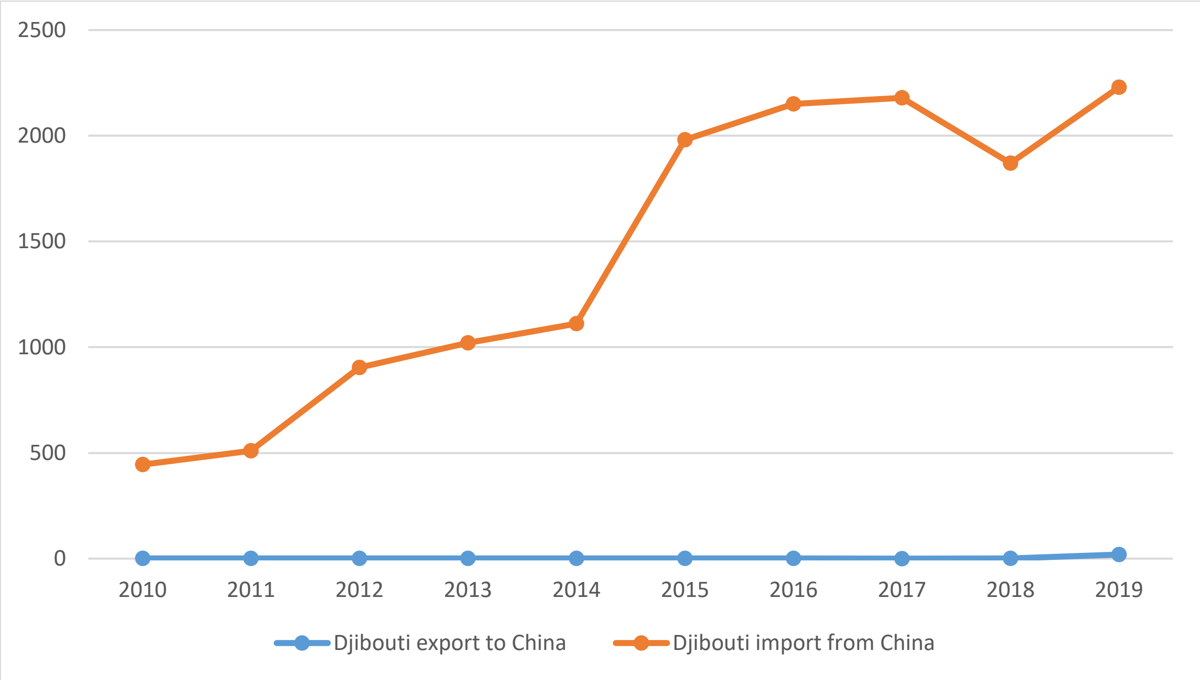

Figure 11. Djibouti-Chine trade data (mUSD). Source: Authors' own compilation based on OEC data

Although Djibouti's role as an intermediary in the China-Africa trade relationship is significant, the direct trade volume between Djibouti and China is not that relevant. Exports to China were less than 1% of total Djibouti exports until 2019, and then suddenly jumped to 14% in 2019, of which chlorides accounted for more than 98%. The share of Chinese imports, like in other African countries, is steadily increasing. From around 20% in 2010, Chinese imports had risen to 40-45% by the end of the decade. Consequently, Djibouti has a huge trade deficit with China: in 2019, Djibouti's exports to China were only USD 19 million, while Chinese imports amounted to more than USD 2 billion.

While trade relation is not the most important aspect of the relations, Chinese companies are keen to participate in local infrastructure development: since 2008, China has invested around USD 15 billion in ports, airports and digital infrastructure (Ford 2020). For instance, the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port was built in 2017 with USD 590 million of Chinese funding from the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (China Daily 2019, Leighton 2021). The project is directly linked to the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway line, also built by the Chinese in 2018, which is planned to be extended all the way to South Sudan (Global Construction Review 2013). The current 759 km Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the first fully electric international rail system in Africa, has reduced travel time between the two cities from two days to around 12 hours. When ready, the line will be operated by China Railway Group Ltd. and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation until 2023 (Ford, 2020).

The China Merchants Group has a 24% stake in the Doraleh port and plans to develop it from a budget of USD 3 billion (Leighton 2021). The port is, however, not only important from a commercial point of view, as China's first foreign military base since 2017 is located right next to it. The United States, Japan, Italy and France also have military bases in Djibouti, and

Saudi Arabia and India are planning to set up their own bases (Small Wars Journal 2019). Thus, China's own base does not need much explanation: it will increase China's global influence and better protect its security interests away from its shores, particularly in Africa and the Indian Ocean. The base in its current form is mainly capable of logistical tasks, but in 2020 major upgrades have been made so that it can accommodate aircraft carriers, destroyers, or even nuclear submarines (Leighton 2021).

According to the CARI database, 8 loan agreements can be identified between 2010 and 2019, with a total value of USD 1.436 billion. In line with the above, it is not surprising that two thirds of this are used for transportation development.

Conclusion

In the pages above, we have presented the variations in relations between Francophone Africa and China through five case studies. For the sake of diversity, we have selected countries rich in various raw materials and natural resources, as well as countries important for global trade, regional security, or taxation, and briefly reviewed their political and economic relations with China. Although the analysed countries are different in many respects, there are several similarities in their relations with China. For example, even if the history of relations in numerous cases has its roots in the second half of the 20th century, the real upsurge in economic relations took place from the beginning of the 21st century onwards, with the announcement of the BRI giving a further boost to bilateral cooperation.

Trade relations provide a more mixed picture. As the above case studies show, DRC and Guinea have accumulated trade surpluses with China due to their significant mineral exports, while Djibouti and Mauritius have a significant trade deficit with China, given that they hardly export anything to China. Perhaps the most surprising is the case of Algeria, where exports of oil products cannot sufficiently offset imports, meaning that Algeria has also been running a growing deficit in recent years.

The dividing line for FDI is also the raw material/mineral resource factor, i.e. if the country is rich in raw materials, Chinese corporate investment typically targets mining, its related sectors and construction, including infrastructure for transporting and processing raw materials. Smaller countries are, however, less likely to have large amounts of Chinese FDI. We have shown two exceptions to this rule: The offshore and tax haven nature of Mauritius has encouraged many Chinese companies to locate their African regional headquarters in the African island. There has also been a growing number of Chinese investments and companies in Djibouti, due to the small country's growing role in East African and global commodity trade as well as its strategic location.

Although some of the infrastructure development projects, especially those linked to mining-related investments, takes the form of FDI, most construction projects are typically carried out in the framework of a loan agreement, that is, Chinese companies build roads, railways, ports, airports, public buildings, power plants, often involving Chinese migrant workers. These projects are typically financed by Chinese state banks, by 80-100%. The details of the loan agreements are often confidential, but the loans are in most cases neither preferential, nor are they particularly long-term, although in some cases part of the debt has been cancelled. Of the five cases, the two poorest countries, the DRC and Guinea, are the ones with the highest levels of loan agreements, and, therefore, the two countries are most at risk of debt traps.

Perhaps in response to criticism of the above-mentioned debt trap narrative, the Chinese leadership decided to rethink its strategy towards the African continent recently. Indeed, announcements made at the China-Africa Forum at the end of 2021 showed that, in the midst of the Covid crisis and the fierce competition for global power, China would rather focus on vaccine diplomacy, with a slight reduction in financial incentives. In his video message, President Xi pledged USD 40 billion to Africa, including everything from credit lines to investment. This means a significant drop from the USD 60 billion pledged at the previous two summits. While reducing the financial pledges, the Chinese President has offered one billion doses of vaccines, including 600 million donated and 400 million locally produced doses, to complement the 200 million doses already delivered to African countries earlier. China is also sending 1,500 health experts to Africa to help to respond to the pandemic (Ni and Davidson 2021).

China's vaccine diplomacy is clearly a soft power tool, closely related to both the African and international criticisms of the previous strategy based on economic incentives. China is sensitive to its international image, especially when its activities in the developing world are criticised. In this case, it typically responds in a way that could impress not only the targeted region but also the international community. And vaccine diplomacy is clearly part of the narrative China wants to promote: how Beijing helped to end the pandemic not only within its borders but also beyond.

Although this paper assesses the China relations from the perspective of Francophone African countries, to evaluate our hypothesis, it is essential to briefly describe what Africa means to China. China is indeed an important player for Francophone Africa, but the importance of Francophone Africa for China in global trade and FDI flows is currently very low: in 2020, Africa accounted only for 4% of China's global trade (4.4% of its exports and 3.6% of its imports), while in 2019 only 2.9% of Chinese FDI flowed to Africa (Pairault 2021). Moreover, China no longer needs to 'buy' allies in the region, as by now all the countries of Francophone Africa recognise the One China principle. That is, these aspects don't really justify Africa's prominent place in China's globalisation strategy. What motivates China's growing expansion in Africa then? The international literature often states: political interests. Pairault (2021), for example, argues that Africa is in fact the cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy, since the countries of the region are all allies of China and thus not only extend the reach of China's activities on the international stage, but also increase China's strategic power in disputes with the United States, thereby strengthening China's international influence.

As far as the relationship between China and the 25 Francophone African countries is concerned, we agree with the more general statement above. However, as we have shown in our case studies, there are exceptions, i.e. bilateral relations that are not only important for the African side, but sometimes even of strategic importance for China. Our hypothesis is thus verified: Francophone African countries are indeed attracted to China primarily by the need for financial resources and infrastructure development and the promise of non-interference in domestic politics, while China is motivated primarily by global trade and political ambitions, raw materials and growing local market size. Through the African countries, Beijing is creating a diplomatic backbone that will raise the country's international profile and thus support China's rise as a great power, while these relationships will also give China access to raw materials that are essential for its economic development. Therefore, with certain limitations, but in some ways the relationship between Francophone Africa and China can indeed be a win-win relationship.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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Appendix

Francophone countries	Average GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international $), 2015-19	Anglophone countries	Average GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international $), 2015-19
Benin	3080,0	Botswana	15813,8
Burundi	781,3	Ethiopia	2004,1
Burkina Faso	2048,9	Eswatini	8442,1
Cameroon	3664,9	Gambia, The	2110,2
Chad	1657,4	Ghana	5118,9
Central African Republic	905,7	Kenya	4243,3
Comoros	3022,3	Lesotho	2669,0
Congo, Rep.	4351,4	Liberia	1554,7
Cote d'Ivoire	4821,9	Malawi	1483,5
Congo, Dem. Rep.	1072,9	Namibia	10241,1
Djibouti	4966,5	Nigeria	5256,1
Gabon	15113,2	Sierra Leone	1627,9
Guinea	2365,2	Somalia	886,5
Madagascar	1581,5	Sudan	4256,1
Mali	2238,1	Tanzania	2515,4
Mauritania	5123,0	Uganda	2107,7
Niger	1174,1	Zimbabwe	3746,9
Rwanda	2026,2	Zambia	3477,7
Senegal	3181,8		
Togo	2018,6		
AVERAGE	**3259,8**	**AVERAGE**	**4308,6**

Comparison of GDP per capita of Francophone and Anglophone Sub-Saharan African countries. Source: Authors own construction based on the World Development Indicators database of the World Bank*

*No data: Eritrea, South Sudan; excluded: Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa