
GEOPOLITICS AND FOREIGN AID

BUILD BACK BETTER WORLD VERSUS THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: WHY MAY THE DRC FIND ITSELF IN A COMPLEX DILEMMA?

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We are undoubtedly in a new era of great-power competition. The USA and its G7 counterparts recently launched the transcontinental long-term policy and investment program 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) aimed at boosting infrastructure financing in low and middle-income developing countries, like China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI,) which focused on financing of strategic infrastructure development such as ports, transport networks, energy pipelines and projects. Interestingly, both the B3W and the BRI shared the goal of developing green and sustainable infrastructure to minimize environmental impact, reduce pollution, and increase energy efficiency to combat climate change by supporting fragile states. This article therefore presents a balanced perspective on the B3W versus the BRI, and seeks to further explain why the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and many other developing countries may find themselves in a 'complex dilemma.' The complexity of this dilemma is viewed in the strategic choice to be made and the possible costs in the aftermath of its choice for its survival. The methodology, based on secondary data from international and national repositories, adopted a qualitative

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approach. However, we critically explained the reasons why the DRC might find itself in a 'complex dilemma', based on different learned insights and perspectives gathered and illustrated in numerical illustrations via figures and statistical tables. After analysis and discussion, the results of this paper clearly show that, beyond the different possible imaginations and strategic opportunities offered by the confrontation between the B3W and the BRI following to the 'conservative-progressive competition,' the DRC, like some developing countries, is in the prey of this 'complex dilemma' due to its different assets, weaknesses and problems. This is due to a number of fundamental reasons: its strategic character in the eyes of both 'conservatives' and 'progressives'; its pronounced dependence on both China and the Western world; and its fragility due to problems of leadership and political governance. To conclude, this paper reasoned that it is up to the DRC to prepare and preserve itself and learn from its past mistakes in order to better redefine the fundamental strategic options for its best survival. It is also up to the DRC to reshape its political model, in particular by strengthening its political governance, but above all by working towards the formation of an innovative leadership capable of capitalizing on the opportunities arising from such a confrontation – while at the same time trying to contain, limit, and even prevent the possible risks.

Keywords: *Build Back Better World, Belt and Road Initiative, complex dilemma, conservative-progressive competition, the DRC's politics.*

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the present twenty-first century, humanity has been witnessing series of global events, that have elevated world politics (Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021; Makengo and Mimbale 2021). We are undoubtedly in an era facing the greatest theoretical obscurity and the most eventful complexity in the history of international relations (Makengo and Mimbale 2021). The attacks of September 11, 2001, the Arab Spring, devastating economic and financial crises, especially the subprime crisis, the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, DAECH, the Islamic State, the Syrian crisis, the crisis in the African Great Lakes Region, the escalation of the North Korean nuclear threat, the relative decline of Western power, the rise of China and the growing resurgence of Russian power in the international arena, and so on. All these past and recent global events are eloquent illustrations and signs of the fragility of the post-Cold War international system (Fukuyama 2020; Makengo 2021a, 2021b; Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021; Makengo and Mimbale 2021). With the catalytic effect of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the list of these events, a new era of great-power competition has just begun. This subject is attracting the curiosity and interest of scholars around the world, in the discourse on the change in the structure and international relations following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanity (Makengo 2021a).

Indeed, the dynamics of pre-COVID-19 world politics are different from those of the COVID-19 era, and will not be the same as those of the post-COVID-19 era either. For COVID-19, as an event, has ended up acting as an accelerator of other events in the international arena, reshaping geopolitics and public policy. Events that should have happened over time, COVID-19 has only accelerated. The most important of these is the rise of the 'conservative-progressive competition' to a higher level than before COVID-19. This 'conservative-progressive competition' is one that involves those who want to

maintain their dominance, power, and influence globally, in this or that region, activity, and/or field – the ‘conservatives’ – and those who push to challenge the status quo – the ‘progressives’ – in short, it is a competition of old influences against newer ones (Makengo 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021; Makengo and Mimbale 2021).

Of course, on a global scale, this competition remains dominated by the United States and China respectively, both accompanied by their allies and/or friends. While Britain, Australia... seem to be closer to the United States, Pakistan, Russia, Iran... seem to be closer to China (Layne 2020). This ‘conservative-progressive competition’ is clearly visible in different corners of the world, states and/or domains, considered strategic by both blocs – such as technology, energy and digital domains, but also strategic spaces like the South China Sea, the Middle East... (Schneider-Petsinger *et al.* 2019). It arises and manifests itself in the confrontation between two major initiatives supported by the two blocs. These are the ‘Build Back Better World’ (the B3W) initiative supported by the Western world – seen here as the ‘conservative bloc’ (the United States in the lead), and China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (the BRI) megaproject – embodied here by China as the leader of the ‘progressive bloc’ (Makengo and Mimbale 2021; Zeng 2019; Sarsenbayev and Véron 2020). These two great initiatives are well seen as two opposing strategies for the world influence, following the logic of the ‘conservative-progressive competition’ in the twenty-first century. This competition, still under the table in some regions, spaces, territories, states or areas during this period dominated by the health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is gradually increasing in other regions, spaces, territories, states or areas considered strategic by both, and is projected in an upward trend in the post-COVID-19 political world, considered as a world of more distrust, uncertainties, competition and clearly divided (Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021).

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a geological scandal known for its diverse reserves of both strategic and necessary raw materials, is certainly no exception – it is also one of the states where this competition continues to take shape and grow. According to the US geologists, the DRC contains about 80 per cent of the world’s coltan reserves, about 60–70 per cent of the world’s cobalt reserves, 10 per cent of the world’s copper reserves, 30 per cent of the world’s diamond reserves and other minerals such as tin, nickel, zinc, germanium, uranium, manganese, gold, silver, oil, gas... (Makengo 2020d). With its mineral potential, the DRC is well positioned as one of the strategic territories, a strategic pivot state for both blocs, and continues to be considered at the heart of this ‘conservative-progressive competition’ on the African continent – especially in light of the new stakes of the energy and digital transition (Makengo 2020c).

In intense cooperation with ‘progressive China’ since the time of the subprime crisis in 2008 (although their relationship dates back to the time of African independence) (Shinn and Eisenman 2012), but it is only very recently, in early 2021, that the DRC joins the BIR, four months before the announcement of the B3W, in June 2021 (Makengo 2020d). On the other hand, the DRC maintains intense cooperation with the Western world (here represented by the United States) following colonial ties, through the period of the East-West (US-USSR) bipolarity of the Cold War, and into the twenty-first century – cooperation that strongly deteriorated during Joseph Kabila’s second term, only to recover considerably under Félix Tshisekedi’s regime (Makengo and Mimbale 2021).

This paper argues that this ‘conservative-progressive competition’ will not leave the DRC unscathed and that, indeed, it (the DRC) might well find itself in a ‘complex di-

lemma.’ This concept of ‘complex dilemma’ is understood in the framework of this reflection as a situation in which, faced with a choice between two paths to follow, it appears difficult not only to go in one direction against the other, but also to manage to balance the two paths at the same time, of course remaining in the middle, without taking a position, playing neutrality and proposing a third alternative path, but without creating pronounced imbalances between the two paths. Simply because each choice has an equivalent consequence and opposing forces. Thus, making a decision or choice in this ‘complex dilemma’ situation requires more and more thought in the sense of capitalizing on the different possible opportunities and avoiding or minimizing the risks involved (Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021; Makengo and Mimbale 2021). The question here is: why might the DRC find itself in this ‘complex dilemma’ with the ‘conservative-progressive competition’ respectively dominated by the United States and China, following the confrontation between the B3W and the BRI?

Based on the existing literature, the idea of great power competition in the twenty-first century is not new (Makengo 2020b). Already in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, many scholars projected this paradigm of great power competition in terms of a scenario marked by the logic of ‘East-West bipolarity,’ which we refer to here as a ‘conservative-progressive confrontation’ (Layne 2020; Wenzhao and Shengwei 2020; Graham 2017; Gregory 2011). In framing the competition in this way, however, many scholars fail to take into account that China differs from the USSR in terms of ideology, strategy, and economics. Unlike the USSR, China is not really interested in ideological issues, nor in pronounced interference in the internal affairs of other states. It is more committed to the principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, mutual non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit (Zhang and Feng 2019). It is also particularly interested in economic, trade, and financial issues, despite the fact that its gross domestic product (GDP) still does not exceed 80 per cent of the United States GDP (Makengo 2020b).

Some recent studies indicate that with the rise of this ‘conservative-progressive competition’ and the projection of the B3W versus the BRI confrontation, we are gradually entering a phase in which each state will have to consciously choose a side – either to be close to the United States with its B3W megaproject, or to be close to China with its BRI megaproject (McFaul 2020; Layne 2020). This would not be easy for many states with strong relations with both China and the West – to mention here only the case of the DRC, on which this article focuses. However, there is a widespread view that suggests neutralism to a number of states – trying to play the balancing act between the B3W and the BRI (Makengo and Omoyajowo 2021; Makengo and Mimbale 2021). This would also be a difficult task for many states that, for a number of reasons, are considered weak or fragile in the equilibrium game – the case of the DRC – the focus of this paper.

But in any case, the most important observation here is that the existing literature has not been able to explore in depth the cases of states which, because of their fragility and many structural deficiencies, are in many ways fundamentally vulnerable in terms of strategic choices – and these categories of states are mainly found on the African continent. States where not only strategic planning in this sense (of the choice of one side against another) seems complicated, but also the game of neutralism. This is the case of the DRC, a giant with feet of clay in the heart of the African continent, which seems to be facing such a dilemma. It is this gap that this article seeks to fill by operationalizing the concept of ‘complex dilemma’ in the fierce competition between the B3W and BRI, using the DRC as an example.

Finally, based on secondary data extracted from international and national sources, the methodology used in the elaboration of this document is essentially qualitative, based on the strategic analytical approach (Babbie 2021; Crozier and Friedberg 1977). It consisted in privileging not only purely theoretical analyses explaining the reasons for this ‘complex dilemma,’ but also numerical illustrations via figures and statistical tables. The fundamental objective is to contribute to the debate on the B3W versus BRI confrontation, by proposing a new analytical framework of the ‘conservative-progressive competition’ and a new interpretation of the concept of ‘complex dilemma,’ in order to contribute effectively to the advancement of scientific knowledge on the subject, but above all, to help developing countries, such as the DRC, to correctly define their strategic priorities. In order to develop this reflection, this paper successively puts forward four basic arguments that structure the whole of this study, namely: (i) the strategic character of the DRC in the eyes of ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’; (ii) the DRC's dependence on China; (iii) the DRC's dependence on the Western world; and, (iv) the problems of leadership and political governance of the DRC. However, for the sake of logic, this introductory section will be followed by the section that briefly presents the B3W versus BRI confrontation. This (introductory section) will be followed by four other sections – which constitute the bulk of our argument – a conclusion, recommendations and further research perspectives on the issue.

2. ‘Build Back Better World’ (B3W) Versus ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI)

It should be noted at the outset that the B3W and the BRI are, strictly speaking, strategies of influence and seduction in order to gain an increasingly unavoidable importance in the management of international affairs (Irgengioro 2021). However, we formally note that the ‘B3W’ is a recent initiative promoted by the G7 countries on June 12, 2021;¹ while the ‘BRI’, launched in 2013, is an initiative developed by the People's Republic of China.

Second, to better understand the strategic opposition between the two, it is necessary to place them in the context of their approval. It must be said that ‘Build Back Better World’ was born in a context in which Beijing's project could not deliver on many of its promises (in terms of infrastructure development, infrastructure proliferation, solving the infrastructure paradox, and infrastructure quality in Africa...), in particular due to the slowdown in China's economic growth caused by structural changes and the COVID-19 pandemic – which consequently raised the suspicions of many countries and created the opening for the ‘B3W’ initiative (Broadman 2021). But in any case, two fundamental axioms can be retained as the origin of the G7's B3W initiative:

- ‘All Against China’ (Donnet 2021) through a common approach on trade and human rights; but also a common approach on the need for a new investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

- ‘All against the BRI implementation mechanism’ (Holland and Faulconbridge 2021) – in particular because of a non-transparent procurement system and failure to respect socio-environmental rights (referring to environmental protection and corporate social responsibility...) – and the uncertainty of its implementation.

In fact, even before the G7 summit, economic trends indicated that China was no longer in a position to provide advantageous loans to its BRI partners (Noah 2021).

In addition, some African governments have also come under scrutiny for signing loan agreements with China that included non-disclosure of loan terms (*Ibid.*). The Africa Report (Broadman 2021) also noted that the level of indebtedness of some African governments to China was worrying – the case of Angola [\$25 billion], Ethiopia [\$13.5 billion], Zambia [\$7.4 billion], Republic of Congo [\$7.3 billion] and Sudan [\$6.4 billion]. Caution is warranted, however, as some of these revelations are part of the anti-BRI narrative that focuses on ‘debt trap diplomacy,’ which, incidentally, is a questionable strategy in many respects (Mitchell Omoruyi 2019). After all, the crux of the matter is not the debt itself, but rather the terms of the loans in terms of interest rates and who ultimately controls the infrastructure in case of default. Thus, attempts by the B3W proponents to advance the narrative of the debt trap in Africa may not be successful, given the progress China has made in its relations with Africa. Consider the Nairobi-Mombasa railway in Kenya, which is almost 80 per cent financed (at a total cost of \$11.17 billion) by China (Barclay 2018)... Moreover, there are Chinese-backed rail, port, and highway projects in various stages of completion cross the continent (Davis 2016; Muller 2019; Zhong 2021). In Egypt alone, for example, China has pledged \$35 billion to fund the creation of a brand new capital east of Cairo (Pakistan Today 2016).

Third, and from a substantive perspective, the two programs also compete in terms of their stated objectives. The BRI would aim to link Asia to Africa and Europe through land and sea networks in order to promote further globalization, increase trade and stimulate economic growth (Ferrari and Tei 2020). On the other hand, a fact sheet published by the White House (2021) states that the B3W will be fundamentally global in scope and will aim to address the enormous infrastructure needs of low- and middle-income countries, which are estimated to have a cumulative infrastructure deficit of \$40 trillion and which the G7 partners and other major democracies will naturally seek to address. Also, quite like the BRI, the B3W would extend from Latin America, to the Caribbean, to Africa and the Indo-Pacific as key regions for infrastructure partnerships.

Moreover, the two initiatives also seem antinomic in terms of membership. As of January 2021, 140 countries (Nedopil 2021) had joined the BRI by signing a memorandum of understanding with China – as did some of the United States' allies (Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). The BRI also includes 40 countries from sub-Saharan Africa and a significant number from the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Asia. The Council on Foreign Relations (Sacks 2021) estimates that the BRI member countries, including China, account for 40 per cent of global GDP and 63 per cent of the world's population. The B3W, on the other hand, is a more recent initiative, endorsed by G7 members, with no detailed membership process at this time... However, the apparent focus on low- and middle-income countries would preclude partnerships with many European, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries that are members of the BRI.

The fifth important aspect of competition to be noted at this level, concerns the financial channels and potentials of both initiatives. For example, Morgan Stanley (2018) estimated a few years ago that the BRI would spend \$1.2 to \$1.3 trillion on projects in member countries by 2027, including megaprojects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – estimated at \$60 billion (Sacks 2021). A more recent estimate, based on the Refinitiv database, associates 2,600 projects with the BRI at a cost of \$3.7 trillion, by mid-2020 (Holland and Faulconbridge 2021). The B3W, on the other hand, projects to reduce the infrastructure deficit in developing countries by more than \$40

trillion by 2035. Also, while the BRI relies mainly on bilateral loans and investments from commercial and state-owned banks such as the China Development Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the Silk Road Fund (Broadman 2021), the B3W plans to use bilateral and multilateral loans and private sector capital to mobilize hundreds of billions of dollars of investment for infrastructure projects. At the bilateral and multilateral level, the B3W plans to use the full potential of Western development finance tools, such as the Development Finance Corporation, USAID, EXIM, the Millennium Challenge Cooperation, and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (The White House, 2021).

At the same time, it is worth noting that the two initiatives also compete in terms of values. While the BRI is based on Confucian cultural values – such as friendship and equality among people – the B3W adheres to guiding principles that focus on democratic values, good governance and respect for human rights. It also aims to be climate-friendly and advocates strong strategic partnerships focused on mobilizing private capital through development finance and enhancing the impact of multilateral public financing. According to US officials, these guiding principles stand in stark contrast to those of the BRI projects, which are characterized by a ‘lack of transparency, poor environmental and labor standards, and a coercive, bottom-up approach’ – but unfortunately, in reality, the Western world is still unable to do the opposite (Holland and Faulconbridge 2021). And it is true that many of the values of the B3W – for example, those concerning climate and gender equality – were hardly relevant to the BRI. And in this sense, the B3W is arguably less of a challenge than a complement to the BRI. Yet, recently, China has issued ‘Guidelines for Green Development’ (Nedopil *et al.* 2021) to strengthen engagement with host countries’ environmental protection agencies – suggesting, indeed, its remarkable capacity to adapt, readjust and even challenge.

But in any case, it is less certain that the B3W will be a resounding success, given the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which will clearly cause the B3W-supporting countries to turn inward and try to revive their own economies first. This is not to say that the BRI will have a smooth ride, as there is every indication that its progress has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang *et al.* 2021). But anyway, the BRI enjoys a continental ‘first mover’ advantage – it serves as an important anchor for infrastructure development initiatives and strengthening the ties of solidarity between China and Africa that the B3W may find difficult to break. Instead, the B3W aims to capitalize on the ‘latecomer advantage’ by trying to avoid the negative criticisms associated with the BRI, and in turn promote the image of an initiative based on sustainability and transparent transactions. However, this idea is far from realistic in the African context, as African governments do not care what color a cat is, as long as it can catch mice.

Finally, this paper considers that these two strategies, although antinomic, remain a remarkable investment opportunity for developing countries. However, if these strategic blocs were to enshrine the principle of exclusivity of membership in their initiative, they could well place some developing countries – like the DRC – in a ‘complex dilemma’ due to a number of factors that we propose to outline in succession in the following points.

3. The Strategic Characteristics of the DRC in the Eyes of ‘Conservatives’ and ‘Progressives’

There is no doubt that the DRC is in the grip of the duel for world leadership between ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’. A duel without mercy which is likely to engulf the entire African Great Lakes sub-region – if one does not pay attention. The reason, of

course, is the race to control the sources of strategic minerals that abound in Congolese territory (Makengo 2020c; Mimbale 2021). The world is hungry for them, at a time when questions are being raised about the energy transition – the market for electric vehicles and other electronic gadgets such as smartphones, computers, tablets, robotics, *etc.* (Harari 2016; Pitron 2018) – and humanity is moving towards a new dependence on rare and strategic metals, namely: Antimony, Beryllium, Cobalt, Coltan, Gallium, Germanium, Graphite, Indium, Magnesium, Niobium, Platinoids, Silicon, Rare Earths, Tungsten... (Raphael 2016; Makengo 2020c). These raw materials are becoming increasingly essential for the realization of a green economy and an ecological society in perspective. This is a priority objective pursued by several global players to date, with the United States and China leading the way. And the minerals that the DRC possesses, in particular cobalt, are once again at the heart of this competition (Makengo 2020c).

As Caspar Rawles remarkably points out, ‘there will be no electric vehicle industry without the DRC’s cobalt. (...) without the DRC, this rise of electric vehicles will not happen’ (cited in Sanderson 2018). Although this thought is relativized in these days with the current alternatives of cobalt-free batteries – which also have many weaknesses, including degraded performance at low temperatures (Makengo 2020c). Yet China alone controls 80 per cent (or 99, according to Bloomberg) of Congo’s cobalt production (Korybko 2018). The United States is annoyed. They want to claw back the large gap with China (Makengo 2020c).

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War (and even during the Cold War), the ‘conservatives’ – represented here by the United States – have had almost absolute control over the DRC’s territory. This implicitly means an almost exclusive control over the DRC’s raw materials. The ‘progressives’ – represented here by China – came to upset the strategic balance at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after the first forum on Sino-African cooperation and the global economic and financial crisis of 2008 – symbolizing and consecrating a new partnership with Africa. And it was then that the United States began to feel threatened by China’s presence in one of the world’s richest mining countries (Leon H. Sullivan Foundation, 2007). The DRC’s government chose to strengthen China’s presence in its territory (Makengo 2020d).

In 2008, Joseph Kabila, the former president of the republic, made a major about-face and refocused the DRC’s economy towards the ‘progressives’, namely the Chinese, thanks to what was then called the ‘contract of the century,’ the Arabs of the Middle and Far East, and the Indo-Pakistanis. And for his international protection, he opened the mining sector to the Russians, the Chinese and the North Koreans (Mimbale 2021). Félix Tshisekedi, in succeeding Kabila, was supposed to inherit the assets and liabilities of his predecessor’s diplomacy. However, since Felix Tshisekedi took office as head of the DRC, the diplomatic locks seem to be moving, especially since he was elected on the basis of a promise to break with the past. As a reminder, China controls almost 80 per cent of the world’s strategic minerals and is on the verge of winning the battery war thanks to its strategic partnership with the DRC (John 2020). And this does not please the United States (Makengo 2020c). The US is desperate to reverse this trend – the B3W should serve as a stepping stone. More recently, it has been announced that the DRC government would like to renegotiate Chinese contracts (Ghizlane 2021). According to the daily ‘Le Potentiel’, Félix Tshisekedi is targeting China as a priority, starting an arm wrestling match with it over the contracts concluded with Kabila (Chine Magazine, 2021). Since then, voices have been raised between the ‘pro-conservative’ and ‘pro-

progressive' political platforms in the DRC, either supporting or opposing the approach advocated by President Tshisekedi. The recent suspension of the mining activities of Chinese companies and three Congolese cooperatives working with the Chinese— such as BM Global Business Sarl, Congo Bluent Mineral (CBM) Sarl and its partner COMBI, Oriental Resources Congo Sarl ORC, Yellow Water Resources, Group Cristal Service and Lutonde Cooperative... The fact that the Provincial Government of South Kivu has declared these activities as illegal is part of this competitive logic, with 'pro-conservatives' on one side supporting the approach and 'pro-progressives' on the other, criticizing the Provincial Government's decision (Mansianga 2021). Nevertheless, despite the Congolese government's willingness to review these contracts, the heavy dependence of its economy on China (see Tables 1 and 2) requires more and more reflection — hence its membership in the BRI in early 2021.

The two blocs ('conservatives' and 'progressives') are constantly up to no good, tugging at each other for control of the strategic, rare and necessary minerals that the DRC has in abundance (Makengo 2020c). Neither side is ready to give up in this duel. The DRC appears like a gazelle between two hungry tigers. The slightest misstep could result in significant costs and damage to its best chance of survival.

4. The DRC's Dependence on China

The DRC's economic structure, largely based on the exploration and exploitation of its aural resources, is increasingly dominated by the mining sector (Makengo 2020d). With almost no processing industries, its economy is destined to be extraverted (ostensibly dependent on the outside). In fact, the DRC's structural dependence on China stems from several factors, including: (1) the volume of investment in the mining sector; (2) the volume of trade between the two countries; (3) the construction of economic and social infrastructure; (4) the promotion of social mobility and the transfer of skills; and, more recently, (5) solidarity in the fight against COVID-19 (Makengo, Mimbale, Mbutamuntu, *et al.* 2022).

First, almost 70 per cent of the DRC's minerals, worth an estimated \$24 billion, are controlled by China (Jeune Afrique, 2021). This pronounced Chinese influence in the mining sector, gained over the years in the DRC, was enacted through the signing of the 2008 'infrastructure for minerals' agreement, which granted mining rights to China in exchange for substantial investment in the war-torn DRC's infrastructure (Makengo 2020d). This, in turn, places China at the top of the list of DRC's top five economic partners in terms of the export-import structure panel (UNCTADstat, 2021).

As a result of this agreement, a joint venture called 'Sino-Congolaise des Mines [Sicomines]' was created to implement infrastructure construction and mining projects — established with a Chinese majority stake of 68 per cent (Desk Eco, 2021). There is no doubt that the agreement establishing Sicomines has stimulated the entry of Chinese investors into the Congolese mining sector, injecting capital into the economy and providing much-needed work for the millions of mostly impoverished residents of the region. In 2013, six years after the agreement was signed, no fewer than 15 of the 143 companies reporting to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) were Chinese; copper production increased from 200,000 mt/year in 2007 to 1.2 million mt/year in 2018, while cobalt production increased from 30,000 mt/year to 90,000 mt/year over the same period (Thema 2019). In addition to Sicomines, several

international-scale Chinese companies operate the largest mines in the former Greater Katanga Province alongside other medium-sized companies. In recent years, two new major mines have fallen into Chinese hands through the acquisition of US and Canadian mining concessions (Maury 2012; Reuters 2020).

Moreover, in terms of trade, the DRC's macroeconomic performance has improved dramatically – with the total global trade balance in goods moving from a deficit of US\$783 million in 2007 to a surplus of US\$208 million in 2017 (Thema 2019). More specifically, economic signals indicate that, despite COVID-19, the volume of trade between China and the DRC would reach an amount of US\$9 billion in 2020... an amount 450 higher than in 2000 (ZoomEco 2021). In fact, the trade balance surplus in favor of the DRC amounts to US\$5 billion, an increase of 39 per cent compared to 2019. These statistics corroborate perfectly with those of the database of the Central Bank of Congo which shows that, from 2010 to 2019, trade between the DRC and China is more beneficial for the country, especially since it generates a high surplus compared to other countries or regions – such as North America, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, *etc.* (see Table 1). Moreover, in the first half of 2021, official data reveal that bilateral trade reached \$6.49 billion, an increase of 108.9 per cent on an annual basis, while China's direct investment in the DRC at the industry level amounted to \$176 million (ADIAC 2021). These statistics suggest not only that the DRC has become the top destination for Chinese investment in Africa (Global Times, 2021), but also that almost all of the DRC's exports from 2010 to 2019 are channeled or concentrated in China (see Table 1). They also suggest that the DRC exports more to China than it imports compared to other countries with negative balances, for which the DRC imports more than it exports. Thus, given the formation of the Congolese economy, which is centered on exports and imports of primary products or raw materials, the surplus in the DRC's trade balance with China reflects, in economic terms, a contraction in local investment in raw materials by the DRC in favour of China, which holds a significant share of Congolese exports – which clearly explains DRC's dependence on China in terms of the extraversion of its economy.

Table 1

The Trade Balance of DRC with China and some of its Western Partners

Years	China	European Union	North America	Belgium and Luxembourg	France	United Kingdom	Italy	Germany	Japan
2010	198.50	-14.30	172.9	65.7	-156.5	-37.8	-132.4	-182.9	-21.9
2011	339.20	-44.00	191.4	8.3	-173.3	-41	-145.2	-195.9	-19.7
2012	1,289.80	-120.00	165.2	-10.5	-177.7	-41.7	-144.1	-195.5	-23.4
2013	810.00	-5.90	261.3	70	-175.8	-45.3	-170.1	-235.9	-20.1
2014	1,461.00	-2,386.10	174.6	-608.2	-500.5	50.6	-118.3	-222.2	-46.3
2015	1,234.00	-2,032.30	138.1	-549.6	-424.3	-21.4	-71.8	-167.4	-41.2
2016	1,060.30	-1,611.10	73.5	-331.8	-489.7	-69	-85.1	-124.2	-19
2017	2,290.00	-1,627.10	105.8	-247.2	-464.3	-61	-71.2	-109.2	-42.6
2018	3,887.00	-1,335.60	97.3	-261	-361	-54.2	-66.4	-96	-30.6
2019	2,351.80	-1,193.70	-292.7	-326.5	-324.2	-86.3	-88	-128	-34.5
2020	5,017.50	-963.60	-171.6	-231.9	-203.2	-91.1	-56.5	-51.6	-19.4

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by BCC database (2019, 2020).

Similarly, the graph below shows that despite the fact that the European Union is dominant in terms of imports to the DRC (from the EU countries), China remains the

second largest source of supply to the DRC, followed by Belgium (see Table 2). And Italy comes last (see Table 2). But in any case, even if the European Union – as a whole – dominates the DRC's import panel, there is every reason to believe that, from the point of view of state-to-state imports, the DRC remains more extroverted towards China than towards other countries of the Western world taken individually. This makes the DRC economically dependent on China in many respects.

Table 2

Distribution of Imports by Main Countries of Origin (in millions of USD)

Year s	China	European Union	North America	Belgium and Luxemburg	France	United Kingdom	Italy	Germany	Japan
2010	1,194.00	1,898.90	272.3	686.2	345.8	47.9	169.2	208.4	63.2
2011	1,825.40	2,015.30	285.9	731.7	351.2	50.1	181.2	221.8	71.2
2012	1,543.60	2,007.30	286.3	740.7	357.4	50.2	179.7	220.6	68.9
2013	1,950.00	2,462.80	351.2	897.8	438.5	61.6	220.5	270.7	84.5
2014	1,362.00	2,949.00	348.3	938.4	516.7	100.6	123.5	257.3	47.0
2015	1,413.00	2,480.50	323.9	832.8	438	117.2	75.2	190.5	41.5
2016	1,319.10	2,152.50	419	692.7	500.5	156.8	92	154.5	19.7
2017	970	2,198.90	371.5	662.8	469.3	152.8	75.2	138.7	42.8
2018	1,774.40	1,815.10	362.8	614.2	364.9	123.9	72.7	123.6	31.6
2019	2,098.90	1,691.30	327.6	554.9	328.8	100.3	83.8	134.3	34.2
2020	2,013.10	1,193.80	187.4	337.9	206.7	101.6	58.3	68.5	21.2

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by BCC database (2019, 2020).

Table 2 illustrates very clearly that China remains the leading destination for the DRC's imports from 2010 to 2020 (approximately USD 17,461 million of the cumulative import volume 2010–2020 – well ahead of Belgium and Luxembourg (USD 7,683 million), France (USD 4,312 million), North America (USD 3,531 million), Germany (USD 1,983 million), Italy (USD 1,252 million), the United Kingdom (USD 1,057 million), and Japan (USD 521 million)) (see Table 2). It is true that the European Union as a supranational organization weighs on the DRC's import mix, but China as a country alone dominates – country by country – the DRC's import mix, especially in 2020 (USD 2,013.1 million), well ahead of the DRC's other main partners, and even further ahead of the European Union (USD 1,193.8 million), and Belgium and Luxembourg (USD 337.9 million). Also, this ostensibly illustrates the DRC's dependence on China.

Table 3

Distribution of the DRC's Exports by Main Countries of Origin (in millions of USD)

Years	China	European Union	North America	Belgium and Luxemburg	France	United Kingdom	Italy	Germany	Japan
2010	1,392.5	1,884.6	445.2	751.9	189.3	8.5	36.8	25.5	41.3
2011	2,164.6	1,971.3	477.3	740	177.9	10.1	36	25.9	51.5
2012	2,833.4	1,887.3	451.5	730.2	179.7	9.1	35.6	25.1	45.5
2013	2,760.0	2,456.9	612.5	967.8	262.7	16.3	50.4	34.8	64.4
2014	2,823.0	562.9	522.9	330.2	16.2	151.2	5.2	35.1	0.7

Table 3 continued

Years	China	European Union	North America	Belgium and Luxemburg	France	United Kingdom	Italy	Germany	Japan
2015	2,647.0	448.2	462	283.2	13.7	95.8	3.4	23.1	0.3
2016	2,379.4	541.4	492.5	360.9	10.8	87.8	6.9	30.3	0.7
2017	3,260.0	571.8	477.3	415.6	5	91.8	4	29.5	0.2
2018	5,661.4	479.5	460.1	353.2	3.9	69.7	6.3	27.6	1
2019	4,428.6	494.2	272.8	360.4	4	79.5	3.6	12.2	1.1
2020	7,030.6	230.2	15.8	106	3.5	10.5	1.8	6.7	1.8

Source: 2022 authors, inspired by BCC database (2019, 2020).

And even in terms of the composition of the DRC's exports, China remains the leader and the country's largest economic partner from 2010 to 2020. This is illustrated in Table 2, which shows that China dominates the DRC's exports (about USD 30,347 million of the cumulative export volume 2010–2020), followed by Belgium and Luxembourg (USD 5,395 million), North America (USD 4,685 million), the UK (USD 1,986 million), France (USD 861 million) Germany (USD 271 million), Japan (USD 205 million), and Italy (USD 185 million) (see Table 3). In this respect, China is even more important than Europe as a whole within the European Union (USD 30,347 million vs. USD 11,523 million), which makes it the major partner for the DRC and also sums up the latter's pronounced dependence on it (see Table 3).

The Palais du Peuple, the Stade des Martyrs, the administrative building of the Congolese Government, the Hôpital Général de Référence de Lubumbashi and the Centrale Hydraulique de Zongo II... also reinforce and consolidate the complexity of Sino-Congolese relations, from the point of view of the construction of economic and social infrastructure. We can also mention the case of fiber optics where China, thanks to the Exim Bank of China, financed the DRC's master plan for the development of the National Backbone with 35,000 km for the deployment of fiber optics, thus giving the DRC access to submarine cables – which bodes well for the opening of the country to the highways of the new information and communication technologies (Le Potentiel 2013). As far as new projects are concerned, COVID-19 has not halted their progress. This is the case for the construction of the Central Africa Cultural and Artistic Center in Kinshasa, and the preparatory work for the Kinsuka power transformation station and the N'djili air terminal, which are well underway (Ambassade de Chine en RDC, 2020).

At the same time, and as part of promoting social mobility and skills transfer, China hosts hundreds of Congolese students and trainees each year for academic and professional training, funded by Chinese government scholarships. The Confucius Institute is also well established in the DRC (Bonsenge 2018; Libre 2018). Cross-visits by arts and sports teams are also increasingly common, and China promises to increase exchanges between the two countries (Kalala 2020).

Finally, as part of the fight against COVID-19, China also increased its influence in the DRC at the onset of the pandemic by donating 66 tons of medical supplies (Saidi 2020). In addition to this large donation, Chinese companies and nationals in the DRC, as well as Chinese NGOs such as the Jack MA Foundation, have also contributed (Politico 2020). In May 2020, a team of medical experts (consisting of twelve Chinese experts) was in Kinshasa to share their experience in fighting COVID-19 with Congolese doctors [Ambassade de Chine en RDC 2020]).

From the above, it is clear that the damage and costs in the aftermath of a clear choice in favor of the ‘conservatives’ against the ‘progressives’ are very real. This is why, the current president of the DRC, Felix Tshisekedi, since coming to power after the highly contested elections of 2018, has still not set foot on the territory of the country's leading economic partner – China – for fear of reprisals from the Western world and in anticipation of the elections scheduled for 2023 (despite his numerous official trips to various countries around the world). In the same vein, he is constantly working with China (despite his increasingly complex relations with the Western world), notably for fear of seeing the country's economy collapse if he were to lift the locks on the economic partnership with China – especially given the need to present a balance sheet during the next elections (hence the strategy of the DRC's membership in the BRI in January 2021) (Makengo 2021d).

5. The DRC's Dependence on the Western World

Despite its economic dependence on China, the DRC, remains integrated into the ‘Western capitalist system’² through history (colonization) and culture (common languages, for example). From an economic-financial point of view (international trade, investment), the countries or even regions of the Western capitalist system also have a considerable impact on the Congolese economy (see Table 1). These include, for example, North America, which is a potentially profitable region for the DRC, except in 2019 (–292.7), when the trade balance was in deficit (see Table 1). Belgium and Luxembourg, on the other hand, are in third place after North America, with trade surpluses in 2010 (65.7), 2011 (8.3) and 2013 (70), and deficits in 2012 (–10.5), 2014 (–608.2) and 2019 (–326.5) (see Table 1). France can also be included in this list, although the trade margin deficit between the DRC and France is very significant compared to the other countries of the Western capitalist system, which have negative margins between 2010 and 2019 (see Table 1). And in relation to the strengthening of institutional governance, the West has a say in the fate of the DRC since the political change in 2018. It must be said that these factors combined reinforce the country's structural dependence on the West.

It should be said at the outset that considering June 30, 1960 as the date on which the DRC's dependence by the Western metropolis, as maintained *ad nauseam*, came to an end is a very simplistic narrative that offers little guidance in determining the potential influence of the Western world as both a historical and strategic actor in the DRC. It is true that modern conditions force all countries to be interdependent on one another in order to meet the needs of their citizens (Sabel 2018). But this is not incompatible with economic independence, as economic independence does not mean isolation. It does, however, require the ability to make choice in external relations and, most importantly, it requires that a nation's growth become self-sufficient at some point. Moreover, it has been said that ‘political independence is an illusion if it is not based on economic independence’ (Doudou 1963: 40). It is also true that the Western world lives on the strategic resources that are lost in the territories of developing countries. However, there is a big difference between the West's dependence on the resources of developing countries and the subjection of these countries under the Western yoke. We have seen this precisely through the pressure exerted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the DRC when it signed the Chinese contracts (William 2009). In other words, despite its potential, the DRC does not have a completely free hand to administer its resources in the face of international covetousness and especially the right of the Western world to monitor its

political governance.³ Another element to be taken into account at this level is the advanced technological power and the soft power machine of certain Western countries, so that, despite the solemn proclamation of the independence of this country, they remain the ‘masters of the political game’ capable of changing the DRC's political landscape (just by referring to the electoral process and the choice of the DRC's leaders).

Second, from a socio-cultural perspective, the DRC is heavily influenced by the Western world. There are, of course, many features that help to maintain the status quo in the country's relationship with the West – including religion and language. In fact, religion⁴ in Africa has basically served, although in some cases it must be qualified, as a major instrument of penetration and cultural domination (Berdâev 1929). We recall the colonial trilogy⁵ (Feltz 1991), in which the church played a decisive role, but also, more recently, the procrastination of religious denominations with political power – especially when we know that some of them are very centralized (the Catholic Church in particular), while others have no real central authority, but have congregations that are more or less involved in the management of temporal affairs. Another element to consider in this reading grid is the influence of Western languages. In fact, language has become one of the mechanisms of integration and dependence of developing countries, which makes the DRC, like any other African state, more inclined to cooperate with the West in order, of course, to succeed in its integration into globalization. The DRC's dependence on the West is also expressed through art, music, and Hollywood cinema (Dupont 2007). In fact, it would be difficult to find a socio-cultural sphere in the DRC that does not reflect the influence of the West on everyday social life in the country.

The remarkable importance of the Western world in the DRC is also manifested through the Bretton Woods institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, which, according to official data (see Table 3), is in first place in terms of public allocations to the DRC, with the exception of 2010, when the United Kingdom held a significant share. The latter (United Kingdom) is in second place, as shown in the table above, followed by the European Union countries, and, lastly, Italy. These external grants take the form of loans or financial assistance granted to the DRC to meet the needs of local authorities. They can be used for various purposes (*e.g.*, operating grants, equipment grants, compensation grants, *etc.*). It should also be noted that the World Bank occupies a prominent place in DRC's total external allocations, with its allocations in 2014 representing 46 per cent of DRC's total loans. Furthermore, if we look at Figure 1 above, we can very quickly understand the dominance of the DRC imports from European countries from 2010 to 2018, which also reflects the strong involvement of the Western world in financing the DRC.

Table 4

Main Sources of External Donations of the DRC's Public Sources (in millions of USD)

Partners	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
United Nations	108.7	40.7	174.9	125.5	153.8	69.1	106.9	24.1	23.0	7.8
European Union	215.9	313.3	241.6	183.3	129.3	176.7	152.1	193.7	223.8	92.9
World Bank	290.2	443.5	411.6	542.1	807.4	418.9	500.3	571.9	331.2	309.8
ADB	110.6	77.3	91.6	79.3	162.9	116.2	113.0	103.3	107.5	93.8
China	18.6	36.7	134.2	13.0	88.5	49.0	0	0	0	0
US	85.4	128.6	208.8	181.1		185.2	110.2	193.0	0	0
Canada	27.9	34.2	35.9	42.5	34.9	0	11.1	10.0	51.0	0

Table 4 continued

France	28.6	20.4	0	0	35.4	45.1	0	2.4	0	0
Belgium	176.0	157.4	133.7	67.4	36.9	79.9	14.0	46.3	0	0
UK	362.5	219.4	204.1	229.8	304.8	205.3	167.0	208.4	259.3	71.5
Italy	5.7	0	0	0	0	1.0	0	0	0	0
Germany	44.0	1.4	170.2	10.3	0	1.9	21.0	52.0	48.7	0
Japan	134.1	36.7	90.7	0	0	0	16.9	33.3	19.9	0

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by BCC database (2019).

It is true that the DRC had lost its status as an AGOA beneficiary (2010) by President Barack Obama's decision – a status recently regained on the eve of the third year of revitalized cooperation between Washington and Kinshasa (AGOA 2021). However, the DRC has been an important partner of the United States in Africa for many years. As early as 1984, the two countries signed a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT).⁶ In 2001, they also concluded a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) within the framework of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2021a). And in terms of trade volume, the United States is the sixth largest export (\$49 million in 2018) and import market for the DRC (\$132 million in 2019, up 69.1 per cent from 2018) (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020; US International Trade Administration, 2021). In fact, the trade balance surplus in favor of the DRC is \$110 million, an increase of 288.1 per cent (\$82 million) compared to 2018. The US foreign direct investment (FDI) in the DRC amounted to \$86 million in 2019, an increase of 7.5 per cent over 2018 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020). Finally, Washington is also a major supporter of the DRC government in its efforts to fight corruption and promote the democratic process, good governance, human rights, security and justice (strengthening state authority), the fight against epidemics, stability and peace within the country but also in the region, and attracting the US investment (US Bureau of African Affairs, 2020).

The fourth reading grid to consider at this level is the considerable influence that the West, in the case of the United States, is exerting on the DRC since the 2018 political transition. In many ways, a new chapter in bilateral relations between the United States and the DRC has opened following the December 2018 elections in the country and the first peaceful transfer of power. Not that the United States was interested in the DRC in 2018 from the outset – relations between the two countries are obviously deep and long-standing⁷ – but that there was clearly some annoyance on the part of Washington over the terms of the 2008 Sino-Congolese agreement and especially if one frames this agreement within the dynamics of the debate that speaks of 'conservative-progressive competition' (Makengo 2020d).

So, unable to compete economically with Beijing, the United States, thanks to the election of Félix Tshisekedi in December 2018 and especially to the political shift he made in December 2020 (by taking control of the judiciary power [Gras and Bujakera 2020; Jeune Afrique 2020; Radio Okapi 2020], both houses of parliament [France 24, 2020; Gras 2021; Isako 2021] and the government [ACP 2021]), is developing an increasing security and defense strategy for the DRC. This strategy has been accompanied by a clear reorientation of the new government's diplomatic discourse: the DRC is moving towards an advanced partnership with the United States. And in exchange for Kinshasa' granting of mining contracts to American companies, America promises to assist

the new government in the process of pacifying the eastern provinces (in particular North Kivu and Ituri), which are affected by the significant activity of various rebel groups. At the same time, this approach converges with Kinshasa's interests. Fighting against the groups of rebel forces in eastern Congo as terrorist forces gives President Tshisekedi ample room to impose a state of siege in these two most affected provinces, and thus to make extensive use of the Congolese armed forces – which are undoubtedly receiving technical, logistical, and even military support from the United States (Gogbeu 2021) – to hunt down suspected terrorists.

In short, the extent of the DRC's dependence on the Western world is very real. A situation that clearly puts Kinshasa in a difficult situation (a complex dilemma), especially when it comes to choosing between 'security guarantees (promoted by the West)' and 'the country's socio-economic problems (for which the Chinese partner is determined to provide concrete answers)'. Taking all these parameters into account, Felix Tshisekedi was called to readjust, to reassess, if not adapt his foreign policy in order to insure the best survival of the DRC. That is why since his election in 2018, Tshisekedi – so as not to offend his American partner – has still not set foot on the territory of the country's first economic partner, China. But at the same time, he continues to collaborate constantly with China, not least out of fear that the country's economy would collapse if he were to lift the locks on the economic partnership with China – but mostly because of the need to present a balance sheet at the next election.... This is what would justify the DRC's strategy of joining the Belt and Road Initiative in January 2021 (Moutiou 2021). It is a gesture that heralds a complex situation that will require extreme caution on the part of the Kinshasa authorities – in order to avoid collisions between two competing blocs and, above all, to promote the cohesion that will give rise to divine harmony (Leibniz 1989).

6. The Problem of Leadership and Political Governance

Leadership is fundamental to the development of nations – it is very a vital element that helps citizens of a country make informed strategic choices in order to achieve a secure and prosperous community (*e.g.*, choices in terms of specific policies, governance of economic policies, necessary and urgent reforms, foreign partners...), and consequently allows for political governance adapted to the realities of the State. Therefore, for the DRC to take off, rhetoric alone is not enough; quality leadership and political governance are critically needed. Intuitively, embracing change requires careful navigation which means, 'opening up to the world and learning from the experiences of others.' If we look closely at the international news on the progress of nations, we obviously find several examples of countries that have rightly avoided the trap of the 'complex dilemma' by subtly opposing it with 'quality leadership and political governance.' This is the case of Asian economies with Lee Kuan Yew for Singapore (Business & Leadership 2021; Hahm and Heo 2018) and Xi Jinping for China (Vogel 2021). This is also the case for some African economies (see Table 4), such as Mauritius – a country with strong influence in African leadership and governance rankings – and Botswana, where a president finishes his term and is celebrated in his country for the leadership and good governance he has shown (Le Monde, 2018; see Table 4). Interestingly, the DRC have witnessed a dramatic and monumental response to key government policies over the last decade in terms of gaining control of corruption, violence/terrorism, rule of law and accountability. However, when compared or contrasted with Botswana, it was quite clear

that there was a deficit in leadership structure and performance. This literally shows that concerted and strategic efforts would be required to bring the DRC out of its fragility.

Table 5

**The DRC, Botswana and Somalia Percentile Rankings
in Worldwide Governance Indicators**

Series Name	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
DRC's Government Effectiveness	1.43541	1.89574	0.94787	5.21327	4.32692	2.88462	6.73077	4.80769	5.76923	4.80769	3.36539
DRC's Control of Corruption	2.38095	2.36967	4.2654	5.21327	7.21154	8.17308	7.21154	5.76923	3.84615	3.36539	3.36539
DRC's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism	3.31754	2.36967	2.8436	2.8436	4.76191	4.76191	4.28571	3.33333	4.24528	7.54717	7.07547
DRC's Regulatory Quality	4.30622	5.21327	5.21327	9.95261	6.73077	6.25	7.69231	5.28846	5.76923	5.28846	5.28846
DRC's Rule of Law	1.89574	1.87793	0.93897	2.8169	3.36539	2.88462	4.80769	3.84615	2.88462	2.40385	2.88462
DRC's Voice and Accountability	9.47867	7.51174	7.04225	8.45071	12.3153	12.3153	9.35961	8.37438	7.72947	13.0435	14.4928
Botswana's Government Effectiveness	66.9857	67.2986	67.2986	66.3507	66.8269	70.1923	71.1539	68.75	66.3462	67.7885	62.5
Botswana's Control of Corruption	81.9048	79.6209	78.1991	79.1469	78.3654	77.4039	80.7692	78.8462	77.8846	73.5577	72.1154
Botswana's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism	83.4123	85.3081	88.6256	88.1517	84.2857	87.6191	83.3333	86.1905	82.5472	90.566	89.1509
Botswana's Regulatory Quality	66.0287	67.7725	72.5119	69.1943	72.1154	68.2692	70.1923	70.1923	68.2692	65.8654	65.3846
Botswana's Rule of Law	68.2464	69.0141	70.4225	68.5446	74.0385	72.1154	71.1539	69.7115	68.75	68.75	65.8654
Botswana's Voice and Accountability	60.6635	60.0939	64.3193	63.8498	61.0837	61.5764	58.6207	59.1133	61.3527	62.8019	60.8696
Somalia's Government Effectiveness	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.48077	0.48077	0.96154	0.96154	0.96154
Somalia's Control of Corruption	0	0	0	0.47393	0.48077	1.44231	0.96154	0.48077	0	0.96154	2.40385
Somalia's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism	0	0	0	0	1.90476	1.90476	2.38095	3.80952	3.30189	2.83019	1.88679

Table 5 continued

Series Name	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Somalia's Regulatory Quality	0.47847	0.47393	0.47393	0.94787	0.96154	0.96154	0.96154	0.48077	1.44231	1.92308	2.40385
Somalia's Rule of Law	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.48077
Somalia's Voice and Accountability	2.36967	1.87793	1.40845	1.40845	0.98522	1.47783	2.46305	3.94089	3.38164	2.89855	2.89855

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by World Bank Database (2021b).

For several decades, successive rulers in the DRC have lacked three attributes of leadership of the utmost importance to the well-being of the Congolese people: a true vision for the future of the DRC – as opposed to agendas and simplistic projects; the competence and capacity to implement the vision; and finally, the character to ensure the realization of the vision with sound judgment (sobriety of mind), integrity and fairness.

First, the ideas of a national program of the presidents of the DRC were often vague and unrealistic. To demonstrate this, Mobutu alone had, among other things, the plan for the nationalization of mining resources, the creation of state enterprises; then, in 1970, the ten-year development plan (Objectif 80), then ‘Zairianization’, and finally, a corrective program to ‘Zairianization’ – ‘radicalisation’ – which had considerably weakened the country's economy (Meditz and Merrill 1994). It is clear, in fact, that all these initiatives were not rigorously implemented and gradually came to be seen as mere aspirations rather than real programs of political governance. Moreover, all of these initiatives were historically conceived in a context of corruption, violence and unaccountability.

The second case concerns the most recent era of Congolese leadership, dominated first by Laurent-Désiré Kabila and then by Joseph Kabila, which is yet to change the dynamics created by the Mobutu era. The Congolese still remember the ‘Five Building Sites’ and the ‘Revolution of Modernity’. Notably, these two successive programs accompanied Joseph Kabila's two terms in office. But each time, however, the results were mixed. However, since coming to power in early 2001, following the assassination of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, he has benefited from the support of certain Western countries and international institutions. Between June 2002 and June 2005, for example, the debt owed to Paris Club creditors was considerably reduced from \$9.09 billion to \$380 million (Directorate for Policy and Operational Evaluation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and The Hague, and Special Evaluation Service for International Cooperation, Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2012). The country will join the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program much later than expected (July 2010). This delay was justified by the signing of Chinese contracts after the 2006 presidential elections. Once elected president, Joseph Kabila wanted to move quickly to fulfil his election campaign promises by turning to China. However, this agreement, which was described as the ‘contract of the century’ at the time, appeared to the Western world to be poorly put together and even opaque (Marysse 2010; Vircoulon 2010). And after several blockages, revisions demanded by the Bretton Woods institutions and the Kabila clan's arm-wrestling with the Western world, the objectives of the Sino-Congolese treaties could not be achieved as planned (Colart *et al.* 2021).

In 2018, Felix Tshisekedi succeeded Joseph Kabila, raising hopes for a new leadership for change. A hope that is constantly dashed by political dithering and overwhelming realities of the country, including persistent crushing poverty, political and security instability and, above all, more or less opaque governance and corruption. Of course, even for the current government, the main problem is unsatisfactory political leadership. The DRC's global governance indicator, as assessed by the World Bank, remains at 0.9 points out of 5, compared to an average of 1.4 for low-income African countries and 1.7 for Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2021a). And, as in the era of his predecessors, large government coalitions and bloated cabinets continue to foster widespread nepotism (Fabricius 2021).

To support this important argument, this paper integrates three fundamental indicators: (1) Good governance indices, (2) leadership-governance binomial and GDP/capita status, (3) leadership-governance binomial and human development index. With regard to the first indicator, this study takes into account two rankings of the DRC in this area, according to Transparency International and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (see Figure 2). Based on data from 180 countries, the Transparency International reveals that the DRC would rank 170th in the world on average – with a very low average index of 16.9 from 2010 to 2020. The interpretation of this index and ranking places the DRC among the most corrupt countries with low levels of good governance (see Figure 1). On the other hand, data compiled by the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which examines the governance of 54 African countries, shows that the DRC is among the list of poorly governed countries ranking between 47th and 49th in terms of good governance from 2010 to 2020. Taking the two results of this combined data together, it is now clear that the DRC's governance structure and function is currently deteriorating, and as such, a state of political emergency and restructuring is critically needed as a way out of fragility (see Figure 1).

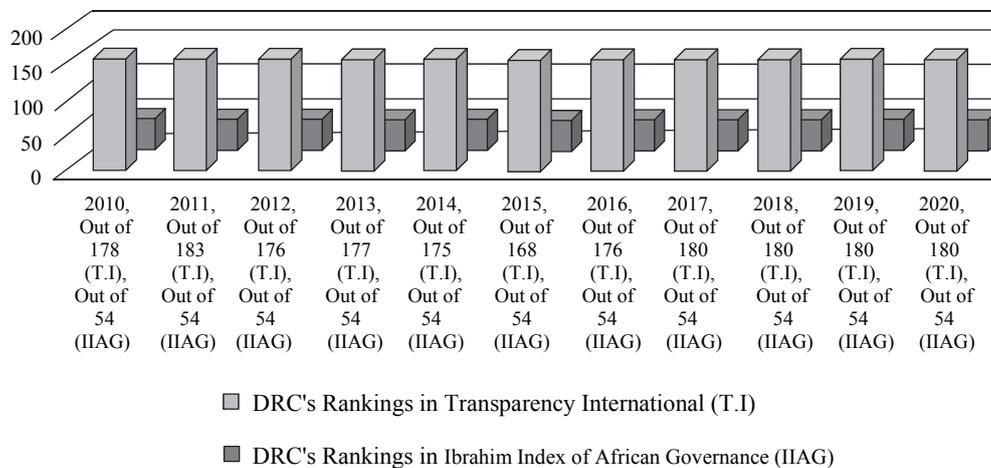


Fig. 1. The DRC's Rankings in Transparency International and Ibrahim Index of African Governance

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by T.I (2021) and IIAG (2021).

The second important indicator – which relates to the link between the ‘leadership-governance’ binomial and GDP per capita – allows us to understand how the succession of leaders in the DRC, has often plunged the country into widespread impoverishment – impoverishment that can be measured in terms of GDP per capita, instead of improving the living conditions of the population (see Figure 2). Indeed, in 1960 – the year of independence and the indigenous seizure of power – the DRC had a more or less acceptable GDP per capita of \$1,134.3 (see Figure 2). This was followed by a dramatic decline in GDP per capita – from \$1,134.3 in 1960 to just \$413.7 in 2020 – after a succession of presidents, of course (see Figure 2). This parameter allows us to understand that, in many cases, the succession of presidents in the DRC has never been a guarantee of leadership and good political governance. On the other hand, because of poor governance and a lack of quality leadership, succession has always produced chaotic results, a deterioration in living standard or in the well-being of the population.

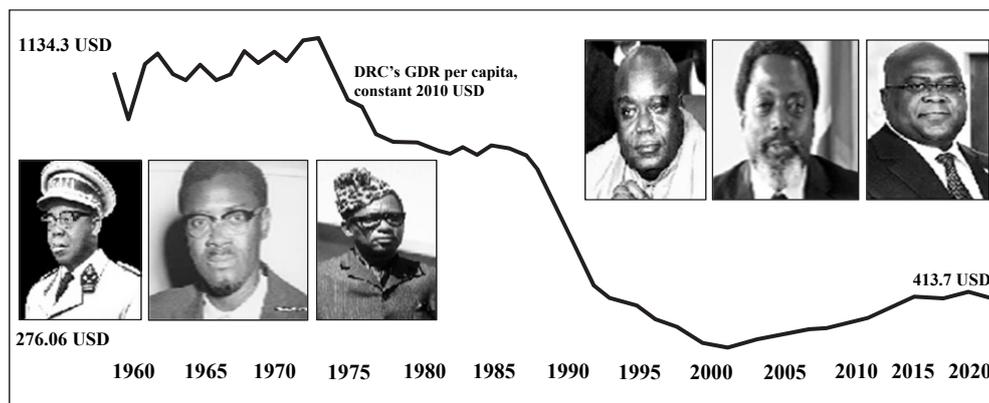


Fig. 2. The Leadership Deficit (Personal Statesmanship) and Political Governance in the DRC

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by Global Economy Database (The Global Economy, 2021).

Despite a leadership analysis based on GDP per capita, this paper argues that it is not sufficient to explain the political and socio-economic reality of the DRC. In this sense, it is important to deepen the analysis by including another important indicator, the Human Development Index (HDI), which is based on three variables: GDP per capita, life expectancy at birth and the level of education of children aged 17 and over (Figure 3). According to the UNDP (World Bank) 2000–2019 database, the DRC continues to lose ground at a remarkable rate. In 2000, for example, the country ranked 163rd in the world with an HDI of 0.349. In 2020, it ranks 175th – in the rank of the last countries, with a small increase in HDI from 0.349 to 0.48, an improvement of 0.131 (see Figure 3). This reinforces the idea mentioned earlier about the leadership deficit in the DRC, which is reflected in a deterioration of the population's well-being.

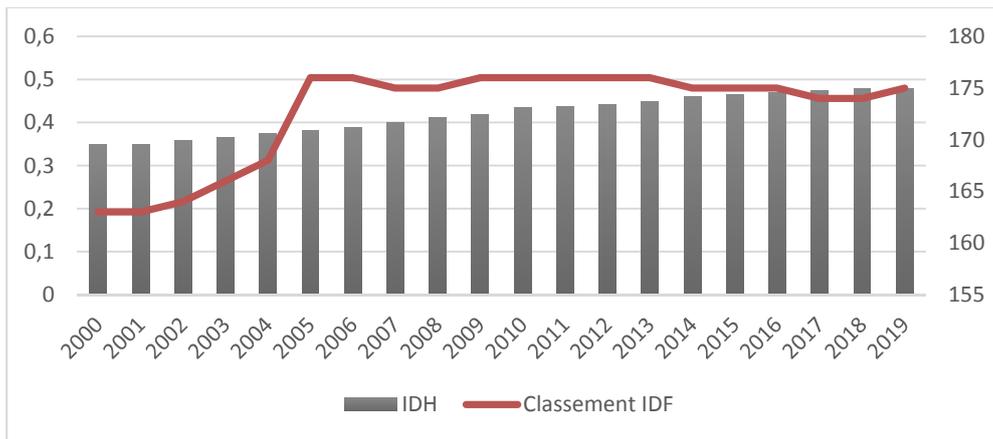


Fig. 3. Evolution of the Human Development Index in DRC (2000–2019)

Source: 2021 authors, inspired by World Bank (2021a) and the Country Economy (2020) database.

These problems of leadership and political governance tend to leave the DRC's leaders weak, exposed and at the mercy of the various whims and maneuvers of the great powers. Under these conditions, the leaders of the Congolese institutions will not be fully capable of defending the country's national interest and of withstanding the various costs and damages that can result from making a strategic choice, from taking sides one against another or from positioning themselves better in the middle – playing neutrality between the ‘conservatives’ and the ‘progressives’.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the confrontation between the B3W and the BRI through the lens of the ‘complex dilemma’ conceptual framework, which the research considers capable of explaining the various cases of rhetorical and even strategic ambivalence in the positioning that most African countries find themselves in vis-à-vis the ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’ – using, of course, the case of the DRC. This ‘complex dilemma’ is understood as a situation in which, faced with a choice between two paths to follow, it seems difficult not only to go in one direction against the other, but also to manage to balance the two at the same time, without taking a position (neutrality or third way) and without creating pronounced imbalances, between the blocks of ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’ – represented here respectively by the United States and China. The complexity of this dilemma is viewed in the strategic choice to be made and the possible costs of that choice for their survival. Beyond the various possible opportunities offered by the B3W and the BRI confrontation under the prism, of course, of ‘conservative-progressive competition’, some developing countries, because of their strengths, weaknesses and problems, find themselves in a dilemma of such great complexity. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, although endowed with enormous natural resource potential – which has earned it the label of ‘geological scandal’ – is, all in all, a strategic country; but it is hardly spared this ‘complex dilemma’ reality for a number of fundamental reasons: (i) its strategic nature in the eyes of both ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’; (ii) its pronounced dependence on both China and the Western world; and (iii) its fragil-

ity due to problems of leadership and political governance. It is up to the DRC to prepare, preserve itself and learn from its past mistakes in order to better define the fundamental strategic options for its best survival.

From this perspective, and given the strategic nature of the DRC's resources in the eyes of the two rival blocs, it is more than necessary for the country to break with its old patterns of bad governance in order to better capitalize on the opportunities arising from the B3W and the BRI confrontation. In this way, a clear and practical vision of the country's future needs to be defined. Appropriate parameters need to be identified and the leaders of the republic's institutions will need to demonstrate reformist and quality leadership. A starting point for the DRC could involve all stakeholders working for a peaceful, politically stable and economically prosperous DRC, which requires a structured and dynamic economic system. Combined, the principles of stability and prosperity can be mutually reinforcing and ensure continued development – but this depends on quality leadership that embraces integrity, fairness, the rule of law, the restoration of state authority, ethics and meritocracy. The DRC is being courted by both camps – ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ – and it is not only difficult for it to choose one or the other, but also to find the necessary balance in the cooperation between the two. It is therefore called upon to evaluate objectively the new geopolitical and geostrategic deals in order to define the axes of cooperation for the benefit of its people, but also for the balance of the international system. The Congolese actors must therefore need to anticipate in order to avoid collisions. This is a ‘complex dilemma’. As a wise Congolese proverb says: ‘When two elephants fight, it is the grass that pays the price’. Thus, the need for further in-depth studies, particularly on the strategic choice that the DRC should make and follow.

NOTES

¹ United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Japan, France, Germany and Italy, plus the European Union.

² Most progressive scholars divide the Western capitalist system into two parts. The first is the dominant or metropolitan part and the second is the satellite countries, because they basically orbit the metropolitan economies. The same idea is conveyed by simply saying that the underdeveloped countries are dependent on the metropolitan capitalist economies (Donnelly 2021; Naustdalid 1977).

³ Notably, the pressure exerted by the tutelary powers, but also by the Bretton Woods institutions.

⁴ A distinction must be made here between Church, Religion and God (Kant 1994).

⁵ The colonial trilogy referred to the close collaboration with the Catholic missions, the administrative structure, and the system of primitive capital accumulation.

⁶ The BIT entered into force in 1989 (US Department of State, 2020).

⁷ The United States established diplomatic relations with the DRC in 1960, after it gained independence.

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