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China's Political and Economic Strategies in Francophone Africa: Comparative Case Studies of Senegal and the DRC

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Abstract. China's engagement with Africa has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent decades, yet Francophone African countries have been less examined despite its historical ties with France and its increasing interaction with China. This paper examines the cases of Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as representative examples of China's multifaceted presence in West and Central Africa. By examining a range of academic literature, policy reports, and data sources, the paper looks at China's economic, political, and cultural initiatives in both nations. It evaluates the applicability of dependency theory, neo-colonial perspectives, and soft power frameworks to assess the nature of these interactions. A comparative approach further reveals the persistence of France's influence and the complex triangular dynamics shaping the region. The findings suggest that China's engagement neither fully replaces French dominance nor constitutes a straightforward neo-colonial project, but rather reshapes existing patterns of external dependence in diverse ways. This research provides a deeper understanding of China's evolving role in Francophone Africa and its implications for African development and autonomy.

Keywords: China–Africa relations, Francophone Africa, dependency theory, soft power, neo-colonialism

1. Introduction

China's growing role in Africa has become one of the most debated issues in contemporary international relations. Over the past two decades, China has expanded its presence on the continent through trade, investment, and diplomacy, often framed as a mutually beneficial "win-win" cooperation model [1]. Existing scholarship has analyzed China's role in infrastructure development, natural resource extraction, and soft power projection [2,3]. Francophone African states—historically influenced by France's political and economic hegemony under the Françafrique system—remain relatively underexplored [4].

This paper addresses this gap by investigating China's engagement in two Francophone countries: Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Senegal offers an example of a multifaceted relationship, where China has combined cultural diplomacy with trade and infrastructure development [5]. In contrast, Congo represents a resource-driven engagement, characterized by infrastructure-for-resources agreements and related governance challenges [6]. Through frameworks like dependency theory, neo-colonialism, and soft power analysis, this study

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investigates whether China's actions reflect a new form of dependence, an alternative to Western dominance, or a hybrid model reshaping external influence in the region.

The research employs a comparative qualitative approach, drawing from academic literature, institutional reports, and official data. The paper's significance lies in its exploration of how China's influence intersects with France's enduring role in Francophone Africa, shedding light on implications for African autonomy and future development strategies.

Table 1. Economic indicators of China–Senegal vs. China–DRC relations

Indicator	Senegal	DRC
Bilateral Trade Volume (USD billion)	2.3 (2020)	9.5 (2020)
Chinese FDI stock (USD million)	250	2,400
Major Sectors of Engagement	Infrastructure, Services	Mining, Infrastructure

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of key economic indicators for China's engagement with Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo, including bilateral trade volume, Chinese FDI stock, and major sectors of engagement. Data sources include Brautigam [5], Global Witness, and UNCTAD trade statistics.

2. Theoretical framework

The study of China's engagement with Africa requires a solid theoretical foundation to interpret patterns of cooperation, resource dependence, and cultural diplomacy. Three major frameworks—dependency theory, neo-colonialism, and soft power—offer complementary perspectives for analyzing Sino-African relations in Francophone contexts.

2.1. Dependency theory

Dependency theory, which has its roots in Latin American structuralism, suggests that global economic systems are organized in ways that reinforce imbalances between core (industrialized) and peripheral (resource-exporting) nations [7]. When applied to Africa, it emphasizes how countries rich in natural resources often remain trapped in a cycle of unequal exchange with wealthier economies [8]. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, China's infrastructure-for-minerals agreements exemplify a pattern where resource flows sustain external industrialization while local economies remain vulnerable [9]. Scholars, such as Bräutigam [3] argue, that dependency theory oversimplifies these dynamics, as Chinese investment sometimes expands productive capacity rather than merely extracting value.

2.2. Neo-colonialism

Neo-colonial perspectives emphasize the persistence of external domination in postcolonial states through economic, political, and cultural means [4]. France's long-standing influence in Senegal and Congo has been widely described as Françafrique, a network of political, financial, and military leverage [10]. The rise of China introduces new actors into this environment, raising the question of whether China replicates neo-colonial practices or provides alternatives [11]. Critics argue that China's reliance on resource-backed loans and its close ties with African elites reinforce patterns of dependency and elite capture [6]. Others contend that labeling China's role as neo-colonial ignores African agency and the diversity of cooperative outcomes [12].

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2.3. Soft power

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power refers to the ability of a state to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion [13]. Initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, media partnerships, and scholarships are designed to cultivate favorable perceptions of China [14]. Compared to France's historical linguistic and cultural dominance, China's cultural strategies represent both competition and complementarity [1]. The effectiveness of China's soft power remains contested, with some scholars highlighting its growing influence in shaping elite and public attitudes, while others emphasize the persistence of skepticism about China's intentions [15].

2.4. Integrating the frameworks

By combining these three perspectives, this study avoids one-dimensional interpretations. Dependency theory explains structural inequalities in trade and finance; neo-colonialism frames questions of external domination and African sovereignty; and soft power highlights the non-material dimensions of influence.

3. Case study: Senegal

3.1. Economic engagement and dependency

China's presence in Senegal is most evident in infrastructure and trade. Landmark projects such as the Dakar National Theatre and major road networks were financed and built by Chinese companies, typically through concessional loans that required the use of Chinese contractors [1]. According to the African Development Bank, Chinese investment in Senegal between 2010 and 2018 exceeded USD 2.5 billion, primarily directed toward transport and energy [14]. Critics note that this arrangement reproduces core–periphery dynamics: Chinese firms retain control of contracts, while technology transfer to local industries remains minimal [3].

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Chinese loans have been more accessible than those offered by Western institutions, which often attach strict policy conditions [6]. Rather, it risks replacing one external patron with another, a dynamic Alden has characterized as a "neo-colonial modality" of engagement [4].

3.2. Political and diplomatic relations

China and Senegal re-established diplomatic relations in 2005, marking the beginning of a new phase in bilateral cooperation in which Beijing has gradually elevated Dakar to the status of a strategic partner in West Africa [2]. This partnership is officially framed in the language of "South–South cooperation" and mutual respect, often presented as a deliberate contrast to France's historically paternalistic approach toward its former colony [9]. However, Wu's comparative analysis indicates that Beijing's "non-interference" rhetoric often masks a pragmatic pursuit of access to natural resources and political influence in regional forums [6].

From the perspective of dependency theory, structural asymmetry persists: Senegal's peripheral position in the global economy and its pressing need for external capital constrain its bargaining power [3]. At the same time, Senegalese elites have leveraged ties with China to diversify partnerships beyond France, gaining room to maneuver in international negotiations [12].

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3.3. Soft power and cultural diplomacy

Soft power has become a visible component of China's engagement with Senegal. The establishment of the Confucius Institute at Cheikh Anta Diop University has facilitated the expansion of Chinese language teaching, scholarship opportunities, and broader cultural exchanges [2]. In addition, media cooperation agreements and the growing presence of Chinese cultural festivals underscore Beijing's effort to shape public perceptions and normalize its presence in West Africa [13].

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of soft power in Senegal remains contested. Bruno notes that while younger generations engage with Chinese culture, skepticism persists regarding labor practices at Chinese-run enterprises and the limited integration of Chinese migrants into Senegalese society [2].

3.4. Synthesis

The Senegalese case illustrates the paradox that characterizes much of China–Africa engagement. On the economic front, large-scale infrastructure projects have enhanced national capacity, yet they also reproduce structural dependencies through debt exposure and foreign contractor dominance [1,3]. Politically, ties with Beijing diversify Senegal's diplomacy yet reproduce asymmetries akin to neo-colonial structures [4,6]. Culturally, soft power initiatives project an image of partnership, though their reception remains ambivalent [2]. Together, these dimensions highlight that Senegal is not a passive recipient: domestic elites and civil society navigate these engagements strategically, shaping outcomes in ways that complicate simplistic narratives of domination or liberation [12,15].

4. Case study: Democratic Republic of Congo

4.1. Resource-driven engagement

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) exemplifies one of the most resource-driven dimensions of China's African engagement. Since the 2008 "Sicomines" agreement, which exchanged mineral concessions for promised infrastructure, Chinese enterprises have steadily consolidated their dominance in cobalt and copper extraction [5]. From the perspective of world-systems theory, the DRC functions as a peripheral economy supplying raw materials to China, a semi-peripheral or near-core power, thereby reinforcing global hierarchies [7].

Meanwhile, Chinese mining practices have drawn criticism for environmental damage, precarious labor conditions, and weak governance oversight [11]. This dynamic illustrates the "resource curse" intersecting with neo-colonial patterns, where strategic minerals essential to global energy transitions are extracted under highly asymmetric terms [4].

4.2. Political and strategic dynamics

Politically, the DRC has used relations with China as leverage against Western dominance. Since the Sicomines deal, Kinshasa has presented China as a development partner willing to operate without conditionalities tied to governance reforms [6].Yet in practice, China's insistence on access to mining concessions constrains sovereignty, reproducing external dependency under a new guise [12].

Diplomatically, Beijing has complemented its economic footprint with symbolic initiatives such as debt relief and medical aid, reinforcing narratives of South–South solidarity [9]. However,

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empirical assessments show that Chinese companies often negotiate directly with elites, bypassing broader institutional frameworks [11].

4.3. Soft power and social contestation

Cultural diplomacy in the DRC has developed through initiatives such as Chinese media partnerships and scholarship programs, yet its impact remains marginal compared to the economic and political dimensions of engagement. Unlike Senegal, where Confucius Institutes have cultivated more durable academic and cultural links, in the DRC such efforts face greater skepticism, largely because of widespread concerns over labor conditions and environmental damage linked to Chinese mining operations [2]. Zhao notes that soft power efforts lose credibility when economic engagement generates social grievances [13].

Even so, the DRC continues to serve as an important testing ground for China's image-building strategy in Africa. Yet the dissonance between narratives of solidarity and the realities of resource extraction highlights the fragility of soft power when not reinforced by practices perceived as fair and inclusive.

4.4. Comparative insights

In contrast to Senegal, the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrates a relationship that is far more resource-driven and extractive in character. While Senegal's cooperation with China incorporates infrastructure development and cultural diplomacy as tools for diversifying external partnerships, in the DRC mineral dependence remains the defining feature of bilateral engagement [1,5]. From a theoretical lens, the DRC case exemplifies the core–periphery logic of world-systems theory more starkly, while Senegal illustrates the hybrid dynamics of neo-colonial continuity and diversification [7,12].

5. Comparative analysis

5.1. Structural similarities

In each case, Beijing's activities can be situated within dependency theory: resource flows and infrastructure loans reinforce structural asymmetries [3,5]. Whether through cobalt extraction in the DRC or infrastructure financing in Senegal, China occupies the position of creditor and investor, shaping development trajectories along lines favorable to its own economic security [6].

Viewed through world-systems analysis, both states remain positioned at the periphery, supplying either strategic raw materials or geopolitical leverage to a semi-peripheral power (China) that increasingly contests the influence of the traditional Western core [7]. This structural analysis underscores that while China challenges Western dominance, it does not necessarily transform the dependent position of African states.

5.2. Divergent outcomes

Despite similar structural conditions, the trajectories of engagement differ considerably. In Senegal, China's focus on infrastructure, service delivery, and cultural diplomacy has produced visible public goods, ranging from transportation corridors to national cultural venues [1,9].Public perception surveys in Senegal often record more favorable attitudes toward Chinese engagement, particularly among youth engaged in education and technology exchanges [13].

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In the DRC, by contrast, the primacy of mineral extraction and elite-driven agreements has fostered broader skepticism. Strikes over labor conditions, environmental degradation, and delays in promised infrastructure projects have eroded confidence in Beijing's "win–win" narrative [10,11]. Here, neo-colonialism provides a sharper explanatory frame, as the relationship mirrors earlier extractive regimes with minimal structural transformation [4,12].

5.3. Agency and negotiation

Another comparative dimension concerns the agency of African states. Senegal demonstrates strategic diversification, maintaining relations with both Western partners and China, thereby extracting concessions from multiple sources [8]. This pattern reflects the growing scholarship on "African agency" in international relations, which emphasizes how local actors shape outcomes even within structural constraints [14].

By contrast, the DRC highlights the limits of agency under conditions of institutional weakness. While Congolese elites have used partnerships with China to circumvent Western conditionalities, the overall effect has often been to entrench dependency and further erode state legitimacy [11,12].

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined China's engagement with Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo to illustrate the diversity of Sino–African relations in Francophone contexts. Using dependency theory, world-systems analysis, neo-colonialism, and soft power theory, the study shows that while China presents itself as an alternative to Western dominance, its practices often replicate structural hierarchies.

Senegal highlights how infrastructure and cultural diplomacy can yield short-term developmental benefits and improve public perceptions. Yet even here, dependency persists, as financing structures and debt risks create long-term vulnerabilities [6].

The DRC, by contrast, underscores the extractive logic of China's engagement, where resource-centered arrangements dominate and promised infrastructure lags behind. This case exemplifies the persistence of neo-colonial dynamics, in which external actors exploit natural resources with limited developmental spillovers [10,12].

Future research could deepen this analysis by incorporating quantitative trade and investment data over longer periods, as well as public perception surveys to evaluate soft power more systematically. Practically, African policymakers must negotiate more transparent contracts and prioritize institutional strengthening to mitigate dependency risks. For China, credibility will increasingly depend on delivering tangible development outcomes and aligning rhetoric with practice.

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