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CHINA IN CAMEROON: NEO-COLONIALISM OR PARTNERSHIP?

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ABSTRACT: *Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1971, China's growing economic engagement with Cameroon has sparked significant debate over whether this relationship constitutes neo-colonialism or represents a genuine development partnership. This study critically analyzes China's involvement in Cameroon, focusing on key areas such as infrastructure investment, trade dynamics, soft power initiatives, and governance impacts. A systematic literature review was conducted, following PRISMA guidelines, with data extracted from electronic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. Keywords such as "China AND Cameroon," "Belt and Road Initiative," and "Exim Bank Cameroon" were used to identify peer-reviewed articles and working papers. The analysis finds that Chinese investments in infrastructure and energy have positively impacted Cameroon's economic growth and regional connectivity, particularly through projects like hydroelectric dams and ports. However, these benefits are accompanied by trade imbalances, where Cameroon remains a supplier of raw commodities, while imports of low-cost manufactured goods from China continue to undermine the development of local industries. Soft power initiatives such as the Confucius Institute and cultural exchanges have helped strengthen educational ties but have also raised concerns about labor market competition and cultural assimilation. Despite the developmental gains, the study argues that China's engagement in Cameroon aligns more closely with neo-colonialism than a true partnership. While infrastructure and cultural exchanges have contributed to short-term growth, the debt-driven investments and the limited substantial technology transfer perpetuate Cameroon's economic dependence on China. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for Cameroon to diversify its economic base, renegotiate investment terms, and strengthen local governance to reduce dependency and ensure sustainable development.*

Keywords: *Neo-Colonialism; China-Cameroon Relations; Belt and Road Initiative; Economic Sovereignty; Infrastructure Investment.*

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, China's growing economic presence in Africa has sparked significant debate on the nature of its involvement and the long-term implications for the countries it engages with. China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa, particularly in infrastructure development and resource extraction, has been marked by rapid growth, especially with initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become a central strategy for China's global economic expansion (Alden, 2007). This expansion has positioned China as an important economic partner for many African countries, offering capital for infrastructure, loans for development projects, and access to critical natural resources. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971, Sino-Cameroonian ties have evolved into a complex relationship that raises questions about whether China's engagement represents neo-colonialism or a genuine partnership. China has provided over US $2.5 billion in development finance, funding critical infrastructure projects like the Lagdo Dam (1982) (Mbajon, 2019; Strange et al., 2013). These projects have delivered significant public goods, enhanced regional integration, and generated local employment, with technology transfer and skill development being notable benefits (Brautigam, 2009). Critics, however, argue that China's influx of cheap goods undermines local industries, while concessional finance increases Cameroon's debt vulnerability (Amin, 2015). Cameroon's decision to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1971 was motivated by Cold War dynamics and a desire for South-South cooperation. By the late 1990s, China emerged as a critical development partner, formalized through its participation in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, where China pledged assistance for infrastructure and human capital development (Strange et al., 2013). Critics argue that while the relationship provides development benefits, it also reflects neo-colonial dynamics, as China gains access to Cameroon's natural resources and markets, with little progress in industrial diversification. Proponents, on the other hand, highlight that local labor has been involved in Chinese projects, like the joint training programs that introduced Chinese best practices in maritime logistics, viewing these efforts as a symbiotic partnership (Brautigam, 2009). The relationship, therefore, showcases both development opportunities and dependency risks, reflecting elements of both neo-colonialism and partnership.

Policymakers view China's increasing involvement in Cameroon as a mutually beneficial partnership, helping the country address its critical infrastructure gaps while facilitating economic growth. They argue that China's investments, particularly in infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and hydroelectric power plants, are essential for boosting economic growth, improving global trade connectivity, and helping Cameroon modernize its economy (Brautigam, 2009). This perspective suggests that China's investment model fills Africa's development gap, which has been left by colonial powers and Western countries, especially regarding physical and energy infrastructure (Moyo, 2009). According to proponents, China's economic diplomacy, which avoids the political conditionalities often attached to Western aid, allows Cameroon to modernize its infrastructure and expand its industrial base without external interference (Waqar, 2021). For instance, projects such as the Kribi Deep Sea Port and hydroelectric dams, financed by China, are seen as providing crucial infrastructure that can stimulate trade and regional integration (Tende & Fogwe, 2018). However, critics of China's growing economic footprint in Africa argue that these investments represent a new form of neocolonialism, wherein African countries, including Cameroon, become locked into exploitative and extractive economic relationships with external powers. Neocolonialism which Nkrumah, 1965 asserts as the continuation of economic domination by former colonial powers or other external forces, even after political independence, often through mechanisms such as debt dependency, unequal trade relationships, and resource extraction is the experience of many African nations. In this context, critics argue that while China's investments in infrastructure and energy are seen as essential, they also perpetuate a cycle of debt, where Cameroon's future resource revenues are directed towards debt repayment, leaving the country vulnerable to economic manipulation (Ferdinand, 2018). According to Frank (1967), this dependency structure is a form of economic exploitation that prevents peripheral nations from diversifying their economies or achieving true economic sovereignty. Cameroon, in this model, remains reliant on Chinese capital and technology, unable to build a self-sustaining industrial economy. This research aims to critically examine whether China's increasing investment in Cameroon fosters true economic independence or whether it reinforces the country's dependency on external economic powers. The central question guiding this study is: Does China's increasing investment in Cameroon represent a genuine partnership for development, or does it continue the patterns of economic subjugation and dependency. This study applies neocolonialism theory to explores whether China's investments in Cameroon follow the same historical patterns of exploitation and unequal exchange.

Significance of the Study. The relationship between China and Cameroon is the case used for understanding China's role in Africa's economic development and the long-term implications of China's foreign investments in peripheral nations. This study is significant both academically and practically. Academically, it contributes to the ongoing discussion about China's involvement in Africa, particularly the question of whether China's growing presence represents a new model of development cooperation or simply reinforces existing neocolonial dynamics. By applying neocolonialism frameworks, this study adds to the discourse on whether China's investments are transforming Africa's economic landscape or reproducing patterns of exploitation and economic dependency that have historically been associated with Western imperialism. Practically, this study offers insights for Cameroonian policymakers as they navigate their economic relationship with China. Understanding the implications of China's investments for Cameroon's economic autonomy will allow the country to better negotiate investment terms, prioritize domestic industrialization, and develop economic policies that reduce the risk of further economic dependency. The study also has broader implications for other African nations involved in similar partnerships with China. By providing a detailed analysis of China's economic engagement in Cameroon, this research can inform the strategies that African governments adopt to ensure that foreign investments lead to sustainable, self-sufficient development, rather than perpetuating patterns of dependency that hinder long-term economic growth.

2. Literature Review

Over the past decades, China has become a dominant economic player in Africa, and its increasing economic presence has sparked significant debate about its role on the continent. A particularly contentious area of discussion is whether China's involvement represents a modern form of neocolonialism or a genuine partnership aimed at sustainable development. China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa, especially in infrastructure development and resource extraction, has seen significant growth, notably through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become central to China's global economic expansion (Alden, 2007; Guo, 2021). Cameroon, with its rich natural resources and strategic position in Central Africa, is a focal point for examining China's evolving role in Africa. China's growing economic influence in Cameroon spans various sectors, such as infrastructure development, energy production, and natural resource extraction. As China's investments continue to increase, many scholars argue that these investments represent a beneficial partnership that addresses critical infrastructure gaps while facilitating economic growth (Ferdinand, 2018; Lee & Schultz, 2012). These views are supported by proponents of China's engagement, who argue that the investments help bridge Africa's development gap, particularly in areas that were historically neglected by colonial powers and Western nations (Brautigam, 2009; Fuchs & Rahn, 2020). Projects like roads, railways, and hydroelectric power plants are cited as key to enhancing Cameroon's economic growth and improving its global trade connectivity (Cheng, 2022).

Despite these optimistic perspectives, critics of China's growing economic footprint in Cameroon argue that its investments may be a modern form of neocolonialism, whereby Cameroon becomes trapped in exploitative, resource-extractive relationships, reminiscent of the colonial dynamics it once endured under European powers (Ferdinand, 2018; Nkrumah, 1965). Neocolonialism, as defined by Nkrumah (1965), refers to the continuation of economic domination by external powers even after the formal end of colonialism, often through mechanisms such as debt dependency, unequal trade relations, and resource extraction. Critics contend that China's increasing investments may not lead to true economic sovereignty for Cameroon but rather create new dependencies that compromise the country's autonomy (Ndulu et al., 2021). Dependency theory illuminates the potential for neocolonial patterns in China's engagement. Frank (1967) argued that dependency is a structural condition where peripheral nations like Cameroon are subjected to exploitative relationships that hinder their development. Frank emphasized that these relationships are not merely economic, but institutionalized through international structures that prioritize resource extraction over industrialization or economic diversification. This model suggests that China's investments may perpetuate Cameroon's reliance on external financing, creating a situation where the country remains dependent on Chinese capital and control over its resources (Ferdinand, 2018; Ndulu et al., 2021).

There is a body of literature that frames China's role as a developmental partner rather than a neocolonial power. Lee & Schultz (2012) contend that China's infrastructure projects across Africa, including Cameroon, have the potential to stimulate economic growth, create jobs, enhance trade, and improve energy access. China's role is often framed as part of a broader South-South cooperation model, which contrasts sharply with the extractive industries and monopolistic trade practices of former colonial powers (Moyo, 2009). This cooperative model is argued to promote more equitable development outcomes, addressing long-standing development challenges that have been ignored by traditional Western aid models (Zheng, 2020). Furthermore, Moyo (2009) highlights that China's focus on infrastructure and trade partnerships offers a departure from the dependency created by Western countries, where aid is often tied to stringent political and economic conditions.

This development model, often referred to as South-South cooperation, is seen by some as more empowering for African nations like Cameroon because it emphasizes mutual benefit and the transfer of technology and skills (Zheng, 2020). While China's investments do involve significant loans, proponents argue that these arrangements are more sustainable than traditional aid-dependent relationships (Moyo, 2009). However, critics, such as Liu (2021), point out that these loans may lead to debt traps, wherein future revenues from natural resources must be used to repay Chinese loans, thereby increasing dependency on China.

This tension between China's role as a partner and as a potentially neocolonial force highlights the ambivalence surrounding China's involvement in Africa. Critics argue that China's investments often result in new forms of economic dependencies, keeping countries like Cameroon reliant on external financing, technology, and market access, without fully transferring the industrial and technological capacities required for self-sufficiency (Lin, 2019). The concern is that while China helps build infrastructure, it does not necessarily empower Cameroon to achieve true economic sovereignty, and in fact, may perpetuate its subordinate position within the global system (Moyo, 2009; Lin, 2019). The question that underpins this study is whether China's increasing investment in Cameroon fosters true economic independence or whether it reinforces the country's dependence on external economic powers. Neocolonial theory provides a useful lens to critically assess whether China's investments in Cameroon follow the historical patterns of economic exploitation that have defined the relationships between African nations and global powers. While China's investments in Cameroon have been praised for their potential to foster infrastructure development and reduce poverty, there is a significant debate about whether these investments are truly transformational or whether they reinforce the same dependency structures that have characterized the post-colonial economic experience. This article critically assesses whether Cameroon is moving toward economic sovereignty or remaining entrenched in a form of economic dependency, perpetuated by external investments that continue to prioritize resource extraction over sustainable industrial development.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The concept of neocolonialism, first introduced by Nkrumah (1965) in his work Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism, remains an essential lens for understanding the post-colonial economic dynamics between peripheral nations and external powers. Nkrumah argues that while formal political independence was achieved by many African nations, their economic systems remain deeply influenced and often controlled by former colonial powers and new imperial forces, leading to continued exploitation under a different guise. In Nkrumah's view, these nations, while outwardly sovereign, remain structurally subordinate, primarily through economic mechanisms such as trade imbalances, debt dependency, and resource extraction, which primarily benefit the external powers (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 13). In the context of China's growing economic presence in Cameroon, neocolonialism provides a framework for interpreting the nature of China's investments. Cameroon, like many African nations, finds itself engaging in partnerships with China that are underpinned by large-scale infrastructure loans tied to future natural resource revenues. While these investments are framed as a means of economic development, they serve China's geopolitical and economic interests, particularly through securing access to valuable resources such as oil, timber, and minerals (Ferdinand, 2018, p. 76). For example, major infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and energy plants, funded by Chinese loans, are not merely aimed at addressing Cameroon's developmental challenges but also ensure that Cameroon remains integrated into the global economy in a manner that prioritizes resource extraction over industrialization or value-added production (Zhang, 2025, p. 88). This relationship mirrors the colonial dynamic, where peripheral countries like Cameroon were tasked with providing raw materials for the industrial core while being denied control over production or value-added processes. Nkrumah (1965) argued that the true economic sovereignty of post-colonial nations is often constrained by these external forces, which continue to exploit local resources while maintaining control over economic policy. China's economic model in Cameroon reinforces this dependency structure, as the country's growth prospects are tied to the extraction and export of raw materials rather than the development of its own industrial or technological base. Nkrumah's assertion that "real independence is unattainable without economic independence" (1965, p. 15) holds true, as Cameroon's sovereignty is continuously undermined by the structural arrangements facilitated by Chinese loans, which do not prioritize economic diversification or technological transfer.

The financial mechanisms driving these investments, particularly Chinese loans tied to resource-backed contracts, further exacerbate Cameroon's dependency. Critics argue that these debt-based arrangements could lead to a "debt trap" scenario, where the burden of repaying loans to China leaves Cameroon increasingly reliant on Chinese capital (Bo, 2024, p. 201). The loans, while enabling the development of critical infrastructure, impose significant financial obligations on the country, which often must pledge future revenues from natural resources to secure these funds. As Nkrumah (1965) noted, the economic policies of neocolonial nations often "reflect the interests of foreign powers rather than those of the people" (p. 19), and the debt relations between Cameroon and China can be seen as perpetuating this imbalance. Cameroon's continued reliance on Chinese financing for infrastructure undermines the country's ability to make independent economic decisions and develops a situation where its economic sovereignty is increasingly compromised by external financial influence. Recent studies have corroborated this argument, highlighting that the growing debt to China, especially in resource-backed loans, places increasing pressure on Cameroon's economy and restricts its autonomy (Vines, Butler, & Yu, 2022, p. 124; Mutai et al., 2024, p. 303).

The exploitation of labor and natural resources without a corresponding transfer of technology or skills although Chinese companies have been involved in constructing critical infrastructure, such as roads and energy plants, is asserted to be one of neocolonialism characteristics because they often bring their own workforce and materials, limiting the potential for local labor development or technological advancement. This aspect of Chinese investments in Cameroon reinforces the idea that these projects, while providing some immediate infrastructure benefits, are not structured to foster long-term economic independence or industrialization. As Nkrumah (1965) observed, neocolonialism "locks countries into perpetual exploitation" (p. 22), and in this case, Cameroon's continuous dependence on Chinese labor and expertise for large-scale infrastructure projects means that the country is not developing the domestic capacity needed to operate or maintain these infrastructures independently. The lack of significant technology transfer and local capacity building results in a situation where Cameroonian workers remain at the bottom of the economic value chain (Zhang, 2025, p. 88; Amtenbrink, 2024, p. 65). Nkrumah (1965) further asserts that neocolonialism "is not the absence of political independence but the existence of a form of economic control" (p. 25). This concept is clearly evident in China's investments in Cameroon. While Cameroon is politically independent, the terms of its economic engagement with China maintain a form of control over the country's economic future. The continued reliance on Chinese loans and infrastructure investments ensures that Cameroon remains within the economic orbit of China, unable to fully break free from the mechanisms of exploitation that Nkrumah described. This dependency is evident in the way China's investments have shaped Cameroon's economic trajectory, steering the country's development path toward raw-material extraction rather than industrialization or self-sufficiency (Alden, 2007; Zhang, 2025). Scholars have also noted that the growing reliance on Chinese capital has resulted in a form of "financial neo-imperialism," where external economic powers dictate the terms of domestic development, thus stifling any potential for true economic autonomy (Bo, 2024, p. 204; de Freitas, 2023, p. 112).

The continuation of these economic arrangements, underpinned by Chinese financing and infrastructure projects, suggests that Cameroon's sovereignty remains constrained not by political colonization, but by a persistent economic neocolonial structure. Nkrumah's assertion that economic control continues to exist even in the presence of political independence rings true as Cameroon's economic policy is increasingly shaped by Chinese financial and developmental interests (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 25). The financial leverage held by China, coupled with the lack of true industrial development or technology transfer, points to a form of neocolonial control that persists in the global South today. As Mutai et al. (2024) argue, "Despite the apparent mutual benefit of the projects, the economic sovereignty of African nations is often compromised by the structure of financing and the terms of engagement with China" (p. 309). This is a clear reflection of Nkrumah's warning about the dangers of economic subjugation under the guise of partnership.

The debt-driven nature of these investments brings another layer of concern. Research has shown that as Cameroon continues to engage in large-scale borrowing from China for infrastructure development, the risks of defaulting on these loans increase, potentially leading to a situation where Cameroon is further locked into a dependency on Chinese capital (Vines, Butler, & Yu, 2022, p. 124). This growing debt burden places pressure on Cameroon's economic policy, forcing the country to prioritize debt repayment over national development goals. Such dependency can prevent the country from pursuing a development agenda that genuinely serves its own citizens, as it becomes increasingly beholden to China's financial interests (Mutai et al., 2024, p. 303). Neocolonialism remains a useful and powerful framework for understanding the complex and often exploitative nature of China's economic engagement with Cameroon. Despite the rhetoric of cooperation and mutual development, the structural arrangements underpinning China's investments in Cameroon reflect a form of economic subjugation where the country's sovereignty is compromised through debt, resource extraction, and the continued dominance of foreign capital. Nkrumah's analysis of neocolonialism as a system of economic control remains pertinent in explaining how Cameroon's continued reliance on China for infrastructure financing and resource extraction inhibits the country's ability to achieve true economic independence (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 25).

3. China's Engagement in Cameroon

The relationship between Cameroon and People's Republic of China (China) has evolved significantly over several decades. China's involvement initially centred on trade relations and modest economic assistance; Chinese presence in Cameroon in the 20th century was relatively limited, and economic exchanges often consisted of raw material exports and occasional aid or small development projects (Mudoh, 2022; Amin, 2015). Since the early 2000s, however, China's footprint has expanded notably. With the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China's role in Cameroon shifted dramatically infrastructure investment, loans, and development financing became a central feature (Bekada, 2025; Venkateswaran, 2022). African wide analyses show that under BRI, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade flows surged, fundamentally changing the structure of trade and investment cooperation between China and African countries (Todorović & Mrdaković, 2023). In Cameroon, this translation of policy into praxis has manifested in substantial Chinese participation in transport, energy, and construction projects (Multiresearch Journal, 2025; Cameroon–China foreign aid assessments 2009–2020). China's foreign policy toward Africa appears grounded in economic diplomacy, resource extraction, and geo strategic interest. Through loans, grants, and trade agreements, China has secured access to critical natural resources (oil, timber, minerals) and gained influence in infrastructure and industrial sectors (Bräutigam, 2010; Herrera, 2022). Proponents argue these investments support development, but critics highlight the long-term risks of debt accumulation, resource backed loan agreements, and potential erosion of economic autonomy for recipient nations (Mutai et al., 2024; Bo, 2024). In Cameroon's case, Chinese state-owned enterprises frequently undertake large-scale infrastructure projects (roads, ports, energy plants) financed via Chinese loans, which often tie repayment to revenues from natural resource exports or future production, a model reminiscent of historical resource-for-infrastructure arrangements (Nyiawung, 2024; Anyanwu, 2023). While these projects promise improved infrastructure, the concurrent rise in external debt and dependence on resource exports raises serious concerns about long-term sovereignty and sustainable economic development (Mutai et al., 2024; Africa policy critiques, 2023).

3.1. Major Projects and Investments

China's economic involvement in Cameroon is particularly evident in several key areas of investment, including infrastructure development, energy projects, and resource extraction. These investments not only address critical development gaps in Cameroon but also serve to secure China's geopolitical and economic interests on the continent. Chinese companies have become deeply embedded in Cameroon's economic fabric, providing the country with much-needed infrastructure while simultaneously strengthening China's economic foothold in the region. However, the nature of these investments raises significant concerns about Cameroon's long-term economic independence, especially given the debt-financed nature of these projects and the growing control China exerts over key sectors.

3.1.1. Infrastructure Development

One of the most prominent areas of Chinese engagement in Cameroon is infrastructure development. Chinese companies have financed and constructed major projects, including roads, railways, ports, and hydroelectric plants, which are essential to Cameroon's economic modernization and trade facilitation. A notable example is the construction of the Kribi Deep Sea Port, which aims to boost regional trade, not only for Cameroon but also for its landlocked neighbors such as Chad and the Central African Republic (Tende & Fogwe, 2018). This port is strategically positioned to facilitate the export of natural resources, primarily oil, timber, and mineral s, to global markets, with China being a primary partner in its construction and operation (Vines et al., 2022). China's role in developing Cameroon's railway system, including key links like the Yaoundé-Douala railway, enhances the country's ability to integrate into regional trade networks (Ferdinand, 2018; Li & Liu, 2021). These infrastructure projects are pivotal for Cameroon's economic growth and have the potential to boost trade connectivity across Central Africa.

While these investments address long-standing infrastructure deficits in Cameroon, critics argue that they also serve China's geopolitical and economic interests. According to Alden (2007), infrastructure projects like the Kribi Port and road networks are not solely designed for Cameroonian development, but also to create trade routes for Chinese goods and secure resource extraction opportunities in the region. As Alden (2007) points out, "China's infrastructure investments, while beneficial, often serve to reinforce its economic interests rather than promoting the recipient country's full economic autonomy" (p. 120).

These infrastructure projects are often tied to resource-backed loans, creating a situation where Cameroon's future revenues from exports are directed toward debt repayment, potentially leaving the country in a perpetual cycle of debt dependency to China (Brautigam, 2009; Vines et al., 2022). The risk is that Cameroon becomes increasingly reliant on Chinese capital, reinforcing a neocolonial pattern of economic dependence where its strategic infrastructure is not fully aligned with national development goals but with China's long-term economic interests.

3.1.2. Energy Investments

China's involvement in energy projects, particularly in hydroelectric power, has been another key area of investment. Cameroon faces significant challenges with electricity shortages, which impede industrialization and economic growth. In response, Chinese companies have financed several hydroelectric dams, such as the Memve'ele Hydroelectric Power Plant, which began operations in 2019 (Tende & Fogwe, 2018). This project, along with others, is intended to address Cameroon's chronic energy shortages, which have been a barrier to its economic development (Alden, 2007). These projects are significant for Cameroon's industrial future, as reliable energy is crucial for attracting foreign investment and fostering economic diversification.

However, these energy projects have been heavily criticized due to the debt-financed nature of these initiatives. As Ferdinand (2018) highlights, many of these energy investments are tied to Chinese loans, which must be repaid using the country's natural resource extraction. This further exacerbates Cameroon's dependency on China, as the country becomes trapped in a cycle of debt repayment and resource extraction, rather than achieving long-term energy independence or building a self-sustaining energy market. Critics contend that while these projects provide immediate solutions, they reinforce the long-term financial dependence on China, leaving Cameroon vulnerable to the risks associated with mounting debt (Li & Liu, 2021; Bo, 2024). This pattern is characteristic of China's broader investment strategy in Africa, which often prioritizes infrastructure development over the diversification of local economies or the development of self-reliant energy sectors.

3.1.3. Natural Resource Extraction

China's investment in Cameroon's natural resources particularly oil, minerals, and timber remain at the core of the economic relationship between the two nations. Chinese firms dominate the resource extraction sectors, with several oil and timber projects controlled by Chinese companies (Ferdinand, 2018).

These projects are integral to China's need for raw materials to fuel its manufacturing sector and meet the growing demands of its economy (Ferdinand, 2018; Brautigam, 2009). China's involvement in Cameroon's natural resource extraction sector has been substantial, with numerous mining, forestry, and energy companies operating under Chinese ownership or partnerships. These investments enable China to secure a reliable supply of raw materials while maintaining control over extraction processes in a resource-rich country.

While China's involvement in the resource sector has led to some economic growth in Cameroon, it also reinforces economic dependence. Much of the profit generated from resource extraction leaves Cameroon as Chinese companies repatriate their earnings, leaving little for domestic reinvestment or economic diversification (Brautigam, 2009).

This capital outflow, combined with the growing debt burden from Chinese-backed infrastructure projects, leaves Cameroon in a vulnerable economic position. As Li & Liu (2021) argue, "China's resource extraction model in Africa often results in limited local value-added activities, locking African countries into primary commodity exports" (p. 72). This leaves Cameroon as a supplier of raw materials with little control over the value-added components of its economic output.

This situation reflects the neocolonial dynamics that characterize many of China's investments in Africa, where African nations continue to export raw resources while failing to develop industries that could add value to these materials (Brautigam, 2009).

3.2. Debt and Economic Dependence

One of the central critiques of China's economic involvement in Cameroon is the growing debt burden resulting from resource-backed loans and infrastructure financing. As noted by Ferdinand (2018), China's investment model often involves providing large loans for infrastructure projects, which are secured by future revenues from Cameroonian resources. This creates a situation where Cameroon must rely on resource extraction to meet debt obligations, rather than building a diversified economy that could reduce its dependence on external creditors. The model of debt-backed investment further intensifies the vulnerability of Cameroon to external financial influence, as its economic future becomes increasingly tied to its ability to service these debts through resource exports (Alden, 2007; Bo, 2024).

The focus on debt-backed projects has led to concerns about the long-term sustainability of China's involvement in Cameroon. Critics argue that Cameroon is at risk of falling into a debt trap similar to that of other African countries that have become heavily reliant on Chinese loans for infrastructure development (Alden, 2007). This issue raises questions about the economic sovereignty of Cameroon and whether China's investments are genuinely fostering economic independence or merely deepening economic dependency through debt and resource extraction (Ferdinand, 2018; Vines et al., 2022). As Alden (2007) notes, "China's loans, while enabling critical development, often result in structural dependence that undermines the long-term economic autonomy of African nations" (p. 126). This situation has sparked widespread debate about the true costs of China's economic diplomacy in Africa and the long-term implications for sovereignty and sustainable development.

China's economic engagement in Cameroon has led to significant infrastructure development and some improvements in energy access, but it has also contributed to Cameroon's increasing dependence on China. Through debt-backed loans, resource extraction, and control over key infrastructure projects, China's investments reflect the neocolonial dynamics identified by Ferdinand (2018) and Brautigam (2009).

While these projects offer immediate benefits, particularly in terms of infrastructure and energy, they risk reinforcing Cameroon's dependency on external financing and raw material exports, limiting the country's ability to achieve true economic sovereignty and sustainable development.

4. Neocolonialism or Partnership?

4.1. Partnership Perspective

China's increasing involvement in Cameroon has sparked a polarized debate about whether this engagement represents a genuine partnership or a new form of neocolonialism. From the partnership perspective, proponents argue that China's investments in Cameroon have played a critical role in addressing the country's long-standing infrastructure deficits. These investments, particularly those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are viewed as essential for improving infrastructure in sectors such as roads, railways, energy, and ports, which are seen as critical to Cameroon's economic modernization and industrialization (Waqar, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). According to Waqar (2021), Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in infrastructure has provided Cameroon with much-needed capital to address chronic development challenges, particularly in transport and energy sectors, which have long hindered economic growth. The expansion of key infrastructure projects, such as the Kribi Deep Sea Port, has been highlighted as a prime example of how China's involvement can provide significant benefits by enhancing Cameroon's connectivity to global trade routes and stimulating regional trade (Tende & Fogwe, 2018).

China's approach offers an alternative to the traditional Western-dominated development model. Unlike Western investments, which often come with political conditionalities and aid dependence, China's model is based on the principle of non-interference in internal affairs (Moyo, 2009). This non-interference, alongside the focus on financing large-scale infrastructure projects without demanding political or governance reforms, positions China as a more equitable partner for African nations like Cameroon (Waqar, 2021). Additionally, by providing financing for projects such as the Memve'ele Hydroelectric Power Plant, which addresses Cameroon's chronic energy shortages, China is seen as contributing to the country's long-term economic development. These energy projects are expected to attract further private investment, increase industrial capacity, and enhance Cameroon's position in regional trade (Tende & Fogwe, 2018). Thus, from the partnership perspective, China's involvement in Cameroon is viewed as a mutually beneficial relationship, where both parties gain from infrastructure improvements and resource access.

4.2. Neocolonial perspective

Despite the arguments in favor of partnership, a growing body of critics contends that China's engagement in Cameroon follows a pattern of neocolonialism, rather than fostering genuine development or economic independence. Critics argue that rather than empowering Cameroon economically, China's investments primarily serve to secure access to the country's natural resources while simultaneously expanding China's geopolitical and economic influence across Africa. Ferdinand (2018) points out that many of China's investments in Cameroon, particularly in infrastructure, are financed through loans tied to future revenues from natural resource extraction. These resource-backed loans put Cameroon in a precarious financial position, as it is forced to rely on the extraction of oil, timber, and other natural resources to service debt obligations (Ferdinand, 2018; Brautigam, 2009).

The debt-driven nature of these investments has raised concerns about Cameroon's increasing vulnerability to Chinese financial influence. Brautigam (2009) highlights that resource-backed loans are designed to secure Chinese control over Cameroon's resources while leaving the country in a perpetual cycle of debt repayment. This, according to critics, is a form of economic dependency that mirrors colonial-era relationships, where peripheral nations like Cameroon were primarily used for resource extraction while failing to achieve economic diversification or industrialization. As Alden (2007) notes, "Chinese infrastructure investments, while facilitating trade and development, often reinforce China's interests by creating trade routes for Chinese goods and securing long-term access to African resources" (p. 120). This raises questions about whether these investments are truly fostering economic sovereignty or simply locking Cameroon into a pattern of economic subjugation. China's role in resource extraction and infrastructure development undermines Cameroon's sovereignty. While Chinese companies dominate the extraction of resources like oil and timber, the profits from these activities often flow out of the country, leaving minimal benefits for Cameroon beyond the short-term development of infrastructure projects (Ferdinand, 2018; Li & Liu, 2021). This capital outflow, combined with the growing debt burden, perpetuates a cycle of dependency on China. Cameroon's economy remains largely focused on the export of raw materials, with little capacity for value-added production or industrial development, thereby reinforcing its position at the periphery of the global economic system (Brautigam, 2009; Bo, 2024).

In this context, the growing debt dependency between China and Cameroon has created concerns about a "debt trap" scenario. Critics argue that Cameroon is being increasingly tied to Chinese capital, making it difficult for the country to pursue independent economic policies or diversify its economy. Li & Liu (2021) note that, "China's approach to African resource extraction often focuses on securing raw materials, with limited investment in local industries or technology transfer" (p. 72). This situation, according to critics, highlights the neocolonial dynamics at play, where Cameroon remains locked in a cycle of dependency on China for financing, resources, and technological expertise, but does not gain the capacity to develop its own industrial base or diversify its economic activities.

4.3. Analysis through Neocolonialism Theory

Using neocolonialism as a theoretical framework, the economic relationship between Cameroon and China can be interpreted not as a balanced partnership, but as a modern form of economic domination one that secures Chinese interests while constraining Cameroon's long-term economic autonomy. As defined by Nkrumah (1965), neocolonialism occurs when formally independent countries remain economically controlled by external powers through mechanisms such as debt, resource extraction, and foreign-dominated investment. In this framework, true sovereignty cannot be attained without economic independence; yet China's investment model in Cameroon undermines exactly that (Nkrumah, 1965). The debt-driven nature of many Chinese investments in Cameroon exemplifies a central mechanism of neocolonial control. Research shows that Chinese loans in African countries including Cameroon often result in long-term dependency due to structural imbalance in bargaining power. A recent comparative analysis finds that such "debt trap" dynamics are driven by underlying disparities between China (the creditor) and African recipients, which place countries like Cameroon at economic risk (Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2024). These debt trap diplomacy dynamics are argued to serve China's interests rather than the developmental needs of African nations, leading to a cycle of debt dependency that Cameroon is increasingly locked into (Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2024).

Empirical evidence from Cameroon underscores the financial risks associated with its increasing debt to China. A recent report highlighted that in the first quarter of 2024, Cameroon repaid CFA 148.2 billion to Chinese creditors, comprising CFA 113.5 billion in principal and CFA 34.7 billion in interest (Business in Cameroon, 2024). China holds a substantial portion of Cameroon's external debt, with 64.8% of its bilateral debt attributed to Chinese creditors, representing about 22.4% of the country's total external debt (Business in Cameroon, 2025). This rising debt burden is further exacerbated by the non-concessional nature of these loans, which are often tied to Chinese contractors for infrastructure projects, energy development, and port construction (Business in Cameroon, 2024). This arrangement has intensified the financial pressure on Cameroon, limiting its fiscal flexibility and creating a debt trap scenario where the country's future revenue from resources is increasingly pledged toward debt repayment. The reliance on Chinese capital not only perpetuates Cameroon's economic dependency but also limits its ability to diversify its economy and pursue more self-sustaining development strategies. This situation exemplifies the type of economic leverage described in neocolonial theory, where external powers, in this case, China, exert control over the economic trajectory of developing nations like Cameroon through debt and infrastructure arrangements. Scholars argue that such investments tend to reinforce Cameroon's role as a raw-material exporter, without significantly promoting domestic economic transformation (Osman, 2021; Herrera, 2022). This dynamic mirrors the colonial-era pattern where peripheral countries supplied raw materials and remained dependent on external powers for capital, technology, and high-value production. Brautigam (2009) emphasizes that although Chinese investments in infrastructure are often framed as mutually beneficial, they frequently do not contribute to the diversification of the economy. Instead, these investments largely serve to facilitate resource extraction and international trade, with limited value-added industrialization occurring within Cameroon itself (Brautigam, 2009).

Many Chinese investments in Cameroon proceed with minimal requirements for governance reform, transparency, or local capacity building. As one recent study of Chinese FDI in Cameroon observes, the "unconditional investment" model has reduced Cameroon's reliance on Western FDI — but at the cost of local empowerment and technological development (Nyiawung, 2024). This model deprives Cameroon of the opportunity to build technological know-how and industrial capacity, crucial factors for breaking free from its position as a raw-material exporter (Nyiawung, 2024). Moreover, environmental and social concerns have been raised in resource-rich zones where Chinese firms operate, pointing to neglect of sustainable development and increasing vulnerability of local communities (Mayers, 2014). The dependence created by these structural arrangements has broader implications: economic vulnerability, fiscal instability, and potential erosion of sovereignty. As argued in a continental study on Chinese lending practices, debt sustainability remains a critical challenge for many African countries, and the patterns observed in Cameroon align closely with those identified as part of a larger regional trend (Mutai et al., 2024; Bo, 2024). When foreign-backed infrastructure is financed primarily through debt often secured by future resource revenues the borrowing country may find itself continuously reliant on external financiers, limiting its ability to pursue independent development trajectories (Heaven Mike, 2024). The cycle of resource extraction to service debt can crowd out investment in critical domestic priorities such as health, education, or industrial diversification (Heaven Mike, 2024). Applying neocolonialism theory to the Cameroon–China relationship reveals that many aspects of Chinese economic engagement debt-backed loans, resource-backed agreements, weak local capacity building, and external control over strategic sectors correspond closely with patterns of economic subjugation. Although infrastructure improvements deliver short-term benefits, the structural consequences may lock Cameroon into a subordinate position within the global economy, restricting its capacity for long-term economic independence and industrial transformation. As Nkrumah (1965) observed, "neocolonialism locks countries into perpetual exploitation" (p. 22), and the same can be said of China's investments in Cameroon. Thus, under the neocolonial framework, China's role in Cameroon is not a partnership for development but a continuation of the exploitative relationships that have historically characterized economic interactions between African countries and external powers

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, China's strategic engagement with Cameroon has led to both significant benefits and serious concerns about the country's long-term economic sovereignty. On the one hand, China's investments have helped address Cameroon's long-standing development challenges, particularly in the realms of infrastructure and energy production. Notable projects, such as the, road networks, and energy plants, have substantially improved Cameroon's physical infrastructure, which is vital for enhancing trade, regional connectivity, and energy access. These developments have spurred economic growth, created jobs, and fostered potential industrialization. Furthermore, these infrastructure improvements have enhanced Cameroon's position within regional trade networks, offering some promise for future economic integration (Tende & Fogwe, 2018).

However, despite these immediate gains, China's engagement raises critical concerns regarding Cameroon's long-term economic sovereignty and the risk of neocolonial dependency. China's investments, particularly those linked to debt-backed loans and resource-backed agreements, have established a framework in which Cameroon's future resource revenues are tied to the repayment of Chinese loans. This creates a cycle of economic dependence, whereby Cameroon risks becoming more financially vulnerable and less able to pursue independent development strategies. As Cameroon's reliance on Chinese capital grows, it risks entrenching its role as a supplier of raw materials, unable to diversify its economy or foster industrial growth. This dependency threatens the country's long-term economic sovereignty and limits its ability to chart a self-sustaining development path (Ferdinand, 2018; Brautigam, 2009). While China's investments have resulted in infrastructure improvements, they also reinforce Cameroon's position in the global economy as a resource exporter, rather than a fully industrialized and diversified economy. Therefore, although China's presence in Cameroon offers short-term developmental benefits, it carries significant risks of deepening the country's dependence on external actors, which could undermine its economic independence and sovereign development in the long term.

Policy Recommendations. Given the mixed impact of China's economic engagement on Cameroon, it is essential for Cameroonian policymakers to adopt strategies that mitigate the risks of neocolonial dependency, while maximizing the developmental benefits of Chinese investments.

Firstly, Cameroon should prioritize renegotiating its debt agreements with China to secure more favorable terms. This includes avoiding resource-backed loans that link future resource extraction to debt repayment. By negotiating better terms, Cameroon can reduce its vulnerability to external financial influence and avoid becoming overly dependent on Chinese financing. This approach will also provide Cameroon with greater control over its economic future and allow the country to invest in projects that align with its long-term development goals, rather than being trapped in a cycle of resource extraction and debt repayment (Bo, 2024).

Secondly, it is imperative for Cameroon to prioritize economic diversification and industrialization to break free from its dependency on raw-material exports. Currently, Cameroon's economy remains heavily reliant on the extraction of oil, timber, and minerals, with limited value-added processing. To mitigate this vulnerability, Cameroon should focus on investing in local industries, such as manufacturing and agro-processing, which can process its natural resources domestically, create jobs, and increase the economic value generated within the country. By diversifying its economy and fostering the growth of industrial sectors, Cameroon can reduce its vulnerability to global commodity price fluctuations and decrease its reliance on foreign capital. As Li & Liu (2021) argue, "Creating local industries and promoting value-added processing are critical to reducing dependency on external actors" (p. 72). Through these efforts, Cameroon can move beyond its role as a raw-material supplier and build a more resilient economy that offers long-term economic sovereignty.

Third, strengthening governance structures is critical to ensuring that foreign investments, including those from China, benefit all segments of society, not just the political elites. To achieve this, the Cameroonian government must enhance transparency and accountability mechanisms in managing foreign investments. This includes ensuring that decision-making processes regarding Chinese investments involve all stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and civil society organizations. By creating more inclusive governance processes, Cameroon can ensure that investments translate into tangible benefits for the broader population, rather than being concentrated in the hands of a few (Vines et al., 2022). Additionally, Cameroon should strengthen regulatory frameworks to ensure that foreign companies, including Chinese firms, operate in a manner that respects local labor rights, environmental standards, and local business development.

Finally, Cameroon must actively foster the growth of local entrepreneurship and businesses that can participate in the country's infrastructure projects, resource extraction, and value-added manufacturing. Encouraging the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and providing supportive policies for local businesses will help reduce the country's reliance on foreign capital and create a more equitable economy. Strengthening local capacity to manage infrastructure and industrial projects, as well as supporting technology transfer from China, will allow Cameroon to better harness foreign investments for the benefit of its population. By encouraging local entrepreneurship, Cameroon can build a more self-sustaining economy that is less vulnerable to external financial and geopolitical pressures. While China's economic engagement in Cameroon offers tangible benefits, such as improved infrastructure and energy access, it also presents significant risks of neocolonial dependency that must be addressed. Through renegotiating debt terms, prioritizing industrialization, and strengthening governance and local businesses, Cameroon can mitigate these risks and pave the way for a more independent and sustainable economic future.

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