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Review

China-Cameroon: A win-lose relationship in the Mining sector?

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As one of the key drivers of the African international political economy of the last two decades, China growing economic involvement on the continent has sparked mixed responses. Is Beijing South-South Cooperation model just a rebranded version of the old North-South relationship or China is actually contributing to helping Africa securing and playing a more important new position on the global scene? This paper analyses the validity of the Chinese win-win foreign policy discourse using the Lobé iron ore deal signed by the state-owned company Sinosteel with the Ministry of Mines of Cameroon as case study. To that end, the paper discusses the conceptual pillars of the Chinese leadership's economic cooperation approach with Africa in general. Regarding the mining cooperation with Cameroon in particular, the paper shows that China having an essentially 'utilitarian' relationship with Cameroon, the deal reflects more Beijing's ambition to expand and consolidate power in its ambition to achieve global hegemony than actually catering for Cameroon's development needs. The paper further argues that the Lobé deal has not provided enough evidence to convince tall the Cameroonian stakeholders that it can be regarded as an example of a mutually profitable cooperation deal as announced by Chinese authorities.

Key words: China, Cameroon, mining, win-win cooperation, Win-lose relationship.

INTRODUCTION

For almost 20 years now, China has been one of the key drivers of Africa's international political economy. In two decades, the Asian giant has succeeded in becoming a major player on the continent economic front. This deployment has polarised discussions on whether China's presence is adding some value to the continent role and position in global economy or Beijing engagement has rather opened up crucial avenues to African countries in securing resources to finance much-need critical economic infrastructure without resorting to controversial conditionalities imposed by traditional western donors (Colom Jaén and Mateos, 2022). Regarding development as a whole, critics of China posit that the strengthening of ties between Beijing and Africa

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has resulted in no significant structural transformation. To authors like Taylor (2016), this has rather produced a de-*industrialisation of the continent with almost no industry or sector GDP distribution by sector having experienced notable enhancements between 1960 to present. On their side, Mohan and Power (2009) believe that reinforced ties between China and Africa will hardly yield different results from those achieved with traditional western partners since the African giant has failed to engage into development-prone activities such adding value industrialisation or implementing even a marginal redistribution of economic benefits. Going further, Clapham (2008) points out that the Chinese type of new South-South Cooperation (SSC) is actually a rebranded and strengthened model of the old North South one. Zeleza (2014) has nevertheless chastised this western-centrist view of China-Africa relationship in characterising it as over simplistic for it ignores that the reality is far more complex and contradictory. Elaborating on this, Colom Jaén and Mateos (2022) say it is actually a result of the interplay of "the intermingling of the agencies, subjectivities, and interests of African and Chinese actors and it involves government to- government, people-to-people, and sector-to-sector relations, including business, media, education, sports, culture, and civil society." While indicating that China's financial assistance to Africa does indeed pursue Beijing's internal political and foreign policy agenda, similarly to western countries, Bräutigam (2009) has however noted some differences between China's aid policies and those of the proponents of the Washington Consensus. Other authors, who see the results of the Chinese economic engagement on the continent as quite mixed, think that one can hardly be categorical about Chinese engagement. To Asante (2018), "while there are positive signs that the trade gap between both sides is narrowing, there are questions about its sustainability." The author notes that the pattern of Chinese imports reveals a strong domination of natural resources while Africa on its side mainly imports manufactured goods. This clearly reinforced the windfall character of SSA economies while highlighting limited technology transfer. When this is associated to the likeliness of the rising levels of African countries to adversely impact the sustainability of the laudable advancements recorded so far, there is a risk for the cooperation to be qualified as 'neo-imperialism'.*

Xiaoyang (2018) on its part believes China is actually contributing in Africa's structural transformation by serving, based on its own experience, as an example of the African countries' agency in developing the most suitable "pragmatic spirit" to their different realities and development needs. Alden (2019) believes China's growing involvement has actually brought significant change to African countries. To him, China has rejuvenated the SSC narrative of the 1960s (historical ties, solidarity of former colonised peoples) to serve as an ideological basis in view of achieving and been accepted as an asymmetric economic power capable of confronting the Washington Consensus neoliberal order in force in Africa since the 1980s. As a result, according to this author, huge flows of Chinese development finance poured in Africa and delivery of economic infrastructure are full of economic and social prospects to hundreds of millions of Africans. In its charm offensive in the continent, Chinese engagement is prominent in trade, construction and mining, all of these resting of public lending and direct investments. Cross migrations are equally an important feature of the relationship. In view of securing a long-term and preferential access to critical natural resources to feed resource-hungry industries, the African mining sector represents a kind of apple of the eyes of Beijing's state-owned companies. "The African continent is home to an abundance of high-grade natural resources, from gold and oil to copper and cobalt that can meet China's growing industrial needs. As the largest producer of lithium cells, accounting for 70 % of the global lithium cell manufacturing capacity, China is keen to find a stable source, such as the African continent, for low-cost cobalt, an element, along with lithium, that makes up the essential components of lithium batteries. High-grade copper is another mineral that China is lacking. Although massive quantities of ores have been mined and shipped worldwide, Chinese investors know that there is still a great deal of deposits to be explored and discovered in Africa" (Baker McKenzie, 2018). The Lobé iron ore deal signed with the Government of Cameroon therefore falls within this context. On May 6, 2022, the Minister of Mines and Industrial Development, Gabriel Dodo Ndoké on behalf of the Republic of Cameroon and Zheng Zhenghao, the General Manager of SINOSTEEL Cam, a subsidiary of the Chinese state-owned SINOSTEEL Corporation Ltd, inked a $676 million high-grade iron ore mining deal for the exploitation of the Lobé iron ore mine located in the South region of Cameroon. The project is expected to produce 4 million tons of iron ore concentrated at over 60 % every year when it goes into full operation (Global Times, May 28, 2022). The Governement of Cameroon (GoC) stated that under the terms of the deal, Sinosteel Cam will annually mine 10 million tons of ore with 33% iron content for ten years based on a study conducted by Sinosteel which revealed that Lobé represents 632 million tons of iron ore reserves. (EcoMatin, May 23, 2022). The deal, which is supposed to usher the country in industrial mining, sparked virulent opposition from Cameroon's political parties of the opposition, civil society and local residents. Former presidential candidate currently serving as an opposition member of parliament, Cabral Libii accused the GoC of being « neither transparent nor accountable by allowing Sinosteel to carry out a feasibility study on the quantity of iron ore in Lobé and authorising the same company to exploit the iron ore » (VOA, May 23, 2022).

By so doing, the politician is casting serious doubts on the sincerity of the deposit estimates and therefore calling for an independent entity to conduct studies in view of establishing real extent of the deposits. Local residents on their side peacefully took to the streets of the small coastal village on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean called Lolabe on May 23, 2022, to vent their ire at the deal. To them, not only the interests of the host community were not clearly spell out in the mining convention, worse still, no binding measures were provided for to compel the Chinese to fulfil their commitments. Local populations believe that Chinese mining exploitation has so far brought about no local development, as it is the case with artisanal gold mining in the East where workers are paid $3 after 12 h of work (Pokam, 2022). Moreover, they fear that with this deal, Sinosteel Cam might soon turn their environment into a dreadful mess just like in the East where Chinese miners usually face the accusation of not respecting environmental norms and violating Cameroon mining code, which for instance, prohibits mining on riverbeds, swampy areas and waterfalls (Pokam, 2022).

For the civil society, the GoC has failed to marshal all the relevant human resources available in the country that could have helped in negotiating and securing a deal with terms that are more favourable to Cameroon. Bareja Youmssi, an expert in mines, oil and gas who worked for international mining companies such as the Russian RENOVA or the Brazilian VALE, has severely criticised the lack of professionalism of public officials of the Ministry of Mines who carried out negotiations with the Chinese. By pointing out their lack of exposure to mining discussions leading to granting of mining licences and permit as compared to representatives of a heavyweight like Sinosteel Corporation Ltd, they were logically unable to grasp all the complexities of a mining agreement . For him, this asymmetry of knowledge and expertise, among others such as corruption, is at the origin of an agreement that is manifestly disadvantageous to the Cameroonian side (Zambo, 2022). This connects to what Chipaike and Knowledge (2018) consider as "a submission that has always been assumed that African actors are passive and supplicant participators in relations with external interlocutors". An already well-entrenched idea by which African agents lack any significant capabilities during international bargains, ranging only from "structural idiots" to "cultural dopes" because they are incapable of reproducing something different from the established social order (Cohen, 1987:302). In fact, as clearly put by Clapham (1996:4), "the evident weaknesses of African states [and their public bureaucracies] did not reduce them to a state of inertia in which their fate was determined by external powers. On the contrary, it impelled them to take measures designed to ensure survival, or at least improve their chances of it". Pressed to shed light on the motivations and circumstances that led to the conclusion of the agreement, the Cameroonian Minister of Mines fends off criticisms by saying that the deal was negotiated under the empire of the law and strictly abides by the country's current mining Code. To him, the agreement is "the translation of the said law into reality, a result of a reflexion and negotiation process where each relevant Cameroonian ministry has contributed, in its own sphere of competence, making the agreement more intelligible and perfect". More, it is definitely a "win-win convention that the State has signed", which is fully consistent with international standards. (EcoMatin, May 23, 2022). Echoing these words, Chinese authorities have lauded the GoC positive remarks on the mining deal issue. In a communiqué issued on May 28, 2022, the Chinese Embassy in Yaoundé has indicated that "China will always be a good partner of Cameroon on the road to development and is willing to support Chinese enterprises to carry out mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation with Cameroon" (China Embassy, 2022). However, considering the high level of hostility demonstrated by different segments of the Cameroonian society, the Lobé deal appears as another serious test to the Chinese postulate of win-win relationship with African countries.This article examines the validity of the Chinese mantra of 'win-win-cooperation' with Africa in general and Cameroon in particular. To carry out such an analysis, it is of paramount importance to highlight the profound basis of the concept as portrayed and meant by Chinese authorities. It goes without saying that even though the overall output of China's financial engagement in Africa has experienced a drastic drop from its heights of $11 billion in 2017 to $2.8 billion in 2019 before rebounding at $3.3 billion in 2020 (Baker Mckenzie, April 29, 2021), the Chinese presence will undoubtedly continue to spur heated debates on the continent as whether Africa is really gaining for its development in deepening ties with Beijing or behind the Chinese mutual interest 'rhetoric', Beijing is rather fostering a new dependency with the greater South (Taylor, 2016) or just represent the 'new face of imperialism' (Lee, 2006). In the course of our analysis, we will in the first place present the formation, development and characteristics of the concept of win-win cooperation as elaborated by the current Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping. Secondly, in reviewing some aspects of China's rise in the international arena that fundamentally condition the structure and development of its foreign policy and economic relations with Africa, we will dwell on criticisms to Beijing's political discourse in which the China-Africa relationship is celebrated as "model for South-South cooperation" (南南合作典范, nan nan hezou dianfang*) (Guangming Daily, November 19, 2021). In a third position, we will assess the concept in the light of the Lobé mining convention by pointing out its most contentious provisions that can or cannot be qualified as a result of a mutual interest consideration and, finally we will look at the implications the*

Lobé mining agreement might induce on the future of relationships between Cameroon and China as well as with its other traditional partners. A mixed approach based on primary and secondary sources were used in the course of this research. Primary sources exploited included interviews with two national mining experts out of which one is a university lecturer, two senior officials from the Ministry of Mines and technological Development, one senior official of SONAMINES, and one resource-person serving as a member of the Board of Directors of the National Investment Corporation (SNI). Secondary sources consisted in the consultation and analysis of the literature on China's role in the political economy of Africa, China's investments in the mining sector in Africa, the geopolitics and influence of emerging powers in Africa. The study consists in a qualitative analysis of perceptions of the mining deal based on discussions held with the aforementioned relevant resource persons.

AFRICA VIEWED FROM CHINA

Official discourse

If Beijing engagement in Africa is certainly yielding fruits for the Asian giant, namely on the economic, security and diplomatic fronts, China's current leadership equally projects its worldview of the governance of global affairs in structuring its relationship with its African partners. In November 2019, few days before the main mechanism China resort to in institutionalising and strategising its engagement in Africa, the triannual Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, 中非合作论坛, Zhongfei hezuo luntan) was to take place in Dakar, Senegal (Xinhua, November 29), China made public a new White Paper showcasing important achievements recorded so far while laying down fundamental principles of the relationship as well as indicating the direction for the future.In "China and Africa in the New Era : A Partnership of Equals" cooperation (State Council Information Office (SCIO), November 26, 2021),we learn that the China-Africa relationship is based on the China's emerging foreign policy doctrine contained in "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy" (习近平外交思想, Xi Jinping Waijiao Sixiang). This is a kind of 'new red book' of 'Chairman' Xi's general norms and principles on the management of global affairs and global development since 2013 or, in short, a reformed China-centred international system. (Jinping, 2021). As founding pillars, we read in the new strategy vis-à-vis the continent that China-Africa relationship is rooted on "amity, sincerity, mutual benefits and shared interests," (真,实,亲,诚, zhen, shi, qin, cheng). This formula actually dates back to 2013 where it was used for the first time by Xi Jinping while addressing a symposium on diplomatic work in neighbouring countries and since then has been consecrated as Beijing's most preferred type of cooperation with friendly neighbour countries and in the Global South (China News, October 10, 2014). Successive leaderships in China have at various occasions lauded the excellent quality of Beijing's relationship with Africa by highlighting the similarity of challenges faced by both sides in their fight to get free from colonialism and imperialism and the necessity to follow a proper way, [different from the Washington Consensus] to achieve economic development (Jinping, 2021). This takes its source in the ancient Chinese civilisation that advocates harmony without uniformity. It is worth noting that this point is particularly appealing to African leaders, as the former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (2015) stressed, "every country has the right to independently choose its social system and a development path compatible with its national conditions". By presenting, in the new White Paper, China and Africa as "an Exemplary Model for World Development and Cooperation" that could be viewed as "an example by increasing the well-being of humanity, creating a new type of international relations, and building a global community of shared future" (SCIO, November 26, 2021), 'Chairman Xi' definitely goes further than his predecessor Hu Jintao. The former Chinese leader who, though probably sharing the same view on what Africa should represent to the rise of China, refrained from labelling the China-Africa relationship as a model for world affairs by limiting himself during his FOCAC 2006 key note address to hailing China and Africa's "major contribution to the advancement of human civilisation" (Xinhua, November 4, 2006). However, considering that China in recent years worked hard, in almost all regions of the world, to build or strengthen a number of 'Sinocentric multilateral institutions' that can be termed as "China plus many" where China obviously plays the leading role (National Interest, September 4, 2018) with the aim of shifting from the existing ones which are considered by Beijing and its partners from the Global South as dominated by the West, citing China-Africa relationship as "a shining example for building a new type of international relations " clearly indicates what, in Xi Jinping's eyes, represents the most favourable type for China's engagement with other regions and the world (Xinhua, November 26, 2021). In so doing, he equally implicitly acknowledges that, apart from FOCAC, Beijing efforts in promoting "China plus many" have so far yielded limited success elsewhere. (Van Oudenaren, 2021).

In his ambition to promote the emergence of new world order, a "Community of Common Destiny" (类命运共同体, renlei mingyun gongtongti), Xi Jinping believes forging and strengthening relations with the former Third World, now Global South, is capital (Rolland, 2020). The

"Community of Common Destiny" whose main embodiment is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), actually represents "a normative paradigm for China's efforts to bring about a loosely hegemonic, Sino-centric international sub-system that is largely centred in the Global South […] where China's interests are afforded pride of place, and participating states are required to demonstrate at least pro forma obeisance to Beijing" (Van Oudenaren, 2018). Against this backdrop, one can say that China's assessment of its international place and role is in keeping with Kennedy (1988) thesis of the rise and decline of powers, where Ikenberry (2008) posits that rising powers generally attempt to induce a balance of power adjustment in the global system by securing greater authority thanks to their newly accumulated power. Having used the capitalist mode of acquisition of power, though without its political liberalism element, one can say with Bernal-Meza (2016) that China is then following the principle that "all States that have dominated the international system -or aspire to do so- have struggled to increase their share of wealth and power, to become both rich and strong, or to stay in that position". To achieve this supreme goal, the concept of win-win cooperation represents the tool that helps China in winning African elites and people's hearts by branding itself as an emerging not yet fully developed country, facing the same challenges, goals and interests of any developing country. It is thus understandable for the White Paper to be hailing the notion of belonging to the developing world and the need for the Global South to work together in view of bringing about a multipolar world order while fostering dual beneficial economic relations.

International division of labour

In an attempt to provide a theoretical basis to the concept of win-win cooperation, Ross (2015) goes back to Adam Smith's conception of the division of labour in the very first sentence of Wealth of Nations. We read here from the founder of modern economy that "The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgement with which it is directed, or applied, seem to have been the effect of the division of labour". Ross explains that the core idea of the old Master here is that as economies intertwined producers become more and interdependent for indirect inputs as seen in the modern architecture of world production of goods. This production is characterised by a higher interconnexion of global supply and production chains, a prerequisite of production efficiency that has so far guaranteed higher standards of living in Western societies. Drawing a parallel with what corporates have been doing to achieve growth and profits for their shareholders, Ross posits that Chinese authorities' win-win policy, similarly, encourages countries to embrace greater specialisation within the global division of labour in order to achieve outstanding economic results. He says, "factual economic research clearly demonstrates that internationally 'open' economies greatly outperform 'closed' ones, China's 'Opening Up' policy being one of the world's biggest examples". In Xi Jinping's economic analysis of Smith then, a greater division of labour at the international level means « one plus one can be greater than two » Ross (2015). This falls in line with the neoliberal assumption that greater cooperation eventually induces absolute gains or, in any case, gains that are higher than losses for all countries, irrespective of their position in the international system. What Xi Jinping calls here win-win cooperation in diplomatic parlance is definitely nothing else than promoting with its African partners, a replication of China's own experience on how to achieve sustained economic prosperity by taking advantage of the international division of labour. In concluding that China's win-win concept is finally "not simply rhetoric but is practically grounded in fundamental economic analysis", Ross, probably bearing in mind the famous Deng Xiaoping's saying "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." (不管黑猫白猫，捉到老鼠就是好猫 buguan hei mao bai mao, zhuo dao laoshu jiu shi hao mao), contends that face with economic challenges, leaders are less interested in conceptual discussions than on practical proposals of the Chinese foreign policy postulate. Taking the example of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as illustration, he explained that the United Kingdom, by deciding to join the bank has taken a clearly win-win option by realising that the benefits in participating outpaced by far the costs of declining China's offer as it was pressed by the USA. Ross puts it in these terms "China certainly benefits from the AIIB, as the bank will finance infrastructure in Asia, thereby increasing China's trade. But the U.K. will also "win" as London has great expertise in financial services, enabling the U.K. to provide inputs and derive benefits greater even than its allocation of capital to the AIIB […] The U.K. logically preferred the solution in which China wins and the U.K. wins to the US proposal in which China wins and the U.K. loses". To sum up, China's engagement with Africa, and specifically its concept of win-win cooperation, should therefore be essentially understood from the cost/benefit analysis viewpoint. Yet, it fails to point out that cost/benefit analysis definitely depends on each country's power. Considering that African/Cameroonian engagement with China is really a result a cost/benefit analysis, how do we assess Beijing's declarations and intentions when for instance the new White Paper makes mention of a partnership of equals while remaining mute on how China and Cameroon intend to achieve equality given the disparity of the two partners? Again, how to make sure China is ready to cater for the development strategies of countries along the silk route without jeopardising its own core interests? Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, what does the former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (2015) mean in saying that China will “follow the principles of wide consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits; actively promote the alignment of development strategies of countries along the routes, with a focus on building connectivity of policies […] and sustainable development of countries along the routes ” ?. To grasp the essence and dynamics of relationships between countries with different capacities like in our China /Cameroon dyad, one has to go beyond Xi Jinping declaring that « among the ten fingers, some are shorter than others, but none are dispensable if the hand is to function well » Yang Jiechi (2015). This is where an analysis through the asymmetry paradigm lens can be helpful.

Equality through asymmetry

Asymmetry paradigm deals with the manifestations of national disparities in international relations. Womack (2004) posits that where two countries present imbalanced capabilities, the relationship is fundamentally subject to differences in perception, attention and behaviour, which can, in the long run, take the form of a dangerous circle of systemic misperceptions. Womack (2010) has identified three basic theses of Asymmetry. First, asymmetric relations are characterised by resilience. Here, if it is understood that perfect equality cannot be established between the ‘smaller’ and the ‘larger’, one would, however, hardy expect the larger one to impose on the smaller. Should this happen, the smaller would mobilise its entire forces in a death or life fight while the larger generally engaged in a “small war” can be frustrated by the level of resilience shown by the smaller. Second, asymmetric relations are characterised by a difference in perspective. Here, the smaller, owing to higher vulnerability to opportunities and risks, tends to have a lesser grip on the relationship while the larger because generally busy managing other foreign and domestic concerns it considers more important, develops a nothing to gain or lose attitude towards the relationship. As result, we notice a difference of attention from the two partners, the smaller devoting more attention to the relationship than the larger. In this context, behaviour is ultimately affected in the sense the larger would mainly engage the smaller strategically from the lens of “friendship, normalcy or hostility” while the smaller would keep its eyes opened on each move made by the larger, and by so doing it decreases the overall level of trust between the two partners. Womack (2010: 4) says here “behavioural differences can lead to misinterpretations that can lead, in turn, to a vicious circle of bullying and alarmism”. Third, asymmetric relations are characterised by normalcy. Yet, one can apprehend, from the first two features of asymmetry, that due to constant misperceptions both partners actually fight for a relationship instead of having one. However, the idea that neither can actually totally win while the other looses serves as a lubricant to both parties’ political resolve in dealing together. One must nevertheless acknowledge that the normalcy of the relationship is not based on the same prerequisites. For the larger, it is fundamental to make sure that the relationship would not entail a challenge to its relative power while for the smaller it is capital to ensure that cooperation would not affect its identity and interests. In this situation, “the larger state needs deference from the smaller state”, while “the smaller state needs recognition of its autonomy” Womack (2010:4). From this perspective, are the neorealists wrong in considering asymmetry as a clear example of a relationship of domination since it is based here on deference and autonomy? Womack says there are for “it results from the realisation of both sides that neither can simply force its interests on the other. The common ground of deference and autonomy is mutual respect. A normal asymmetric relationship is not an equal exchange, but is one of negotiation rather than coercion”. It is worth noting that if the first works on asymmetric theory dealt essentially with Asian countries’ relationships, it can nonetheless be applied to other regions, such as Africa, for it tries not to capture the difference in culture but the dynamics of ‘relational exposure’ inherent in any relationship where partners present notable disparities. In addition, most of modern interstate relationships nowadays rightly qualify as asymmetric for they are conducted between countries with different capacities where exchanges are believed to be more negotiated than forced. Different aspects of asymmetry as explained above clearly feature in China’s modern diplomacy with African countries in general and Cameroon in particular. In pointing out that “those countries that share the same ideal and follow the same path can be partners; those that seek common ground while shelving differences can also be partners” (Yang Jiechi, 2015), Xi Jinping just laid emphasis, under the Five principles of Peaceful Coexistence, on the right of each country to build the type of society that fits its own aspiration, as an indication of China’s resolve in respecting its African partners’ autonomy. Likewise, by firmly adhering to the One China Principle, African countries refrain from taking actions likely to challenge China’s power over the crucial issue of the recognition of Taiwan as sovereign state. With regard to the win-win concept, asymmetric finally doesn’t mean equality but rather complementarity as it does not come to the mind of any African leader that being received on an official visit in Beijing is an acknowledgment of any inferiority vis-à-vis China. More, it echoes the idea of division of labour highlighted earlier by Ross. And because China and Cameroon are fully aware of their differences and disparities, having a normal asymmetrical relationship does not erase the differences but “provides a stable framework for negotiating them” in the same way “Vietnam will always sleep with its eye on China open, but […] now expects to talk rather than to fight” Womack (2010: 4).

CRITIQUE OF THE WIN-WIN POSTULATE

If Beijing is very confident about the validity of its concept of win-win cooperation within the framework of an asymmetrical relationship by emphasising the mutual benefit that each country enjoys in the process, critics cast serious doubts about the sincerity of the Asian giant. Bernal-Meza (2016) for instance perceives its win-win discourse mainly as a strategy to divert attention from the fact that Chinese bilateral relations have a clear North-South pattern which serves China’s core interests more than those of its various partners. This falls in line with Prebisch’s core-periphery thesis on power and capacity distribution in which the division/specialisation of international work constitutes the main feature. The extraordinary success of the Chinese version of capitalism is indeed the living proof that Western paths of development do not represent the only alternative offered to developing countries. It constitutes a pragmatic approach where market economy positive effects are blended with greater understanding of local realities and specificities in order to produce an ‘original’ type of society, which surely portrays similarities with other capitalist societies across the globe, but retain a unique and special flavour than can be considered its trademark. Yet, with its rise as a global power and main challenger to the hitherto leading US, China has moved from the periphery to the core (Li Xing, 2012). Thanks to Beijing newly accumulated power, the North-South axis that used to characterise the divide between developed and undeveloped countries has been replaced by the East-South axis (Pieterse, 2011). This comes, however, with challenges and constraints (Li Minqi, 2005). Similarly, as Western powers did before in the course of their rise to economic hegemony, China is doing nothing else than structuring a new version of dependency where it assumes the role of the core while Africa, South Asia and Latin America have turned into a semi-periphery and periphery. In such a configuration, “while ASEAN countries provide intermediate goods, Latin America and Africa provide raw materials” Bernal-Meza (2016). In other words, Beijing’s foreign policy official discourse on China providing support to fellow developing countries in Africa is actually ill portraying the hidden reality of a North-South relationship if one is to consider China’s trade structure with Africa and its global strategic as well as security positioning. To Stewart and Li (2013, 28), China carries out a double standard foreign policy allowing it to clearly play “the developed country card” when flexing muscles with the US and NATO and “the developing country card” when inking agreements with resources-rich African countries. Beijing’s foreign policy duality is therefore the expression of its ‘utilitarian view’ on Africa whose ultimate goal, as Yun Tso Lee (2013, 83) said about Latin America, “lies in obtaining resources and raw materials, especially oil, in order to continue feeding back its peaceful rise and regain his throne as the country of the centre of the world”. Considering this, the win-win relationship is just a hollow concept where China is endeavouring to take advantage of strategic opportunities emerging from a greater engagement in Africa thanks to a rapidly changing global economy in view of principally serving Chinese interests and not Africans’ ones.

As for the alleged equality and normalcy in a clearly asymmetrical relationship, it is obvious from the neorealist posture that such a relationship, where parties present considerable discrepancies, can hardly be complementary. It is actually the realm of the old zero-sum game where there are only winners and losers. Establishing equality can only be done through alliances whether ‘dominating or defensive’ or balancing ones. More, neorealists will acknowledge misperceptions as an input to the relation but definitely not as inherent to its structural pattern. Differences in capacities, perception, attention and behaviour mentioned by Womack are seen here as playing mere accessory functions when there are not completely disregarded. Furthermore, neorealists refute the idea of normal asymmetrical relationship to only consider symmetric ones applied to great powers’ relationships or hegemonic ones between the core and its semi-periphery/periphery (Womack, 2015). China-Cameroon relationship falling into the second category, the control is therefore exerted by China which is not interested in managing disparities but rather in ensuring its economic power would not be challenged given that Beijing’s ambitions in Africa in general are primarily economic, then political. In its quest for economic hegemony, the apparent alignment of interests between both countries is outweighed by the strategy of deployment abroad adopted at the highest levels of the Chinese leadership which, in this case, plays a negative role on Africa and Cameroon’s own development since “it deepens the primary export character of the economies […] and keeps –and even aggravates – the increasing dependence” of countries on “Chinese economic development and demand” Oviedo (2014). In this context, neorealists wonder how development strategies of Cameroon could match China’s economic hegemonic ambitions in a mid/long-term alignment likely to produce mutual benefits to both parties as professed by China’s foreign policy mantra of win-win cooperation.

When it comes to knowing whether the China-

Cameroon cooperation is really a win-win one, the Cameroonian scholar Pokam (2022) has identified winners and losers of the relationship. To him, the biggest winner is China in its various forms (state, state-owned companies and Chinese workers as well as private entrepreneurs enjoying full support and backing of the Chinese central government) with gains of different natures serving strategic interests. This is to say that Cameroon, in the process, gives more than it receives. After having benefited considerably from China's financial support in various domains such as security, infrastructure, health care and higher education, what could have been considered as as gains for the state of Cameroon faces higher potential of appearing as losses with the phenomenon of 'debt trap'. Indeed, China has succeeded in replacing France as the first economic partner and since the launching of major infrastructural projects in 2012; it has equally become the first creditor of the country. According to figures made public by the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT) quoted by the author, the stock of Chinese financial commitments from 2007 to 2017 stood at CFAF 3282 billion (approximately $5,9 billion). The author explains that Chinese financial commitments have greatly contributed to the substantial increase of the Cameroonian external debt, whose level is henceforth considered as almost unsustainable by the IMF, without any guarantee of performance on the overall economic development of the country. Pokam therefore worries about the consequences of the Chinese "debt diplomacy" bearing in mind the possibility that China avails itself in taking possession of assets funded through China EximBank loans in case borrowing countries cannot meet reimbursement conditions as with the recent case of the Entebbe airport in Uganda (Athumani:2021). Although Beijing has 'vigorously' denied its intention to do so by qualifying allegations of 'debt trap diplomacy' as completely meaningless (CGTN, November 30, 2021), the simple fact of inserting such provisions into agreements signed with certain countries strengthens the suspicion of a calculated and premeditated deception from the Chinese side. It equally hardens the position of the proponents of a win-win discourse as simple 'rhetoric'.

Local private sector is considered as another looser. Cameroonian companies can't just compete with Chinese counterparts as Chaponnière, quoted by Pokam, puts it "China and Africa scarcely belong to the same category and when it is the case, results can be disastrous for the African industry. Thus, in Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya and South Africa, Chinese imports have accelerated the bankruptcy of numerous garment companies prompting Beijing in reaction to adopt unilateral export restriction measures". Cameroonian companies on their part find it very hard to secure a meaningful part of subcontracting activities within the framework of Chinese infrastructure projects. Pokam clearly affirms that they gain almost nothing from the arrival of Chinese companies which are principally viewed as disloyal competitors. As for China's impact on the labour market, it is believed to be marginal given that Chinese companies essentially hire low-skilled workers and less management staff which adds practically no value to the capacities of the local labour market.

The verdict is less severe regarding Pokam's assessment of the mining sector regarding the so-called win-win outcome. For him, Chinese's entry into the sector is characterised by "numerous negative externalities for local communities and crystallises people's resentment" in the regions they operate. The semi-industrial exploitation of gold is the Eastern region of the country fuels tensions between local populations and Chinese mining companies which are accused of "murder, land grabbing and corruption" prompting civil society organisations to regularly chastised these activities. Justin Chekoua, an activist who works for FODER, an association focusing on mining activities and their consequences on the environment and public health explains, again quoted by Pokam: "when exploitation is over, the Chinese just go, leaving the ground totally excavated; this creates huge gaping holes which are transformed into lakes during rainfalls". Other grievances are related to "the absence of environmental impact studies and no rehabilitation of mining sites as provided for by contract specifications, which are directly responsible for drownings and deaths in numerous localities where semi-mechanised mining activities are carried out"[2]. Moreover, deforestation and reduction of biodiversity, by drastically reducing the means of living of local and certain indigenous populations such as the Pygmies, are other direct indication on how harmful mining activities carried out by Chinese are to local communities. Finally, growing Chinese mining activities in the region has led to an expansion of artisanal mining that has, as a matter of consequence, increased early school drop out among the youth despite a formal ban taken by administrative authorities in 2012 that prohibits school age children work on mining sites.

THE Lobé MINING DEAL: A WIN-WIN CONTRACT?

The least one can say is that the inking of the Lobe mining deal has gone unnoticed. It has actually sparked a heated debate, both on traditional and social media in Cameroon and among Cameroon diaspora, obliging the signing minister, in it up to his neck and driven into a corner to release the contract and provide insights on GoC's overall objectives in signing the contract (EcoMatin, May 23, 2022). The main issue here being to know whether Cameroon has really secured a win-win deal in signing with Sinosteel, a Chinese state-owned company specialised in steel production but not necessarily a major player in the domain of iron ore exploitation. For Minister Dodo Ndoké, there is no doubt Cameroon will be winning alongside in Lobé. Experts and the public dampen this enthusiasm considering what some present as Chinese well-established track record in “mining cheating” (Zambo, 2022). To support their argument, they highlight a certain number of provisions contained in the agreement that should have been negotiated differently in order to guarantee Cameroon a fair deal. The Minister objects the agreement is in full compliance with international standards in the sector. The analysis of some of its contentious aspects pertaining to the mining regime, economic benefits and the credibility of the Chinese partner will therefore serve as the basis for our discussion on the agreement.

Low standard mining regulation

To carry out an assessment on the mining regime, we will use Botswana as our benchmark. This country is internationally regarded as an example for successfully translating mining exploitation, namely diamonds, into concrete economic and social development. Such a performance is based on its mining law of 1999 which Jeffery (2016) describes as one that ensures “certainty and predictability”. The country higher level of attractiveness to investors lies in the fact that rules are both clearly spelled out and applied in total transparency. Little wonder therefore that for many years Bostwana, except in 2021 when outdone by Morocco, has been the highest-ranked jurisdiction in Africa on policy. On the 2020 Fraser Institute’s Annual Survey for mining which explains that “40% of investment decision is determined by policy factors, while 60 % is based on assessment of a jurisdiction’s mineral potential”, Botswana was rated globally 31st (of 84) this year after ranking 15th (of 77). This is to say mining companies direct their investments in Botswana for this jurisdiction has attractive policies driven essentially by economic and certainly not by ideological considerations. In other words, it is “a best practice environment which contains a world class regulatory environment, highly competitive taxation, no political risk or uncertainty, and a fully stable mining regime”[1]. The first controversial issue identified with the Lobé agreement is related to the legal environment itself. To carry out industrial mining activities, the 2016 Cameroonian mining law provides for both a mining contract and an exploitation permit where the Botswana law does only provide for the mining licence. The latter is granted by the minister in charge of minerals while in Cameroon the minister in charge of mines and the exploitation permit by the President of the Republic sign the mining contract. In the Botswana case, the decision is mostly based on technical conditions while in Cameroon it is grounded on both technical and political ones. The Cameroonian code does not provide for an automatic issuance of the exploitation permit by the President following the conclusion of a mining contract. In order words, signing a mining contract is equal to exploitation permit only if the highest political authority consents to endorse the initial agreement. Indeed, Cabral Libii actually ambitions to derail the whole process from the legal point of view by calling on the President of the Republic to seize this opportunity given to him by the law not to deliver a permit to the Chinese. This is the contrary in Botswana where policies in the mining sector are “clearly defined and obtaining all required mining permits is relatively quick and straightforward compared to most countries worldwide” It is definitely “the jurisdiction other African countries should strive to copy” (Jeffery: 2016). Such an architecture, where the political grossly overweights the economic, definitely contributes to increasing uncertainty to the whole process while sending wrong signals to investors who might interpret it as the possibility that preferential treatment can be given to some depending on extra-economic considerations.

Another policy factor affecting the solidity of the legal environment is the role of the two main stakeholders in the mining sector. When the mining law was passed in 2016, the ministry in charge of mines was solely competent in dealing with mining issues. Thereafter on December 14, 2020, SONAMINES (National Mining Corporation) was created as the operational arm of the Government in the sector whose main missions are “to ensure the development and promotion of the mining sector in Cameroon, except hydrocarbons and quarry materials, and oversee the management of state’s interests in the sector” (PRC:2020).[6] Cameroon is admittedly taking its first steps in the industrial solid mining exploitation, but it has a long and rich experience in liquid mining operations. SONAMINES has been created to mirror, in this part of the industry, the SNH (national hydrocarbons Corporation) in charge of the management of the state’s interests in the oil and gas sector. Nevertheless, where contracts are always negotiated and signed by SNH on behalf of the State for liquid mining, it is the Ministry that negotiated the Lobé deal with the Chinese, most likely leaving SONANIMES in the cloud notwithstanding the capital role it is henceforth supposed to play in such negotiations. The eloquent silence of the public company on the agreement tells a great deal about the muffled battle both institutions are fighting for the control of the ‘juicy’ solid mining sector. In such circumstances, the Lobé deal is even viewed in certain circles as the Minister’s response to the recent decision of the President of the Republic to exclusively entrust SONAMINES, and not the Ministry in charge of mines, with the management of the mega

[1] Decree no 2020/741 of December 14, 2020 to set up the National Mining Corporation, Sonamines.

Mbalam/Nadeba iron ore project worth $US 8.7 billion for which the GoC and the Australian Sundance, mother company of Cam Iron, signed a mining convention in 2012 (Bangda, 2022). Such type of management, where decisions bow under a heavy political toll, where suspicion of unorthordox practices taking place constantly envelop any deal, is far from bringing in ‘certainty’ and ‘predictability’ that are crucial for a healthy development of the sector.

Of course, China can hardly be blamed for Cameroon’s inconsistencies in terms of mining policy. However, the Chinese are known for their preference in sailing through rough waters as indicated by Nola Nouck (2021). To them, uncertainty represents an excellent bargaining argument to put forward in order to leverage most favourable terms that could hardly have been contemplated where the environment is not clouded. The equation is simple in this case, uncertainty is equal to high risks; But higher the risks, highest the rewards. The technique was successfully used in Sudan which the Chinese eventually helped join the restricted circle of oil producer countries in Africa (Nola Nouck, 2021). Opposition to the deal is greatly associated to this perception, proven or exaggerated that Chinese deals are necessarily bad deals. The bottom line is that the general opinion would likely have spared the Minister both the accusation of having a hidden agenda in signing with the Chinese and the uncomfortable defensive stance he has taken on this dossier if the policy environment was clear and transparent. Bareja Youmsi is even categorical on this: “mining conventions are increasingly criticised by mining companies, the civil society and EITI (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative) whose Cameroon is a party to); why? because this document opens the door to double-standard practices. Terms are tailored depending on the partner. In sum, the mining convention encourages corruption” (Journal du Cameroun, May 30, 2022). In view of becoming a mining destination as envisioned, Cameroon definitely has to “go back to the drawing board” and revise its mining code for it to comply with international standards. It will greatly contribute to levelling the playground for all actors of the sector while allowing the state to reap the fruits of its extraordinary and rich mining potential. This means, as it is the case with Botswana, a mining code showing “a clear understanding that the substantial investment required to develop a mine and carry out mining operations is itself a major economic and social good. In this process, capital is committed and jobs are created, while households’ living standards and expenditure levels rise. At the same time, tax revenues and export earnings are generated for the benefit of society as a whole” Jeffery (2016). From the regulation point of view, the Lobé deal will definitely need more to be qualified as win-win for it derives from a mining law that lacks clarity and transparency, a situation still far from best international standards dear to the Cameroonian minister of mines.

Kribi udders or Lobé?

The second point of controversy with the deal is to ascertain whether the Chinese ever discovered any iron ore mine called Lobé. According to Bareja Youmssi, “let’s agree from the onset: Sinosteel has never made any iron ore mine discovery in Cameroon. The mine called Lobé, long time known as ‘Kribi Udders iron ore mine,’ was actually discovered during the colonial period”. The exploration permit issued to Sinosteel in 2012 as revealed by the minister of mines was therefore only meant for “carrying out an evaluation of deposits already known” (Journal du Cameroun, May 30, 2022). This declaration is confirmed by the official Chinese digital media outlet China.org.cn which, reporting on potential iron ore mining projects discussed during the CIMEC (international conference on mining industry) organised by the Cameroonian ministry of mines in Yaoundé in May 29 -31, 2013, clearly mentioned, “the Kribi Udders iron ore mine, still located in the Southern part of the country, is endowed with 632 million tons out of which 33% are exploitable, and for which 4 million tons yearly production is projected over a period of 25 years”. It continued “the Chinese company Sinosteel Cam, which has submitted to GoC its technical study report on the mineral upgrading, projects to invest $US 660 million for the first phase which includes an iron ore plant capable of processing locally 15% of the overall production » (Li Zhijian, 2013). Having said this, the Cameroonian analyst elaborates that in the mining industry in general, when an exploration licence is delivered over an area with already identified proven deposits, the licensee, after confirming the estimated reserves and where it is ready, willing and able to pursue with the development of the project, has to pay a signature bonus. The bonus is a onetime fee to be paid to the State for the assignment or securing of a licence. While not all states use bonuses, it seems unbelievable to Youmssi that Cameroon has relinquished this right in a contract with already proven reserves and high potential commercial benefits by selling out its resources to the Chinese who have not paid a dime in exploration costs. To him, the country has even ignored Art 15-1(a) of the Lobé deal that rightly provided for the payment of “non-refundable survey and exploration fees”. Drawing a parallel with other countries, he insists that companies are bound to pay signature bonuses irrespective of economic success in Botswana or in Nigeria recently within the framework of marginal fields’ awards (Obojemoinmien, 2021). Was it too demanding to just try to copy what other African countries have done in similar situations namely Guinea for the Simandou iron ore project operated by international majors Rio Tinto, BHP and Vale or Gabon with the Chinese of COMIBEL for the Belinga iron ore project?, the expert asked. After indicating that the signature bonus is calculated according to the type of mineral based on a rate proper to each country, he goes on with the maths. “For the Lobé iron ore, I would have required Sinosteel to pay, upon the signature, an amount of $US 5 per ton of proven deposits; as they have declared 650 million tons of iron ore at 33%, that is almost 200 million tons of enriched iron ore at 65%, the maths is simple. Sinosteel should pay close to $US 2 billion (FCFA 1200 billion) to Cameroon before clinching the exploitation permit” (Journal du Cameroun, May 30, 2022). If some may say these figures are meant to create a shock into the Cameroonian’s collective conscience by titillating the curiosity of the general public on the magnitude of potential losses incured by the agreement with the Chinese and initiate a strong backlash against the deal, Youmssi’s intention is actually to point out the extent of the total incapacity of the Cameroon’s bureaucracy in managing common heritage for the public good. He highlights, as one of possible explanation, their incapacity due to lack of experience in handling this type of issue while calling on the minister of mines to equally seek for the help of relevant human resources outside his ministry for “one cannot master techniques and develop capacities in negotiating mining contracts and conventions overnight. It is the result of the type and number of contracts one has negotiated during his/her whole career”. Although there is no doubt in the mind of people that the figures given by Bareja Youmssi are not subject to discussion for actual upfront costs if exploration was to be carried out nowadays would reasonably hardly rise to Youmssi’s levels, failing to have Chinese to pay in any way, even during production in the extreme case, for the exploitation of a mine they did not discover made the deal to appear as disadvantageous to Cameroon. Moreover, in trying to distort the reality through a semantic sleight of hand (Lobé instead of Kribi Udders), officials of the Cameroonian ministry of mines and their Chinese pals have masterminded a kind of cynical mafia-like trick aiming at depriving Cameroon off financial resources it is legitimately expecting to collect in Lobé deal could hardly be given a win-win characteristic.

Taken together, the Cameroonian expert’s critics portray the necessity to reflect on what has been conceptualised as “Africa Agency” in international relations and defined by Chipaike and Knowledge (2018) as “African actors’ ability to negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves”. This primary requires departing from the traditional narrative of the marginalisation of Africa in International Relations, which Bayart (2000:167) describes as “nonsense”, and to project “a posture of power and self-help in international engagements” (Chipaike and Knowledge, 2018). To enhance African agency, the authors share with the Cameroonian critic Bareja Youmssi that African agency should no longer be left in the hands of the States and their public officials alone. Today more than yesterday, a working synergy with non-state actors such as the civil society, the private sector and individuals is more likely to secure greater results in their international bargains and negotiations, for the interest of all.

What is Lobé iron ore mine actually worth?

The third curiosity of the Lobé deal is that Cameroon has signed a convention while questioning the sincerity of its Chinese partner’s declarations regarding upfront expenses. In its Art 18-3(a), the agreement says that the state reserves the right to carry out a counter-expertise of Sinosteel’s declared amount of investment during the exploratory phase as certified by an independent audit company mandated by Sinosteel while Art 18-3(b) indicates the new amount resulting from the counter expertise would be incorporated into the agreement as an amendment. These provisions are manifestations of the reluctance of officials of the ministry of finances, contrary to those of the ministry of mines, in giving a blank cheque to Sinosteel’s claims. Beyond this, it is actually the question of the sincerity of reserve estimates that is raised. It should be recalled that Cabral Libii cast serious doubts on the figures announced by the Chinese and chastised GoC for solely relying on these as an objective basis for discussions and signing of the agreement. Youmssi seconds this motion by referring to Chinese companies’ old habit of underestimating reserves as a strategy to reduce revenues of the host country while maximising theirs in the course of exploitation (Zambo, 2022). He says, “having worked with the Chinese in Gabon and DRC, they are well-known as specialists in minimising reserves. It is therefore imperative to always carry out a counter expertise of their results. There is no gainsaying that they have minimised Lobé iron ore reserves”. For the Lobé case, Sinosteel announced exploration costs of about $US 12 million. Youmssi replies these figures are insignificant for this type of project. This is, for him, another clear indication that Sinosteel never carried out any exploration, but rather an evaluation of the proven reserves. Pursuing his analysis, he points out a series of irregularities on Sinosteel’s road to signing Lobé. We read that the Cameroonian mining code requires from each operator carrying out exploration activities to produce each year one technical and financial report on its activities. Accessing these reports, starting from 2015 when the Chinese filed for an exploitation permit according to the minister of mines, would therefore help in revealing the real figures. However, there are serious doubts as per the existence of those reports as Youmssi puts it: “in the Cameroonian mining code, for an exploration permit to be transformed into exploitation permit, it is not only required to certify reserves but equally to produce a feasibility study. Inexplicably, only reserves certification appears as annex to the agreement. Quid off the feasibility study?".

Again, can we blame the Chinese for certifying the reserves as required by the Cameroonian mining code? Off course no. But was it urgent for the minister of mines to proceed with the signing when officials of the ministry finance have requested a second thought over figures presented by the Chinese? Off course no. It goes without saying it would have made sense to wait for the counter expertise results before any signing as a means of avoiding a potential conflict of interest that could exist between Sinosteel and audit firm(s) it mandated to certify the reserves and the level of upfront fees. While the identity of the firm is known for the second activity, the one committed for the first activity has not been disclosed, the minister just indicating it is a well-know international audit firm. A situation Youmssi mocked at when he says, "the Cameroonian minister of mines, in a recent interview, declared the Chinese had reserves certified by an internationally well-known firm. Curiously, he did not reveal the name of that firm. Either the minister does not understand what he saying or he is hiding the truth"**.**

However, as we saw it in the discussion on asymmetrical relationship, gains are never completely equal in such type of arrangements. What is most important here is how each party assesses opportunities and challenges and, devises a comprehensive strategy including agency and ownership of the relationship based on a pragmatic approach where interests and policies are well elaborated with the aim of achieving the well-being of the population through the strategic development of the national economy (Agbebi and Virtanen, 2017). That is to say that where from the outside people see a fool's bargain in the Lobé case, Cameroon in view of maximising opportunities and mitigating risks tied to its interaction with China, has maybe carried out a UK/AIIB cost/benefit analysis-type and decided to go ahead with the agreement. It is probably what Dieudonné Essomba, one of the current leading Cameroonian economic experts, had in mind when he explains that industrial mining being a complex domain, "it is necessary to analyse a number of indicators not always under Cameroon's full control for the Chinese capitalists are investing technology, capital and expertise. Evaluating implications of Chinese investment and Cameroon's gains should therefore be carried out before rushing into any debate". (Ecomatin, May 23, 2022). The question at the end will be to know if Sinosteel could still be considered as a reliable partner in case the counter-expertise produces results indicating that it overestimated its upfront fees. One can already sense it is likely to be the case if we consider that Art 18-3(b) seems to pose it more as a certainty than a probability: "the new amount obtained from the audit will be approved by a joint order of the ministers responsible for mines and finance, and then mentioned in this agreement as an amendment to the agreement". Moreover, should it effectively materialise, how could one be sure that Sinosteel did not equally tell lies regarding other components of the deal? To sum up, considering the various grey areas still cloaking the actual circumstances under which the deal was signed, suspicion for probably not telling the whole truth on the amount of investment and, maybe equally on the reserves estimates, definitely dents the credibility of Sinosteel as a reliable partner while contributing to discrediting the win-win 'etiquette' both Chinese authorities and the Cameroonian minister of mines have given to the Lobé deal.

The general question now to ask is to know why the GoC has in eventually signed the deal even though it does not show evidence of a win-win deal. For the GoC, the progressive depleting of oil reserves requires shifting focus on the valorisation of gas, on the one hand, and its vast and huge mining resources on the other. Paul Biya, the Cameroonian President has confirmed this postulate during his end-of-year address to the Nation. "Although our subsoil is endowed with mineral resources, the non-oil mining sector accounts for merely 1% of gross domestic product. Developing solid mineral mining will provide us with substitutes for our dwindling hydrocarbon stocks, and additional financial resources which can be used to finance investments" (Biya: 2022). As a possible response to Bareja Youmsi and other critics of the lack of agency of public officials, Paul Biya has equally indicated in the same address that the project includes "the construction of an approximately 20-kilometre-long pipeline and a 60-megawatt power plant". It should be noted that this energy infrastructure was not announced by the minster of mines when he was explaining the different fallouts of the project (EcoMatin, May 23, 2022). One can therefore guess that for the President to give his green light for the issuance a mining pemit, there is a good deal of bargaining that took place behind the scene leading both parties to agree on the inclusion of this infrastructure in the package of the project. This falls in line with the Chinese practice of resources against infrastructure known as the "Angola Model", a kind of modern barter trade where exploitation of resources is secured by providing supporting related investments in the infrastructure sector of the country (Nola Nouck, 2021).

What about the Chinese then? Why do they need to invest in an iron ore mining ore sector where the international market of iron ore by-products, namely steel, is characterised by an overproduction capacity? Authors like Maluku and al. (2019), Al-Fadhat and Prasetio (2022) believe that through the "debt trap diplomacy", Beijing is pursuing a foreign investment strategy in Africa, and other parts of the world, which consists in carrying out huge investments that will serve to obtain preferential treatment and favours on other deals where the debtor country is not capable of repaying the loans. One cannot totally rule out that the Lobé deal may possibly serve these political and foreign policy calculations from China now that a power plant, whose funding conditions have not been revealed, has been included in the package. However, we think that Beijing's decision to sign a deal in the iron ore-mining sector may equally have a link with the role assigned by Chinese authorities to steel in the overall Chinese economy.

In 2005, it was designated pillar industry in line with the government ambitious plans for the modernisation manufacture and construction industries as the country's infrastructure. We should highlight here that to achieve a certain level of economic transformation, a strong and sustainable domestic steel manufacturing capability has been historically a prerequisite. "Steel is the backbone of the Government's public infrastructure and urban development goals" The Economist Times, May 16, 2016). To grasp China's impact on the global steel industry, one must understand the overall scale of its steel production. In 2020, China accounted for 57 % of the global steel production and became the first country to produce over one billion tons in a single year (World Steel Association, January 26, 2021). This increase in production by China, characterized by an induced strong demand for high grade iron ore, has helped to drive up prices. High grade iron, the one Sinosteel is to process within the Lobé project, is a raw material that is essential in determining the price of steel. Thanks to a combined rise of the overall production and prices, Chinese steel companies have so far enjoyed both higher earnings and share prices. One could have expected the recent move made by the US and EU in agreeing to jointly support a greener production of sustainable steel and aluminium to deter Chinese ambitions in the iron ore mining sector. Both giants have pledged to work together in order to "restrict access to their markets for dirty steel and limit access to countries that dump steel in our markets, contributing to worldwide over-supply" (The White House, October 31, 2021). This move took place after the striking of a deal to end the U.S.-European Union bilateral dispute over steel and aluminium tariffs by the two parties.

Nevertheless, there is nothing new in attempts to curtailing Chinese steel imports. As Yuen Yee (2021) puts it, "in 2017, the U.S., EU and Japan pledged to rein in excess steel […] yet both previous statements were mostly symbolic, as resolving the problem of steel overproduction is virtually impossible without buy-in and cooperation from China". Investing in the Lobé iron ore project will therefore contribute in helping China to maintain an upper hand over this strategic sector of the global economy by securing access to raw material for its steel industry on preferential conditions while eventually augmenting its share of the market in Cameroon.

IMPLICATIONS

History will hold it that after signing with the Australians for the Mbalam project in 2012, the first mining contract signed under the revised mining code of 2016 is with the Chinese and not the French as one could have hitherto expected. In order words, France that has for very long played a leading role in the exploitation of resources in Cameroon (oil, timber, etc..) is been kicked out of the picture as confirmed by Anatole et al. (2021) and Nanda et al. (2022) in the agricultural and forestry sectors respectively. This confirms the admission made by French President Emmanuel Macron during his maiden visit to Cameroon on July 26, 2022, when he was acknowledging that the 40% market share in public contracts French companies used to control more than a decade ago has shrunk nowadays to a mere 10%. This appears as an indication of a greater autonomy gained by a 'smaller state', Cameroon, in its asymmetrical relationship with a 'greater state', France. However, while China has become the first economic partner of the country both in terms of investment and trade (Pokam, 2022), this has not yet translated into greater political influence in the country (Cabestan, 2015). One can hardly think how a contract awarded to the French could have faced the stiff opposition the Lobé deal has spurred twenty years ago when Cameroon was internationally viewed as belonging to France's 'traditional zone of influence' in Africa. This not to say that agreements signed with French were never vehemently criticised by those criticising the Chinese ones today. Rather, critics have just never been in position to challenge solid French leverage capacities within the Cameroonian governing system by putting GoC in a defensive position as they succeeded in the Lobé case, making it even obliged to release copies of the agreement while setting a precedent in the modern history of the country. One of the possible reasons could be that signing with the French in those days represented for the signing minister an important political survival tool for, in case of contention, the French would most likely activate their official and unofficial networks of relays within the system in view of pushing forward the deal and saving the fate of the minister in the eyes of President Paul Biya. China would hardly represent a game changer without this important political asset. Based on this, it will not be exaggerated to project that Chinese deals would likely face the same or even greater backlash in future. In addition, one could not expect the French to abdicate so easily without fighting as the French President has embarked on a communication crusade to confront the rise of Chinese and Russian influence in Africa. As a result, one can posit that Cameroon is strengthening relations with China while trying to maintain its autonomy of manoeuvres within this other asymmetrical relationship. The decision to grant or not an exploitation permit to

Sinosteel by President Paul Biya will surely help in validating or refuting this assertion.

The second lesson the Lobé deal teaches us is that China is resolutely following the path of Cameroon and by extension Africa's traditional partners as concerning what role is devoted to these countries in their World's view. With Lobé, China will pursue what any developed country has always done with the continent's resources, reported as the domination developed countries upon developing ones in international cooperation by Nanda et al., 2021. This is to say extracting raw materials and shipping them abroad for processing in view of sending them back as added valued manufactured goods to Africa. With Lobé, there is an upgrading plant that is part of the deal, but just for adding value to raw material for exportation while nothing is projected for the processing of at least the 15% of the total enriched iron ore production reserved for the local market. This falls in line with Bernal-Meza (2016) thesis explaining that commercial, financial and investment flows flooding Latin America are nothing else than 'functions' of Beijing's development strategy, "the logic that determines and sustains their respective dynamics responds to China's development model, not to a model of industrial development of its Latin American periphery". The very same thing can be said about Lobé as an element of disproof to the aforementioned Yang Jiechi's (2005) statement about a supposed China's concern over aligning development strategies of host countries with the internal logic of Beijing's comprehensive goal in Cameroon in this case. From the structural development point of view, one is can rightfully ask what in this context makes China different from Africa's traditional western partners. The answer is almost nothing!

CONCLUSION

Our study focused on the validity of the Chinese win-win foreign policy discourse using the Lobé iron ore deal signed by the state-owned company Sinosteel with the Ministry of Mines of Cameroon as case study. Analysing some contentious aspects of the deal, we have found that the Lobé deal lies on a substandard mining regime as compared to other African mining jurisdictions like Botswana. This situation has created among critics a feeling that the Chinese used the loopholes present in the law to advance their economic and financial pretensions in the agreement. Regarding the name of the project, we have equally pointed out that the deal is inexplicably named Lobé, a mine that has been for ages known until the day of signature of the agreement as Kribi Udders. Again, for opponents to the deal, this represents a shortcut used by the Chinese in order to avoid paying for the exploitation of a mine they have not discovered. Finally, the sincerity of estimates made by the Chinese remains subject to discussion by GoC itself; and its actually equal to questioning the credibility of the Chinese partner. On the three aspects analysed namely mining regulation, denomination of the mining asset and sincerity of upfront expenses, none has qualified as mutually beneficial to both parties, but rather what has emerged is the idea that the deal has consecrated an unbalanced arrangement particularly detrimental to Cameroon, tending to assert, all things been equal, a win-lose nature of the relationship. As confidence-building measure to implement in view of ensuring a smooth development of a strategic cooperation with China, we recommend a more asserted agency from the policymakers though a synergy of actions with an active and increasingly vocal civil society with the ultimate objective of devising pragmatic and constructive strategies likely to responsibly address the political, economic and social needs of their fellow citizens.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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