Memorandum

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To: **President Felix Tshisekedi, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Topic: **Leveraging US and China in the DR of Congo’s National Interest**

Date: **April 18, 2025**

**Abstract**

This memorandum analyzes the Democratic Republic of the Congo's strategic position amid escalating competition between the United States and China. It examines our multifaceted economic relationship with China, particularly the resources-for-infrastructure model that has resulted in $18.79 billion in bilateral trade and Chinese control of key mineral extraction operations. While acknowledging the benefits of Chinese investment in infrastructure development and military cooperation, the memo highlights concerning dependencies and vulnerabilities in these arrangements. The analysis contrasts these with the DRC's more limited economic engagement with the United States ($576.4 million in bilateral trade). The memo evaluates potential opportunities to leverage growing U.S. interest in militarily securing critical mineral supply chains, particularly in the context of intensifying U.S.-China competition. It concludes with strategic recommendations to maximize national interests through value-addition initiatives, improved governance frameworks, and balanced diplomatic engagement that extracts maximum benefit from both powers while preserving Congolese sovereignty and developmental priorities.

**A Dance with the Dragon**

*The trade and economics in our relations with China*

The 2006 elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) changed our relationship with People’s Republic of China (China). It was the year our people formally elected President Kabila, after two years of a “Transition Government” and consequential governance over-haul. It was the wish of the people then that allowed our nation to step into this period of development.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is likewise the wish of the people since 2018 to multiply efforts in developing our youth and resources for the nation’s growth, that has given our government this mandate. Western, affluent nations have pulled foreign investment, just as China stepped up its trade engagements with us.[[2]](#footnote-2) Today, we trade USD 18.79 billion worth of products with China.[[3]](#footnote-3) This trade is based in an infrastructure-for-resources model. Critical minerals and high commodity prices inflate our exports and result in a positive balance of trade with China. It is also noteworthy that while our imports have substantially increased, the biggest trade items are stone machines and trucks – to help move extract and move the minerals for exports.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Trading resources-for-infrastructure and the Sicomines Deal*

The natural resources of our country are worth $24 trillion[[5]](#footnote-5), and our arrangement with China assures them a consistent access to some of these. The DRC supplies 80% of the global cobalt production. 80% of this supply is via Tenke-Fungurume, Sicomines and other Chinese owned mines.[[6]](#footnote-6) Half of the 10 mines in Katanga region are controlled by Chinese firms.[[7]](#footnote-7) These together make up 67.5% of China’s refined cobalt imports, making the DRC a critical node in China’s aspiration to be the single largest manufacturer of critical infrastructure components. In the last year, we surpassed China’s traditional copper source Chile, with a year-on-year increase of 71% in our exports. The DRC supplies a little more than a third of China’s copper. These minerals have become indispensable to China’s manufacturing sector, given its position as the linchpin of the EV battery market.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Sicomines joint venture established in 2008 granted Chinese enterprises access to the Kolwezi copper-cobalt deposit - one of the world’s richest mineral reserves.[[9]](#footnote-9) Under the original agreement, Chinese firms secured a 68% stake in the Sicomines in exchange for $3 billion in infrastructure funding for the DRC, which we revised to $7 billion in 2024.[[10]](#footnote-10) As a trade-off, Chinese entities control 15 of the DRC’s 19 premier cobalt and copper sites, consolidating their influence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*The concern of over-reliance*

As part of the 2024 renegotiation of the Sicomines deal our share of annual royalties from profits increased to 1.2% and road infrastructure was given a greater push,[[12]](#footnote-12) as partaking members of the Belt and Road Initiative. We however, tied annual infrastructure investments by the Chinese worth $324 million to copper prices crossing $8000 per tonne.[[13]](#footnote-13) This exposes the DRC to market volatility and price decreases – seeing how China controls the largest chunk of this supply.[[14]](#footnote-14) While the people of the DRC need the benefits of massive economic trade, the capital flight that this arrangement protects is harmful in the longer run for the DRC’s economy. Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in infrastructure in neighbouring Republic of Congo has resulted in a substitution effect and greater dependency on resource exports, just as in other African nations.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*The Dem. Rep of the Congo-China military relations*

We have come a long way from the days of limited engagement of 2005, to today’s full-fledged security partnership between the DRC and China.[[16]](#footnote-16) While the Chinese prefer no direct involvement, they have trained, armed and logistically supported the DRC’s fight against rebelling non-state actors. One-third of the 6000 military personnel trained by China in Africa are Congolese.[[17]](#footnote-17) The permanent Chinese military mission posted at the Kamina military base has facilitated joint-exercises, counter-terrorism drills and logistics management *same*. China regularly depends on the DRC’s military forces to secure its mining investments against conflicts. Non-combat donations in the form of surveillance drones, vehicles and medical equipment have enabled real-time counter-ops in conflict zones.[[18]](#footnote-18)

May 2025 will mark a year to the ground-breaking of the Likasi Military Industrial Complex, a $1.2 billion joint-venture between China’s ‘Norinco’ and Turkey’s ‘MKE’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In Katanga, the mineral heartland, this facility will produce small arms, ammunitions and unmanned aerial vehicles for the Congolese military.[[20]](#footnote-20)

China has become the largest supplier of arms to the DRC after Russian arm supplies decreased dramatically between 2014-18 and 2019-23 – filling the void left due to diversion of Russian supplies.[[21]](#footnote-21) In the two years before 2024, the DRC purchases of Chinese arms surged from $12 million to $89 million. The rifles, anti-tank missiles and armoured vehicles have bolstered the DRC’s campaign and helped recapture the M23 occupied cities of Goma and Bukavu early this year.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*Blurring lines and interference:*

While China categorically avoids interfering in the DRC’s internal affairs, Chinese advisors have assisted in planning operations against M23 rebels and this blurs the line between advising and operational assistance. The DRC neighbour, Rwanda – the backer of these rebelling forces, sees our operability with the Chinese military as empowering our refusal to negotiate in the M23 rebellion.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**Cold War echoes, hot new stakes**

*The DRC-U.S. economic relations*

The DRC and the United States (U.S.) have had economic relations since as far back as 1984 – when the bilateral investment treaty with the U.S. was signed.[[24]](#footnote-24) We also have a trade and investment framework agreement with the U.S. as part of Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). The DRC is an eligible country under the U.S. African Growth Opportunity Act as well.[[25]](#footnote-25) Our trade numbers however are almost as negligible as these treaties have been advertised as significant. In 2024, the U.S. goods trade totaled $576.4 million, where our exports accounted for a third of this value. In the past year, our imports from the U.S. grew at double the rate than our exports to the U.S.[[26]](#footnote-26) The DRC remains the single-largest receiver worldwide of bilateral aid from the U.S. In the last fiscal year, the U.S. sent $1.2 billion in humanitarian assistance to the DRC. Since 2010, the U.S. has disbursed $600 million+ for malaria control. About 70% of our humanitarian projects are funded by this money[[27]](#footnote-27) and with recent funding reversals, we see the vulnerability of our development programs due to over-reliance on the U.S.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The United States has signed a memorandum with DRC and Zambia to develop a supply chain for electric vehicle batteries. Recent engagements between the DRC’s and American trade officials point to the possibility of a greater economic partnership where we exchange our natural resources for American military assistance to contain the rebellion.[[29]](#footnote-29) The DRC has promoted a strategic partnership to develop American firms’ access and development of mining projects in the DRC. This is aligned with current American objectives to secure access to critical minerals for their green energy infrastructure plans, as China blocks world supply.[[30]](#footnote-30) This is a significant positive development since the exit of the last American mining company Freeport-McMoRan in 2016.

American companies, regulated with stringent governance guardrails and anti-corruption practices find high-risk investment environments like ours financially unsustainable due to compliance costs.[[31]](#footnote-31) The Export-Import Bank of the United States has a program – ‘China and Transformational Exports Program (CTEP)’ – that enables American firms to invest in critical mineral extractions competitively around the world.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is concerning that the DRC is restricted as an investment destination because of two reasons. One is the historic conflict and our weak governance frameworks – for environmental, social and financial security.[[33]](#footnote-33) The second is the lack of performance standards that match the U.S.’s International Finance Corporation (IFC) specifics.[[34]](#footnote-34)

*U.S.-Congo military relations*

The DRC request for American security assistance against the rebellion includes training, weapons, intelligence and equipment.[[35]](#footnote-35) The DRC’s idea is not a new proposal, but a leverage the U.S. has used since American president Obama’s tenure. During the 2012-13 M23 rebellion, the U.S. suspended military aid to Rwanda for backing the conflict in the eastern DRC.[[36]](#footnote-36) This ensured that broader diplomatic efforts to halt the conflict saw fruition. Today again, the U.S. has a natural interest in the containment of growing Chinese military presence in the DRC and Africa.

The Obama administration first authorized deployment of U.S. Special Forces to train Congolese infantry battalions and provisioned equipment to contain the rebellions in the east.[[37]](#footnote-37) The United States makes significant financial contributions to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission – the UN’s largest peace-keeping effort.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Concern should be noted about the exposure of the DRC to short-term U.S. interests in critical minerals. Even as we request military engagement from the United States, I must painfully refer to the 1960s, when we dealt with unhelpful American interference post our initial Independence.[[39]](#footnote-39) Historically, the Congolese people have suffered when international powers have acted on their regional motivations. We should be wary of exchanging our resources limitlessly for a semblance of development infrastructure and security, and work to prioritize our national interest over time. While militarization of Congolese lands with foreign efforts can contain the rebellion the DRC currently faces,[[40]](#footnote-40) we should engage with the international community to solve the core issues of governance deficits and regional power conflicts.

**Recommendations to maximise the DRC’s interests**

*Promote Value-Addition and Incentivize Industrialization*

DRC currently exports 95% of its minerals as raw materials, forfeiting what could be $6 billion in potential value-added revenue, according to estimates.[[41]](#footnote-41) **I strongly recommend the development of downstream processing capacity and local value-addition.** Building on the Sicomines deal revision of 2024 we should establish a deeper partnership with China in these processing industries. Joint partnerships to process cobalt and copper into battery-grade materials, like the DRC-Zambia Joint Battery Council are great examples to replicate. **The DRC next needs to develop local refineries and battery precursor plants with the help of Chinese experience and technologies.** The benefit for the DRC lies in the local economic activity such industries generate. Ethiopia incentivizes on-site manufacturing with tax breaks.[[42]](#footnote-42) **As an incentive, the DRC can likewise provide staged, output-value linked tax breaks for all Chinese companies that establish smelters, on-site processing and battery-part manufacturing respectively in the DRC.**[[43]](#footnote-43)

*From Grants, to Guns and Governance*

The 2023-24 audits of Chinese mining deals[[44]](#footnote-44) revealed the undervaluation of mineral reserves as well as the lopsided terms we were engaging along with China.[[45]](#footnote-45) **Institutionalizing mandatory contract disclosure will enable civil society oversight**, as evident in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – from which we based the Sicomines renegotiation for our national interest*.*[[46]](#footnote-46)As we already speak with the U.S. for increased economic engagement, governance protocols like this one are an excellent segway for a formal mineral trade partnership with the U.S. that meet EXIM governance standards. Simultaneously, **I recommend requiring all mineral extraction projects to undergo periodic audits that meet IFC performance standards.**[[47]](#footnote-47) Inviting the U.S. to help us in these reforms in addition to all that we are proposing[[48]](#footnote-48) will play well with American motivations of enabling good governance worldwide.[[49]](#footnote-49) American motivation also lies in countering Chinese influence in the critical minerals supply chain and the suggested improvement in governance will enable EXIM (CTEP) enabled U.S. private investment in the DRC.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**Conclusion**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo stands at a critical juncture in its international relations, positioned between two competing global powers with strategic interests in our abundant natural resources. Our economic partnership with China has delivered tangible infrastructure development but has also created dependencies that require careful management. Meanwhile, American interest in our critical minerals presents new opportunities that could be leveraged to diversify our partnerships and strengthen our negotiating position.

The path forward demands a nuanced approach that balances these competing interests while prioritizing our national development agenda. By implementing the recommended value-addition initiatives and governance reforms, we can transform our resource wealth into sustainable economic growth rather than merely exporting raw materials. The proposed governance improvements would not only attract U.S. investment meeting EXIM standards but also strengthen our position in negotiations with Chinese entities. By playing a more active role in shaping these relationships rather than being shaped by them, we can ensure that international engagement serves the long-term interests of the Congolese people.

The DRC's vast mineral wealth gives us leverage that few nations possess in today's critical mineral-dependent global economy. Our goal must be to emerge not as a battleground in a new Cold War, but as a sovereign actor that skilfully navigates these complex relationships to secure our rightful place in the international community and deliver meaningful development to our citizens.

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