
**Bilateral Trade Asymmetry Under the Belt and Road Initiative: Evidence
From Cameroon–China Trade, 2000–2024**

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Abstract

This Article Examines Whether Cameroon–China Trade During the Belt and Road Initiative (Bri) Period Shows Evidence of Balanced Trade Deepening or Persistent Structural Asymmetry. Using Annual Bilateral Merchandise Trade Data for 2000–2024 From UN Comtrade and the World Integrated Trade Solution, the Article Applies Sub-period Compound Annual Growth Rate Analysis, the Herfindahl–hirschman Index (Hhi), the Trade Intensity Index (Tii), Commodity-price Cross-referencing, and a Comparator-country Benchmark Using Côte D’ivoire. The Evidence Shows That Two-way Trade Increased From About Us\$190 Million in 2000 to Us\$2.09 Billion in 2024. This Expansion Was Import-led. Cameroon Moved From a Us\$20 Million Bilateral Deficit in 2000 to a Us\$1.22 Billion Deficit in 2024. Hhi Values Remained Above 0.25 in Every Observed Year, Reaching 0.385 in 2023, With Crude Oil Accounting for 57.8 Percent of Exports to China. Import-side Tii Rose From 0.85 to 1.82, While Export-side Tii Stayed Below One Except During the 2021 Commodity- Price Spike. The Article Concludes That Bri-period Trade Engagement Widened Cameroon Access to Chinese Manufactures and Project-linked Inputs, but Did Not Shift the Export BASE Toward Stronger Market Penetration or Product Diversification.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Cameroon, China, Bilateral Trade, Export Concentration, Trade Intensity, Herfindahl–hirschman Index

1. Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a central framework for infrastructure-led external economic cooperation. In Africa, the initiative is often linked to ports, roads, energy projects, trade facilitation, and stronger South–South exchange (Cheng, 2016; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Wang, 2021). Cameroon is an appropriate case for testing these expectations because it signed a BRI memorandum of understanding with China in 2018 and has received Chinese-backed infrastructure finance in transport, energy, and digital networks. Cameroon also remains dependent on a narrow set of primary exports and a wide range of imported manufactures. This

structure creates a direct test of whether BRI-period engagement is associated with export upgrading or with deeper trade asymmetry.

The policy claim behind many BRI discussions is clear. Infrastructure should reduce trade costs, widen market access, and support stronger export capacity. This expectation is consistent with trade-cost and gravity-based trade theory, where transport connectivity and border efficiency shape bilateral trade intensity (Anderson and van Wincoop, 2004; Limão and Venables, 2001; Head and Mayer, 2014). It is also consistent with recent BRI studies showing that transport networks may reduce shipment times and trade costs (de Soyres et al., 2019; Baniya et al., 2020). Yet this mechanism is conditional. Infrastructure access does not automatically change the export basket of a resource-dependent economy. Domestic processing capacity, supplier linkages, production standards, and market-access arrangements determine whether lower trade costs become export diversification.

Existing studies on China–Africa economic relations identify both opportunity and risk. Chinese engagement can support infrastructure provision and selected productivity gains (Miao et al., 2020; Calabrese and Tang, 2023; Ngassam, 2024). It can also reproduce dependency where African economies remain concentrated in primary exports and imported manufactures (Kaplinsky et al., 2007; Taylor and Zajontz, 2020). The Cameroon-specific literature confirms the scale of Chinese presence in trade, infrastructure, mining, hydropower, and project contracting (Khan et al., 2009; Cabestan, 2015; Nguempjoug, 2017; Chen and Landry, 2018). However, the trade evidence remains fragmented. Prior work rarely measures export concentration or bilateral trade intensity over a continuous period.

This article addresses that gap by asking one question: did BRI-period engagement coincide with balanced Cameroon–China trade deepening, or

did it reinforce structural asymmetry? The article makes three contributions. First, it provides a continuous 2000–2024 assessment instead of iso-lated benchmark-year comparison. Second, it uses HHI and TII to distinguish trade volume growth from structural change. Third, it cross-checks the 2021 export surge against commodity prices to avoid attributing price effects to BRI-related export upgrading.

The article does not claim causal identification. The analysis is descriptive and interprets observable associations. Commodity-price cycles, domestic policy, COVID-19 shocks, exchange-rate movements, and global demand shifts also shaped Cameroon trade outcomes. The contribution is therefore empirical and diagnostic. It identifies what changed during the BRI period, what did not change, and what the pattern implies for trade policy.

2. Literature Positioning and Analytical Expectations

2.1. Trade costs, connectivity, and bilateral intensity

Trade-cost theory treats trade flows as a function of distance, market size, logistics efficiency, and border costs (Anderson and van Wincoop, 2004; Head and Mayer, 2014). Infrastructure matters because it lowers the effective cost of moving goods across space. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that roads and transport corridors can alter market access and trade volumes (Buys et al., 2010; Storeygard, 2016). Trade facilitation studies also show that physical infrastructure and border efficiency affect developing-country export performance (Hoekman and Nicita, 2011; Portugal-Perez and Wilson, 2012).

The BRI literature extends this reasoning. de Soyres et al. (2019) find that BRI transport projects can reduce shipment time and trade costs. Baniya et al. (2020) show that the trade effects of the New Silk Road depend on transport improvements and supporting trade reforms. These studies motivate the first expectation: if BRI-linked connectivity improved Cameroon–China trade conditions, bilateral trade intensity should rise.

2.2. Structural asymmetry and export concentration

A second strand stresses uneven gains. China–Africa trade has expanded, but African export capacity remains shaped by commodity dependence, limited manufacturing depth, and weak domestic linkages (Ademola et al., 2009; He, 2013). Taylor and Zajontz (2020) argue that BRI participation can re-produce dependency when infrastructure finance is not linked to

industrial upgrading. In this setting, higher trade volumes may coexist with rising import dependence and unchanged export concentration.

This strand motivates a second expectation: if BRI engagement contributed to structural upgrading, Cameroon's export HHI should decline over time. If HHI remains high or increases, then trade deepening occurred without export diversification. The distinction is necessary because a country can trade more without changing what it produces and sells.

2.3. Commodity-price effects

Commodity exporters can record sharp export-value changes without changes in production structure. Cameroon exports crude oil, liquefied natural gas, and timber to China. These products are exposed to global price volatility. The article therefore treats the 2021 export surge as a test case. If the surge coincided with oil and gas price recovery and then reversed, it should be interpreted as a price episode rather than a structural export shift.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Data

The article uses annual Cameroon–China bilateral trade data for 2000–2024 from UN Comtrade and WITS (United Nations Comtrade, 2024; World Bank, 2024a). It uses product-level export data at the HS2 level for selected years, total trade aggregates from UNCTADstat, and commodity prices from the World Bank Pink Sheet (UNCTAD, 2024; World Bank, 2024b). Côte d’Ivoire is used as a comparator because it is a lower-middle-income African economy with active China trade, primary-product exports, and a BRI memorandum of understanding signed in the same broad period.

3.2. Sub-period design

The study period is divided into three phases. The pre-BRI baseline covers 2000–2012. The early BRI period covers 2013–2017, after the initiative was announced but before Cameroon’s formal BRI memorandum. The formal BRI period covers 2018–2024. The boundaries are institutional, not statistical breakpoints.

3.3. Growth-rate comparison

Compound annual growth rates are computed as:

$$CAGR = \frac{V_{end} - V_{start}}{n - 1}$$

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where V_{end} is the final-year value, V_{start} is the initial-year value, and n is the number of annual observations. CAGR is used because it captures compounded change and reduces sensitivity to year-to-year fluctuation.

3.4. Export concentration

The Herfindahl–Hirschman Index is computed as:

$$N$$

$$2$$

$$i$$

$$i=1$$

where s_i is the share of product i in Cameroon’s exports to China. Values above 0.25 are treated as high concentration. The HHI is computed for 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2023.

3.5. Trade intensity

The export-side TII is defined as:

$$TII = \frac{\sum_{ij} X_{ij}}{X_i} \quad (3)$$

$$ij \quad M_j / M_w$$

where X_{ij} is Cameroon’s exports to China, X_i is Cameroon’s exports to the world, M_j is China’s imports from the world, and M_w is world imports. The import-side TII uses the analogous import expression. Values above one indicate higher-than-expected bilateral trade intensity.

4. Results

4.1. Bilateral trade expansion and deficit persistence

Table 1 reports selected observations from the full annual series. The pattern is clear. Two-way trade increased sharply, but Cameroon’s trade balance with China remained negative in every year.

The deficit widened from US\$20 million in 2000 to US\$347 million in 2012 and US\$1.22 billion in 2024. The 2021 narrowing was temporary. It did not persist in 2022 or 2023. This confirms that the trade imbalance is not a short-run fluctuation. It is a structural feature of the relationship.

Table 1: Selected Cameroon–China bilateral merchandise trade values, 2000–2024

Year	Exports to China (US\$m)	Imports from China (US\$m)	Total trade (US\$m)	Trade balance (US\$m)
2000	85	105	190	-20
2005	198	268	466	-70
2010	330	543	873	-213
2013	448	875	1,323	-427
2018	525	935	1,460	-410
2021	1,112	1,187	2,299	-75
2023	385	1,573	1,958	-1,188
2024	435	1,650	2,085	-1,215

Source: UN Comtrade and WITS. Trade balance equals exports minus imports.

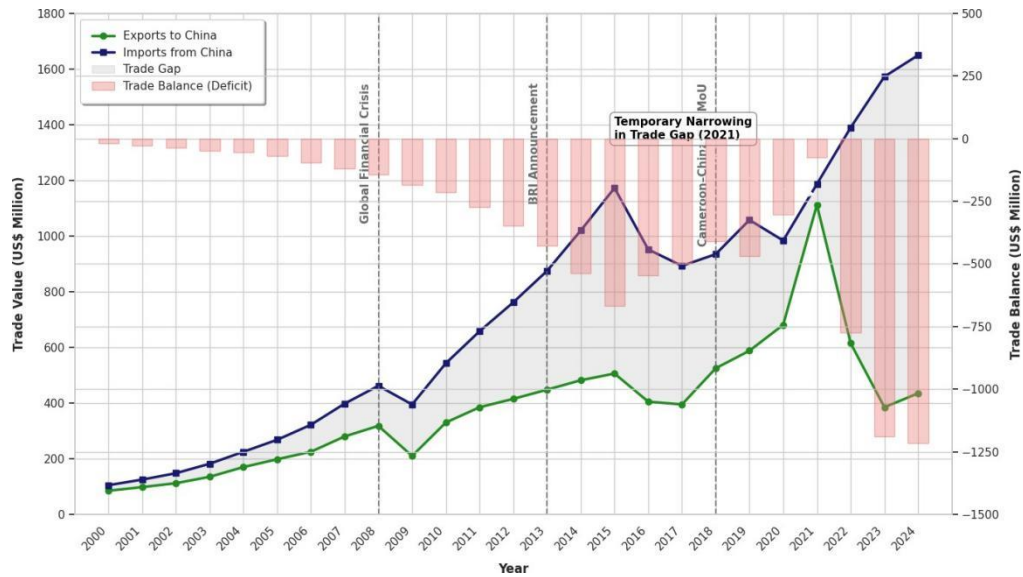


Figure 1: Cameroon–China bilateral merchandise trade and trade balance, 2000–2024.

Source: Author calculations from UN Comtrade and WITS. Vertical reference lines mark the global financial crisis, BRI announcement, and Cameroon–China BRI memorandum.

Note: A dual-axis line chart is recommended, with Cameroon’s exports to China and imports from China plotted as separate lines (left axis, US\$ million), and three vertical reference lines marking 2008 (global financial crisis), 2013 (BRI announcement), and 2018 (Cameroon–China BRI MoU). The chart clearly show the persistent gap between the import and export lines and the temporary narrowing in 2021.

4.2. Sub-period growth rates

Table 2 shows that the fastest expansion occurred before the BRI. The pre-BRI phase recorded double-digit growth for exports, imports, total trade, and the deficit. During the early BRI period, trade growth slowed. During the formal BRI period, import growth recovered but export growth remained negative.

Table 2: Compound annual growth rates by sub-period

Indicator	Pre-BRI 2000–2012	Early BRI 2013–2017	Formal BRI 2018–2024
Exports to China	14.2	-2.4	-2.7
Imports from China	17.8	0.3	8.5
Total bilateral trade	16.3	-0.5	5.1
Bilateral trade deficit	26.4	3.2	16.8

Source: Author calculations from UN Comtrade and WITS. Values are percentages.

This result matters because it limits strong claims about BRI-induced trade expansion. China–Cameroon trade had already deepened before 2013. The formal BRI phase is better described as an import-led recovery under continuing export weakness.

4.3. Export concentration

Table 5 reports HHI estimates for Cameroon’s exports to China. All values exceed the 0.25 high-concentration threshold. The highest value occurs in 2023, within the formal BRI period.

The number of exported HS2 categories fluctuated, but did not show a sustained rise. The export basket remained dominated by crude oil, liquefied natural gas, and wood products. The BRI period therefore did not coincide with measurable export diversification.

4.4. Import structure

The import side shows a wider product base. In 2023, major imports from China included herbicides, tyres, ceramic tiles, polyethylene terephthalate, glass packaging, steel, motorcycles, textiles, and other manufactured goods.

Table 3: Export concentration in Cameroon’s exports to China

Year	Sub-period	HS2 products	Top product share	HHI
2005	Pre-BRI	18	52.3% crude oil	0.321
2010	Pre-BRI	22	48.7% crude oil	0.298
2015	Early BRI	25	54.1% crude oil	0.345
2020	Formal BRI	21	51.6% crude oil	0.332
2023	Formal BRI	19	57.8% crude oil	0.385

Source: Author calculations from WITS HS2 export shares. HHI above 0.25 indicates high concentration.

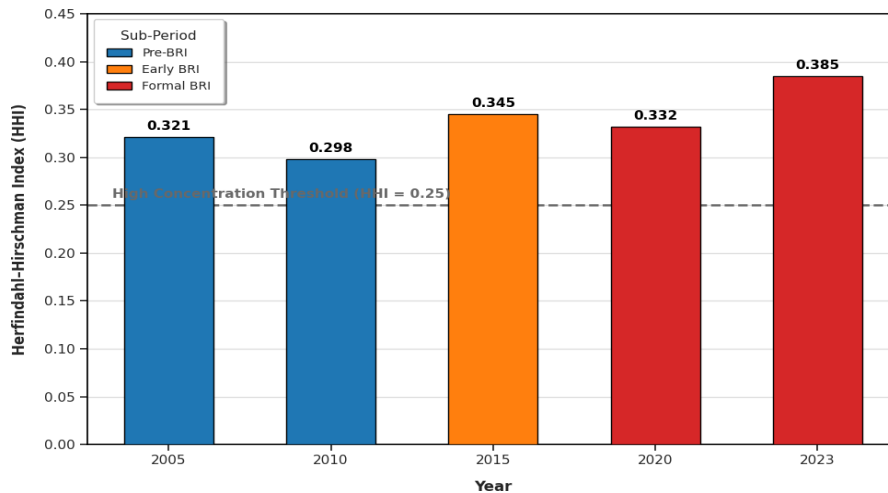


Figure 2: Export concentration index for Cameroon’s exports to China, selected years.
 Source: Author calculations from WITS HS2 bilateral export shares. The dashed line marks the high-concentration threshold.

This figure depicts a bar chart with HHI values on the vertical axis and years on the horizontal axis. A horizontal dashed reference line at $HHI = 0.25$ should mark the threshold for high concentration. Bars should be colour-coded by sub-period (pre-BRI in blue, early BRI in orange, formal BRI in red). The chart should clearly show that all values remain above the high-concentration threshold throughout the study period.

These categories indicate demand across agriculture, construction, transport, industrial inputs, and household consumption. The import basket is therefore broader than the export basket.

This contrast is central to the article’s argument. China supplies a broad range of goods used in Cameroon’s domestic economy and infrastructure activity. Cameroon sells a narrow range of commodities. Trade linkage increased, but value-chain position did not shift.

4.5. The 2021 export surge

Table 7 shows that the temporary export surge in 2021 coincided with a recovery in crude oil and gas prices. The surge therefore cannot be treated as evidence of sustained export upgrading.

Table 4: Commodity prices and Cameroon’s exports to China, 2019–2023

	(US\$/barrel)	(US\$/MMBtu)	(US\$/m ³)	(US\$m)
2019	64.2	2.57	268	588
2020	41.8	2.03	245	681
2021	70.7	3.84	295	1,112
2022	99.0	6.45	310	615
2023	82.6	2.74	285	385

Source: World Bank Pink Sheet and WITS. Natural gas is proxied by the Henry Hub benchmark.

The 2021 value rose sharply, then declined in 2022 and 2023. This pattern is consistent with a commodity-price and contract-timing episode. It is not consistent with a durable shift toward processed exports or new export lines.

4.6. Trade intensity divergence

Table 9 reports selected TII values. Import-side intensity rose steadily and exceeded one after 2005. Export-side intensity stayed below one except in 2021.

The divergence is the strongest quantitative evidence of asymmetry. Cameroon imports from China at an intensity higher than expected from global trade shares. Cameroon exports to China at an intensity lower than expected. The

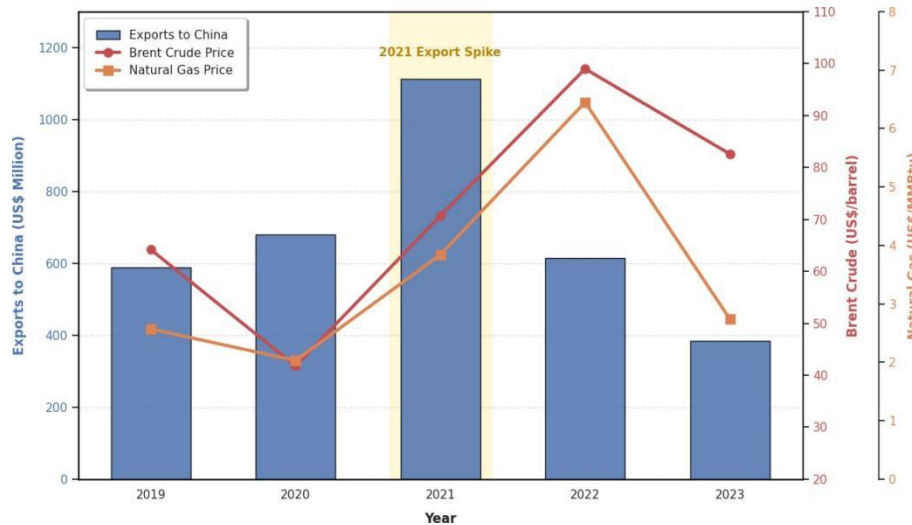


Figure 3: Commodity-price movement and Cameroon’s exports to China, 2019–2023.

Source: Author calculations from WITS and World Bank Pink Sheet data. The figure separates price-driven export-value movement from structural export upgrading.

This figure illustrates the Global Commodity Prices and Cameroon's Exports to China, 2019–2023. The left axis plots Cameroon's exports to China (bar chart, US\$ million). The right axis plots Brent crude oil price (line, US\$/barrel) and natural gas price (line, US\$/MMBtu). The chart should make visually clear that the 2021 export spike coincides with the commodity-price recovery, and that the subsequent export decline in 2022–2023 confirms the price-driven interpretation.

Table 5: Cameroon–China trade intensity, selected years

Year	Sub-period	Export-side TII	Import-side TII
2000	Pre-BRI	0.48	0.85
2005	Pre-BRI	0.55	1.02
2010	Pre-BRI	0.62	1.18
2013	Early BRI	0.58	1.35
2015	Early BRI	0.60	1.52
2018	Formal BRI	0.65	1.48
2020	Formal BRI	0.72	1.42
2021	Formal BRI	1.08	1.55
2023	Formal BRI	0.42	1.78
2024	Formal BRI	0.45	1.82

Source: Author calculations from WITS and UNCTADstat. Values above one indicate higher-than-expected bilateral trade intensity.

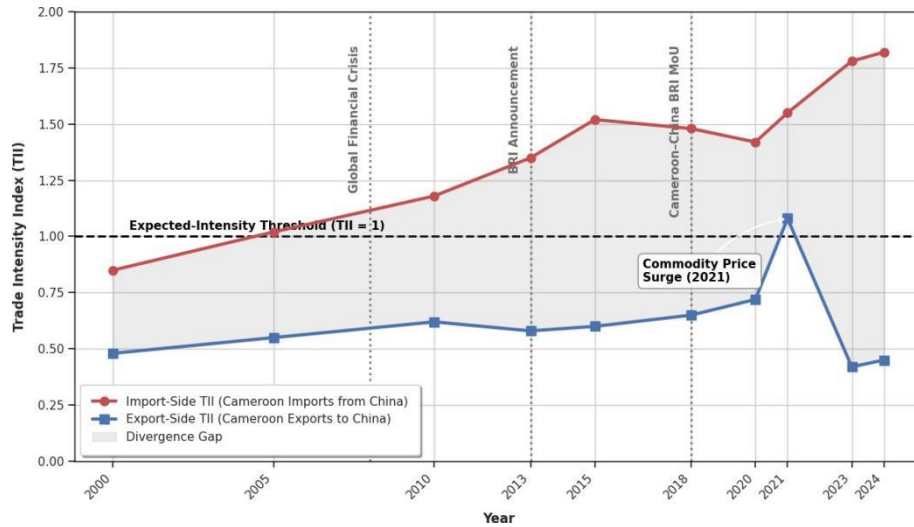


Figure 4: Cameroon–China export-side and import-side Trade Intensity Index, 2000–2024.

Source: Author calculations from WITS and UNCTADstat. Values above one indicate higher-than-expected bilateral trade intensity.

Note: this figure shows a line chart with two lines: export-side TII and import-side TII, plotted annually. A horizontal dashed reference line at TII = 1 should mark the expected-intensity threshold. Three vertical reference lines at 2008, 2013, and 2018. The chart should make visually clear the divergence between the rising import-side TII and the flat-to-declining export-side TII.

4.7. Comparator evidence

Côte d’Ivoire provides an external benchmark. During the BRI period, Cameroon’s exports to China declined at about -0.2 percent per year, while Côte d’Ivoire recorded positive export growth of 6.8 percent per year. Imports from China rose in both countries, though the comparator grew faster. This suggests that Cameroon’s weak export performance is not simply a regional BRI pattern. It reflects country-specific constraints linked to commodity concentration and limited processed exports.

5. Discussion

The findings support a restrained interpretation of BRI-period trade effects. Trade deepened, but not in a balanced way. The trade relationship shifted toward stronger Cameroonian absorption of Chinese goods, while

Cameroonian export penetration into China remained weak. The HHI evidence shows that export diversification did not occur. The TII evidence shows that import dependence intensified beyond global trade-share expectations. The commodity-price check shows that the most favorable export episode was temporary.

These results align with the structural-asymmetry literature. Infrastructure and external finance may reduce trade costs, but the export response depends on domestic production capacity. In Cameroon, the export base remained concentrated in hydrocarbons and wood products. Without processing capacity, quality upgrading, logistics-to-production linkages, and Chinese market-access commitments for processed goods, port and road investments can raise trade volume without changing trade structure.

The results also qualify optimistic readings of the BRI. The initiative may improve access to infrastructure finance and imported inputs. It does not, by itself, create export diversification. For Cameroon, the policy issue is there-fore not whether to engage China. The issue is how to convert trade access and infrastructure into domestic capability. Export promotion, local supplier development, product standards, and processing capacity must become part of BRI-related negotiation and implementation.

6. Policy Implications

Four implications follow. First, Cameroon should link port and transport projects to export-promotion targets. The Kribi port can support trade only if exporters have processed products, standards certification, and distribution channels. Second, the government should prioritize processing capacity in hydrocarbons, gas-linked inputs, wood products, and selected agro-industrial exports. Third, import-substitution feasibility should focus on goods already imported at scale from China, including construction materials, selected agricultural inputs, packaging products, and simple transport-related goods. Fourth, Cameroon should negotiate China-market access for processed products rather than relying on commodity exports.

These measures require institutional discipline. Infrastructure contracts should include local-content rules, training obligations, supplier-use targets, and reporting provisions. Without these conditions, import-led trade deepening will persist.

7. Conclusion

This article examined Cameroon–China trade from 2000 to 2024 to assess whether the BRI period coincided with balanced trade deepening or structural asymmetry. The evidence supports the second interpretation. Bilateral trade increased strongly, but imports from China expanded more consistently than exports to China. The trade deficit widened to US\$1.22 billion in 2024. Export concentration remained high, with HHI values above 0.25 in every observed year. Import-side TII rose to 1.82, while export-side TII remained below one except during the 2021 commodity-price spike.

The central conclusion is that BRI-period engagement widened Cameroon access to Chinese goods and project-linked inputs, but did not transform Cameroon’s export structure. The developmental value of the BRI for Cameroon depends on whether infrastructure, trade policy, and industrial policy are aligned toward export diversification and domestic processing. Future

re- search should extend the analysis through firm-level customs records, export- quantity data, and a formal gravity or synthetic-control design.

Data Availability

The data used in this article are derived from public sources: UN Com- trade, WITS, UNCTADstat, and the World Bank Pink Sheet. Processed tables can be made available by the author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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