



## China–Cameroon football cooperation and prospects: From infrastructures development to talents flow

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### Abstract

The strategic partnership between China and Cameroon in football represents a microcosm of broader Sino-African cooperation, embodying both the opportunities and complexities inherent in South-South collaboration. This dissertation examines the multifaceted dimensions of China-Cameroon football relations, analyzing how infrastructure investment, talent exchange, and institutional cooperation can be leveraged to advance mutual development objectives. Cameroon, represented by its internationally acclaimed football team “Indomitable Lions,” possesses a rich football heritage and proven expertise that can significantly contribute to China’s ambition to become a global football powerhouse by 2050. Simultaneously, China’s capacity for large-scale infrastructure development and financial investment addresses critical gaps in Cameroon’s football ecosystem. Through the frameworks of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this bilateral football partnership holds strategic importance not only for athletic development but also for sports diplomacy, cultural exchange, and broader economic engagement between the two nations.

**Keywords:** China-Cameroon football cooperation, south-south sport collaboration, The Indomitable Lions, FOCAC, BRI

### Introduction

The burgeoning relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Cameroon in the realm of football represents a paradigmatic case of South-South cooperation, where China’s strategic push for global soft power and infrastructural development aligns seamlessly with Cameroon’s rich footballing heritage and its exceptional potential as a source of elite talent and technical expertise. This partnership emerges at a critical juncture when China seeks to elevate its football profile on the global stage while Cameroon aims to capitalize on its established football legacy to drive economic development and international recognition. China’s ambitious football reform plan, initiated in 2015 with President Xi Jinping’s vision of becoming a football powerhouse by 2050, requires not merely infrastructure and investment but also the cultivation of genuine football culture and technical proficiency. Cameroon, with its storied history of producing world-class players like Samuel Eto’o and Roger Milla, and its deeply embedded grassroots football culture, offers precisely the expertise China lacks. The Indomitable Lions’ five World Cup qualifications and their status as Africa’s most successful nation at the FIFA World Cup underscore the depth of Cameroonian football knowledge that China seeks to harness. This strategic convergence of Cameroon’s footballing expertise with China’s investment capacity, channeled through comprehensive policy frameworks like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creates a sophisticated symbiotic relationship poised to yield significant mutual benefits across multiple dimensions of sports development, cultural diplomacy, and economic objectives. The cooperation transcends traditional North-South development paradigms by establishing a horizontal partnership where both nations contribute distinct but equally valuable assets. This cooperation strategically leverages Cameroon’s proven talent development systems and training methodologies to accelerate China’s football ambitions while simultaneously addressing Cameroon’s critical infrastructural deficits, thereby forming an innovative model of South-South

partnership that challenges conventional development assistance frameworks. This dissertation comprehensively examines such a strategic convergence of interests between both nations through the lens of football diplomacy and development theory. It posits that their cooperation transcends mere sports diplomacy, functioning instead as a multifaceted vehicle for achieving mutual developmental goals, strengthening geopolitical ties within the Global South, and creating a sustainable, replicable model for how developing nations can leverage shared passions and complementary strengths for mutual benefit on the global stage, ultimately reshaping traditional paradigms of international cooperation.

### 1. Cameroon’s Football Excellence: The Indomitable Lions and Their Global Legacy

#### a. A Historical Achievements and Continental Dominance

The Cameroon national football team, universally known as the Indomitable Lions, stands as one of Africa’s most successful and respected football institution. With five Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) titles (1984, 1988, 2000, 2002, 2017), Cameroon ranks among the continent’s football elite alongside Egypt (seven titles) and Ghana (four titles). This continental dominance reflects not merely competitive success but the development of a distinctive footballing culture characterized by technical excellence, physical prowess, and indomitable spirit <sup>[1]</sup>.

Cameroon’s AFCON victories span different eras of African football, demonstrating sustained excellence across generations. The 1984 triumph, led by captain Théophile Abega, marked Cameroon’s emergence as a continental power, with the team defeating Nigeria 3-1 in the final. The 1988 victory, with Roger Milla as the tournament’s top scorer and best player, consolidated this status. The consecutive titles in 2000 and 2002 represented a golden era, with Samuel Eto’o emerging as a global superstar. The 2000 final against Nigeria, won on penalties after a 2-2 draw, featured Eto’o and Patrick M’Boma as key protagonists. The 2002 tournament in Mali saw Cameroon

defeat Senegal on penalties following a goalless draw, with captain Rigobert Song leading a team characterized by “*absolute confidence*”<sup>[2]</sup> and unstoppable momentum.



Fig 1: Cameroon team 2002

Beyond continental success, Cameroon holds the African record for World Cup appearances with eight qualifications (1982, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2010, 2014, 2022), a testament to consistent competitive excellence over four decades. This record surpasses that of African football powerhouses such as Nigeria (six appearances), Ghana (four appearances), and Morocco (six appearances)<sup>[3]</sup>. Cameroon’s most iconic achievement remains its performance at the *1990 FIFA World Cup in Italy*, where the Indomitable Lions became the *first African team to reach the World Cup quarter-finals*. This historic achievement fundamentally altered global perceptions of African football and inspired generations of African players and nations.

#### b. Legendary Players: Ambassadors of Excellence

Cameroon’s football excellence is embodied in legendary players who have achieved global recognition and success at the highest levels of European football:

Roger Milla (born 1952) is widely regarded as *one of the greatest African footballers of all time*. Named *African Footballer of the Year in 1976 and 1990*, Milla was the top scorer and best player at the 1986 and 1988 AFCON tournaments. His longevity is extraordinary: at the 1994 World Cup, aged 42, he scored against Russia, becoming the *oldest goal scorer in World Cup history*, a record that still stands. In 2004, Pelé named Milla in the *FIFA 100 list of the world’s greatest living players*. In 2007, the Confederation of African Football named Milla the *best African player of the previous 50 years*. Milla’s influence transcended statistics; he represented African football excellence globally and inspired countless young Africans to pursue professional careers (Mike Hincks, 2009)<sup>[4]</sup>.



Fig 2: Roger Milla (Picture by 2009 Getty Images)

Thomas N’Kono stands as arguably Africa’s most renowned goalkeeper and one of the finest players in his position during the 1980s. His professional journey began in Cameroon with football clubs *Canon Yaoundé* and *Tonnerre Yaoundé*, where his exceptional talent earned him the France Football African Footballer of the Year award twice, in 1979 and 1982. As the cornerstone of Cameroon’s national team, N’Kono’s performances in three World Cup tournaments—most notably in 1982 and 1990—elevated both his personal reputation and African football’s global standing. His technical brilliance and commanding presence between the posts transcended mere statistics, establishing him as a transformative figure who redefined goalkeeping standards for an entire generation.

Samuel Eto’o (born 1981) is Cameroon’s *all-time leading goal scorer with 56 goals* from 118 international appearances. A *four-time African Player of the Year* (2003, 2004, 2005, 2010), Eto’o won the *UEFA Champions League three times* (twice with Barcelona in 2006 and 2009, once with Inter Milan in 2010), making him one of only a handful of players to achieve consecutive Champions League titles with different clubs. He is the *top goal scorer in AFCON history* and scored the winning penalty in Cameroon’s 2000 AFCON triumph and was instrumental in the 2002 victory. Eto’o’s club career included successful stints at Real Madrid, Barcelona, Inter Milan, Chelsea, Everton, and Sampdoria, earning him recognition as one of the greatest strikers of his generation.

Rigobert Song holds the record for most appearances for Cameroon with 137 caps. He captained the team that won consecutive AFCON titles in 2000 and 2002, scoring the decisive penalty in the 2000 final. Song’s leadership and defensive prowess over nearly two decades (1993-2010) made him one of African football’s most respected figures. His participation in four World Cups (1994, 1998, 2002, 2010) represents remarkable longevity at the international level.



Fig 3: Rigobert Song (AFCON 2002)<sup>[5]</sup>

Other notable Cameroonian players include *Patrick M’Boma*, *Geremi Njitap*, and *Idriss Carlos Kameni*, all of whom achieved success in Europe’s top leagues while contributing to Cameroon’s national team achievements.

Beyond these icons, Cameroon functions as a crucial talent exporter. It ranks second in Africa and ninth globally for exporting footballers under the age of 18, feeding a consistent stream of talent into Europe’s top leagues (Cameroon Concord News, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>. This constant flow of players not only sustains the national team’s quality but also enhances its global brand, with Cameroonian professionals making significant impacts at clubs across the world.

### c. The 2000 Olympic Gold: Cementing Global Status

Cameroon's crowning achievement came at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where they won the football gold medal, becoming only the second African nation (after Nigeria in 1996) to achieve this feat. The tournament showcased Cameroon's depth of talents, with victories over Brazil (1-0 after being reduced to nine men), Chile (2-1 comeback in the semi-final), and Spain (5-4 on penalties after a 2-2 draw in which Cameroon came back from 2-0 down). This Olympic triumph, achieved mere months after winning AFCON 2000, established Cameroon's 2000-2002 period as arguably the greatest era in African football history, with the team winning AFCON (2000), Olympic gold (2000), AFCON again (2002), and reaching the Confederations Cup final (2003). This unprecedented sequence of success demonstrated sustained excellence and the ability to compete at the highest international levels (Olympic.com, 2021) [7].

### d. Playing Style and Tactical Identity

Cameroonian football is characterized by distinctive attributes that constitute valuable expertise for international football development:

**Physical Prowess and Athleticism:** African footballers, particularly Cameroonians, are "valued for their speed and athleticism", providing competitive advantages in pace, power, and endurance. This physical dimension, combined with technical skill, creates a complete footballing profile.

**Technical Skill and Creativity:** Beyond physical attributes, Cameroonian players demonstrate exceptional technical abilities, close ball control, dribbling skills, and creative flair. The tradition established by Milla and continued by Eto'o emphasizes individual skill combined with team cohesion.

**Mental Fortitude and Fighting Spirit:** The "Indomitable" moniker reflects not just prowess but psychological resilience. Cameroon's ability to overcome deficits (the 2000 AFCON and Olympic finals), compete with reduced numbers (1990 World Cup opener, 2000 Olympic quarter-final), and maintain composure under pressure represents invaluable competitive mentality.

**Tactical Versatility:** Cameroonian teams have demonstrated adaptability, successfully employing various tactical systems from defensive counter-attacking football to possession-based play, reflecting sophisticated tactical understanding developed through exposure to diverse coaching philosophies in European leagues.

## 2. Cameroon's Potential Contribution to China's Football Development

### a. Professional Training Methodologies and Knowledge Transfer

Cameroon possesses accumulated expertise that could significantly accelerate China's football development, which has been hampered by inconsistent coaching quality and lack of adequately trained coaches and modern training methodologies. Cameroonian contributions could include:

**Elite Coaching Education:** Cameroon has produced numerous UEFA and CAF-certified coaches with extensive experience in African and European football contexts. The

establishment of joint Sino-Cameroonian coaching academies could provide Chinese coaches with access to world-class training methodologies.

**Youth Development Systems:** Despite infrastructural challenges, Cameroonian football has consistently produced world-class talent through community-based development systems, informal academies, and talent identification networks. Cameroon offers two distinct yet complementary models for talent development that China can study and adapt. The holistic private academy system and the federation-led, internationally standardized coaching curriculum are exemplary models among many that Cameroon can offer:

- **The Academy Model: Kadji Sports Academy (KSA):** As one of Africa's most renowned football academies, KSA provides a successful template for nurturing elite talent. Its methodology is built on a *holistic "sport and study" philosophy*, integrating rigorous, age-specific technical and tactical training with formal academic education on its 40-hectare campus. This dual-track approach ensures players develop life skills and character alongside their footballing abilities, a model that has produced world-class players like Samuel Eto'o, Carlos Kameni, and Stéphane Mbia (*Justin Hinson, 2021*) [8].
- **Federation-Led Coaching Curricula:** The Cameroon Football Federation (FECAFOOT) implements a structured coaching education pathway aligned with Confederation of African Football (CAF) and FIFA standards. Through its National Technical Directorate and the CAF Centre of Excellence in Mbankomo, FECAFOOT organizes formal licensing courses (e.g., CAF License 'D') that cover modern coaching pedagogy, match analysis, and youth development principles [9]. This institutionalized approach to coach training offers a scalable model for elevating coaching quality at the grassroots and professional levels.

This "grassroots-to-elite" pathway, refined over decades, offers valuable insights for China, which aimed to develop 30 million youth players by 2020 and establish 50,000 football schools by 2025. Cameroonian coaches and administrators could assist in designing age-appropriate training curricula, talent identification protocols, and player pathway structures.

**Performance Psychology and Mental Conditioning:** The psychological resilience characteristic of Cameroonian football—the "indomitable spirit"—represents a crucial dimension often overlooked in technical development programs. Cameroonian sports psychologists and former players could contribute to developing mental toughness programs for Chinese national teams and youth academies.

**Physical Conditioning and Athletic Development:** African football's emphasis on physical conditioning, speed development, and athletic performance could complement China's developing sports science infrastructure. Joint research programs between Cameroonian and Chinese sports scientists could optimize training methodologies for Chinese players.

## b. Exchange Programs and Friendly Matches

Structured exchange programs would facilitate knowledge transfer and competitive development. More specifically, this can be achieved through the following aspects:

**Bilateral National Team Friendlies:** Regular friendly matches between Chinese and Cameroonian national teams at various age levels (senior, U-23, U-20, U-17) would provide Chinese teams with exposure to African playing styles, physical intensity, and tactical approaches different from Asian football. Currently, China's national team rarely faces African opposition, limiting players' exposure to diverse footballing cultures.

**Club-Level Partnerships:** Twinning arrangements between Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs and Cameroonian clubs could facilitate player loans, coaching exchanges, and pre-season training camps. For example, a CSL club could host Cameroonian coaches for summer training sessions while sending Chinese youth players to Cameroon for winter training camps, exposing them to different playing conditions and competitive environments.

**Coaching Exchange Programs:** Cameroonian coaches could be embedded in Chinese football academies for extended periods (6-12 months), working alongside Chinese coaches to transfer knowledge. Conversely, Chinese coaches could undertake apprenticeships with successful Cameroonian coaches, learning talent identification, youth development, and competitive coaching methodologies. The precedent of Walter Musanhu, a Zimbabwean coach successfully operating in Beijing's youth football system, demonstrates the viability of African coaches contributing to Chinese football development.

**Referee and Administrative Exchanges:** Football development extends beyond players and coaches to match officials, administrators, and technical staff. Exchange programs could include Cameroonian referees officiating in Chinese leagues and Chinese administrators observing Cameroonian football federation operations, fostering comprehensive institutional learning.

## c. Talent Flows: Bidirectional Benefits

**Strategic talent mobility could serve mutual interests**

**Cameroonian Players in China:** The Chinese Super League has successfully attracted African talent, with over 141 African players participating between 2006 and 2023, including 59.57% from West Africa and 19.5% from Central Africa (which includes Cameroon). Since 2004, the CSL's "foreign aid" policy has facilitated the recruitment of numerous African players, providing Chinese clubs with top-tier talent while offering Cameroonian players lucrative career opportunities (Yang, K.J. and Wang, L.J., 2022) [10], with statistics showing players like *Christian Bassogog* (Henan Jianye) AFCOM 2017 Player of the Tournament, a high-profile; *Stéphane Mbia* (Hebei China Fortune, Wuhan Zall) Former national team captain; *Benjamin Moukandjo* (Jiangsu Suning) Captain of the 2017 AFCOM-winning squad; *Michael Ngadeu-Ngadjui* (Beijing Guoan), a current CSL player and key member of the Indomitable Lions, representing the ongoing talent flow. These few examples and many others have been making meaningful contributions to the the CSL's development (Zhou, X.X., Yan, L. and Zhang, J.L. 2022) [11]. African players bring

“athleticism, diverse technical-tactical knowledge, and intensity, enhancing the excitement of the league”. For Chinese players, competing alongside high-caliber African teammates elevates training standards, match intensity, and tactical sophistication. The technical-tactical knowledge transfer from African players to Chinese teammates represents significant value beyond on-field performance.

However, the recent implementation of strict foreign player salary caps (maximum \$3 million annually) and transfer taxes has reduced the CSL's attractiveness to top African talent. Cameroon-China cooperation could include special provisions within bilateral agreements to facilitate Cameroonian player recruitment, perhaps through subsidized contracts or special visa arrangements, ensuring continued African presence in Chinese football [12].

**Chinese Youth Players Training in Cameroon:** While less common, sending Chinese youth players to train in Cameroonian environments could provide invaluable developmental experiences. Exposure to Cameroon's competitive football culture, physical playing style, and technical creativity could accelerate Chinese player development. The recent example of *Jadel Football Academy* facilitating exchanges between Chinese and African youth players demonstrates the feasibility and value of such programs [13].

**Technical Staff and Scout Networks:** Establishing joint scouting networks could benefit both nations. Cameroonian scouts could assist Chinese clubs in identifying African talent, while Chinese clubs could provide Cameroonian players with alternative professional pathways beyond Europe. This could create a “win-win” scenario where Cameroon gains additional export markets for its talent, while China accesses affordable, high-quality African players.

## d. Educational and Cultural Exchanges

To ensure the long-term viability and mutual benefit of their sports cooperation, it is essential for China and Cameroon to transcend the purely athletic domain by integrating educational and cultural dimensions into their partnership. By fostering exchanges in these areas, both nations can build a more robust and sustainable foundation for their athletic collaboration. This strategic integration can be actualized through several key initiatives:

**Student-Athlete Programs:** Partnering Chinese and Cameroonian universities to offer combined football and academic programs could create pathways for Cameroonian student-athletes to study in China while developing football skills, and for Chinese students to experience Cameroonian football culture. The University for Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana preparing for tournaments in China exemplifies emerging models of university-level football exchange [14].

**Language and Cultural Training:** Cameroonian coaches and players in China could receive Mandarin language training through existing Confucius Institute programs, facilitating deeper cultural integration and more effective communication. Similarly, Chinese coaches and players in Cameroon could learn French or English, Cameroon's official languages.

**Media and Broadcasting Cooperation:** Joint broadcasting initiatives could increase Chinese audiences' exposure to African football and Cameroonian audiences' exposure to Chinese football, building popular support for bilateral cooperation. Chinese sports media companies could partner with Cameroonian broadcasters to produce documentary series on football development, player profiles, and cultural exchange narratives.

### 3. China's Capacity to Address Cameroon's Infrastructural Deficits

#### a. Stadium Construction and Modernization

Cameroon faces significant infrastructure challenges in football development. While the country has constructed notable facilities for major tournaments, substantial gaps remain in training infrastructure, regional stadium development, and facility maintenance.

**Existing Chinese Contributions.** China has already made significant contributions to Cameroonian sports infrastructure. *China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC)* constructed two major football stadiums: the Limbe Omnisport Stadium and the Bafoussam Omnisport Stadium, both completed in 2016 with financing of \$44.2 million. These stadiums successfully hosted matches during the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations (held in 2022) and have become "veritable unifier for young people in the sub-region," according to football analyst James Ndukong.

The multi-functional gymnasium in Yaoundé, constructed by a Chinese company, is "the largest project assisted by China in Cameroon in recent years, and it is also the largest multi-functional and comprehensive gymnasium in Cameroon at present". Designed with 5,400 seats and covering nearly 13,000 square meters, this facility has "played an unprecedented role in promoting the development of Cameroonian football" and successfully hosted major events including the Africa Cup of Nations and Under-17 Central African football tournaments (Zhou, X.X., Yan, L. and Zhang, J.L. 2022).

**Future Infrastructure Needs.** Despite these contributions, Cameroon requires substantial additional investment

**Regional Stadium Development:** Cameroon's ten regions require modern stadiums to decentralize football development beyond major cities (Yaoundé, Douala, Limbe, Bafoussam). Provincial capitals and secondary cities need facilities that meet CAF standards for hosting national-level competitions, enabling wider talent identification and development.

**Training Facility Networks:** Cameroon lacks sufficient dedicated training centers with modern amenities. The country needs *Youth Training Academies* equipped with multiple training pitches, dormitories, classrooms, medical facilities, and sports science laboratories. China's experience in constructing comprehensive sports complexes, including the *Evergrande Football School in Guangdong* covering 167 acres with 50 football fields and facilities for 2,500 students, provides a model for Cameroonian facilities [15].

**Technological Integration:** Modern stadiums require integrated technology for performance analysis, VAR systems, digital scoreboards, and fan experience

enhancement. Chinese companies possess expertise in 5G infrastructure, AI-powered systems, and smart stadium technologies that could modernize Cameroonian facilities.

#### b. Training Centers and Academy Development

**National and Regional Training Centers.** Cameroon requires a hierarchical network of training centers mirroring China's planned five-tier youth training system (county, city, provincial, regional, national). Chinese investment could establish:

- **National Elite Training Center:** A flagship facility near Yaoundé serving as the primary training base for national teams (men's, women's, youth levels) with world-class amenities including multiple natural and artificial turf pitches, indoor training facilities, video analysis rooms, rehabilitation centers, sports science laboratories, accommodation for 200+ athletes, and administrative offices.
- **Regional Training Hubs:** Four regional centers (North, South, East, West regions) serving as intermediate development centers, each accommodating 100+ youth players with qualified coaching staff, educational facilities (ensuring players continue academic studies), and modern training equipment.
- **Grassroots Community Pitches:** Hundreds of community-level pitches throughout Cameroon to maximize youth participation. China's goal of reaching at least "One football pitch for every 10,000 people" provides a benchmark that Cameroon could adopt (*SportsPro, June 2021*) [16].

**Technical Facilities and Equipment.** Beyond physical infrastructure, Cameroon needs:

- Performance analysis technology and video equipment for coaching and player development
- Modern gym equipment and rehabilitation facilities
- Medical diagnostic equipment for injury prevention and treatment
- Nutritional facilities and sports science equipment
- IT infrastructure for coaching education and online learning platforms

**Financing Models.** Chinese investment in Cameroonian training infrastructure could follow several models proven successful in China-Africa cooperation:

- **Concessional Loans:** Low-interest loans from China Exim Bank or China Development Bank with extended repayment periods (15-20 years), following the model of the Kribi Deep Sea Port financing (85% Chinese financing).
- **Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Arrangements:** Chinese companies construct and operate facilities for defined periods (e.g., 10 years) before transferring ownership to Cameroon, allowing revenue generation during operational phase to offset construction costs.
- **Grant Assistance:** For grassroots community facilities, Chinese government grants (similar to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation frameworks) could fully finance construction without repayment obligations.

- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Chinese private enterprises (e.g., Evergrande, Wanda Group, which have invested heavily in Chinese football infrastructure) could partner with Cameroonian businesses or the government to co-invest in profitable ventures like commercial stadiums with hospitality facilities.

#### c. **Equipment, Technology, and Sustainability**

**Equipment Supply.** Cameroon requires massive quantities of football equipment for grassroots development:

- Footballs, training cones, goal nets, and basic training equipment for thousands of schools and community programs
- Playing kit (jerseys, shorts, socks, boots) for youth programs
- Goalkeeping equipment, coaching boards, and training aids
- Medical kits and first aid equipment for clubs and academies

Chinese sports equipment manufacturers (which supply much of the global sports equipment market) could provide affordable, quality equipment through bilateral agreements, perhaps combining commercial contracts with aid components.

**Technological Solutions.** China's advanced technological capabilities could modernize Cameroonian football in the following ways

- **5G-Enabled Stadiums:** Integration of 5G infrastructure for enhanced fan experiences, real-time performance data, and broadcast capabilities.
- **AI-Powered Analysis Systems:** Artificial intelligence systems for tactical analysis, player performance tracking, and talent identification, areas where China has invested heavily.
- **E-Learning Platforms:** Online coaching education platforms enabling remote learning for coaches in remote regions, democratizing access to quality coaching education.
- **Blockchain-Based Player Registration:** Secure, transparent digital player registration systems to prevent fraud and ensure proper tracking of player development pathways.

**Sustainable Design.** Chinese architects and engineers have experience designing sustainable sports facilities incorporating:

- Renewable energy (solar panels for electricity generation)
- Rainwater harvesting systems for pitch irrigation
- Natural ventilation to reduce cooling costs
- Local materials and labor to stimulate local economies and ensure cultural appropriateness

The AECOM-designed Japoma Sports Complex in Douala emphasizes sustainability and "low maintenance ahead of technology and hospitality", recognizing that sustainable legacy requires facilities appropriate to local economic contexts. Future Chinese-Cameroonian projects should prioritize this sustainable approach.

#### 4. **Strategic Frameworks: FOCAC, BRI, and Policy Initiatives**

##### a. **FOCAC as a Multilateral Platform**

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, serves as the primary political platform for launching and legitimizing sports diplomacy initiatives. The commitment made during the 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit to facilitate over 50 *sports and cultural exchanges programs* provides a direct mandate for deepening football cooperation (Ahmed Shafiq, Liu Zijin, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup>. This framework is perfectly suited for promoting people-to-people connectivity through structured programs.

**Sports Diplomacy Within FOCAC:** Sports exchanges have become "an important topic" in China-Africa relations since the Bandung Conference, with "sports exchanges between the two sides experienced a slow development process from single exchange to diversified coordination, from local to overall". FOCAC provides structured mechanisms to:

- **Coach and Referee Exchange Programs:** A formal FOCAC-backed initiative can facilitate the exchange of coaching and refereeing personnel. Cameroonian coaches with CAF/FIFA licenses could conduct workshops in China, while Chinese counterparts could train at Cameroon's CAF Centre of Excellence, fostering a two-way transfer of technical and tactical knowledge.
- **Youth Tournament and Cultural Festivals:** An annual "China-Cameroon Youth Friendship Cup" can be established under the FOCAC cultural exchange banner. This event, alternating between cities like Yaoundé and Shanghai, would feature U-17 and U-20 teams and be paired with cultural festivals that celebrate both nations' heritage, strengthening grassroots connections.
- **Administrative and Management Training:** FOCAC can fund programs where Cameroonian football administrators learn from the Chinese Super League's (CSL) commercial and operational structure, while Chinese administrators gain insight into Cameroon's successful national talent identification systems.
- **Specific FOCAC Football Initiatives:** Within FOCAC frameworks, China and Cameroon could pursue specific football cooperation initiatives:
  - **Bilateral Football Development Agreement:** A comprehensive agreement covering all aspects of cooperation (infrastructure, talent exchange, coaching, administration) with defined timelines, financial commitments, and implementation mechanisms.
  - **China-Cameroon Football Friendship Year:** Modeled on successful "friendship years" in other domains, a dedicated year of intensified football exchanges including national team friendlies, youth tournaments, coaching symposia, and cultural events.
  - **Joint Hosting of International Tournaments:** Exploring possibilities for China and Cameroon to co-

host future youth tournaments (e.g., FIFA U-17 or U-20 World Cups), leveraging China's financial capacity and Cameroon's organizational experience and African hosting advantages.

- **FOCAC Football Development Fund:** Establishing a dedicated fund within FOCAC's financial mechanisms specifically for football infrastructure and program development across Africa, with Cameroon as a flagship recipient and model for other African nations.

#### b. Belt and Road Initiative Integration

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has become *"welcomed by all CEMAC countries as a model for cooperation with China in infrastructure development and socioeconomic transformation"*. Cameroon signed a cooperation agreement on jointly building the BRI in 2018, opening *"broader prospects for bilateral cooperation"*. Football infrastructure development can be strategically integrated into BRI frameworks.

Infrastructure Connectivity. BRI emphasizes infrastructure connectivity (roads, railways, ports, telecommunications). Football stadium projects can be integrated into broader urban development projects financed through BRI mechanisms. For example, stadium construction could be combined with:

- Urban transportation infrastructure (roads, metro stations connecting stadiums to city centers)
- Telecommunications infrastructure (5G networks for smart stadiums)
- Urban utilities (water, electricity, sewage systems) serving both stadiums and surrounding communities
- Commercial development (shopping centers, hotels) creating economically sustainable stadium precincts

Financing Mechanisms. BRI provides multiple financing channels:

- **Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB):** Cameroon is an AIIB member and could access loans for large-scale sports infrastructure projects that demonstrate economic sustainability and developmental impact.
- **Silk Road Fund:** Co-investment arrangements where the Silk Road Fund provides equity investment in sports infrastructure projects with revenue-generating potential (commercial stadiums, training centers with hotel and conference facilities).
- **China-Africa Development Fund:** Specifically targeting African development projects, this fund could finance integrated sports and community development projects combining football infrastructure with educational facilities, healthcare centers, and youth employment programs.

Digital Silk Road. The Digital Silk Road component of BRI focuses on digital infrastructure and technology transfer.

Football cooperation could include:

- Digital platforms for online coaching education
- E-sports and gaming initiatives linking Chinese and Cameroonian youth
- Sports technology research and development cooperation

- Broadcasting and media technology transfer for sports content production

People-to-People Connectivity. BRI's "people-to-people connectivity" pillar explicitly includes sports and cultural exchanges. Football exchanges directly contribute to BRI objectives of fostering mutual understanding, creating educational opportunities, and building people-to-people ties that undergird economic cooperation.

#### c. National Football Development Policies and Alignment

Both China and Cameroon have articulated national football development strategies that can be synergistically aligned: China's Football Reform Plan (2015-2050). China's comprehensive 50-point football reform plan aims to transform China into a "first-class football superpower" by 2050 (*General Office of the State Council, 2015*)<sup>[18]</sup>. Key targets include:

- 20,000 football schools by 2020; 50,000 by 2025
- 70,000 football pitches nationwide by 2020; 100,000 by 2025
- 30 million students playing football regularly by 2020
- Qualify for and host a FIFA World Cup
- Develop 16-18 "key football cities" with comprehensive football infrastructure by 2025

The plan emphasizes "international collaborations" and "partnerships with European clubs" to "facilitate knowledge transfer and provide Chinese clubs with access to advanced training facilities and methodologies". Cameroon, with its proven football excellence and competitive African environment, represents an ideal partner for fulfilling these international collaboration objectives.

Cameroon's Football Development Needs. While Cameroon lacks a published comprehensive national football strategy comparable to China's, observable priorities include:

- Infrastructure modernization to meet CAF and FIFA standards
- Youth talent development systems to maximize the country's abundant football talent
- Coaching education and professionalization
- Women's football development (Cameroon's women's team, the "Indomitable Lionesses," has competed in multiple World Cups and Olympics)
- Revenue generation through football to achieve financial sustainability
- Governance reforms to combat corruption and improve administration

Strategic Alignment. A bilateral football cooperation agreement could explicitly align Chinese and Cameroonian objectives:

- **China gains:** Access to Cameroonian coaching expertise, player talent, competitive playing environments for Chinese youth teams, and partnership with an African football power enhancing China's global football profile
- **Cameroon gains:** Infrastructure investment addressing critical development constraints, access to Chinese sports technology and equipment, educational opportunities for players and coaches, and commercial partnerships generating revenue

- **Mutual gains:** Strengthened bilateral relations, enhanced cultural understanding, youth development opportunities, and models of South-South cooperation demonstrable to other nations

#### d. Follow-up Mechanisms

To ensure the longevity and success of these initiatives, a permanent institutional body is required. A “China-Cameroon Joint Committee on Football Cooperation,” co-chaired by high-level officials should be established. This committee would be responsible for overseeing the implementation of FOCAC and BRI-related projects, monitoring progress, and resolving challenges. By anchoring football cooperation within these powerful multilateral frameworks and creating a dedicated bilateral mechanism to manage it, China and Cameroon can ensure their partnership transcends symbolic gestures, becoming a durable and mutually beneficial pillar of their overall strategic relationship.

### 5. Strategic Importance: Sports Diplomacy, Mutual Benefits, and Broader Objectives

#### a. Sports Diplomacy and Soft Power Projection

Sports diplomacy— *“the unique power of sport to bring people, nations, and communities closer together via a shared love of physical pursuits”*—has become a central tool in contemporary international relations. Football, as the world’s most popular sport, provides particularly powerful diplomatic opportunities, serving as *“an effective non-traditional tool for diplomatic engagement, transcending cultural and political boundaries”* (Amir Mahdi. Alavi, 2024) <sup>[19]</sup>. The football cooperation between China and Cameroon functions as a strategic exercise in sports diplomacy, yielding significant diplomatic capital for both nations. This partnership transcends the athletic sphere to become an instrument of soft power, enhancing their respective international standings and strengthening bilateral ties.

#### 1. China’s Sports Diplomacy Objectives

China employs sports diplomacy to:

- Project soft power and enhance China’s global image
- Demonstrate China’s modernization and developmental achievements
- Build relationships with developing nations through sports assistance and exchange
- Counter negative perceptions by showcasing China’s constructive international engagement
- Create people-to-people connections complementing government-to-government relations

Football specifically aligns with President Xi Jinping’s personal interest and the government’s strategic objectives of becoming a “football powerhouse.” Successful cooperation with established football nations like Cameroon demonstrates China’s commitment and progress, enhancing China’s reputation in global football governance and potentially influencing FIFA and AFC decision-making.

#### 2. Cameroon’s Sports Diplomacy Objectives:

Cameroon utilizes sports diplomacy to:

- Showcase Cameroonian excellence and national pride through football achievements

- Attract foreign investment and development assistance
- Build bilateral relationships supporting broader economic and political objectives
- Position Cameroon as a regional leader and model for African football development
- Generate positive international publicity enhancing Cameroon’s global profile

Football therefore represents Cameroon’s most powerful soft power asset. Leveraging this asset through strategic partnerships with major powers like China maximizes returns from Cameroon’s football heritage.

### 3. Mutual Diplomatic Benefits

By fostering goodwill and mutual understanding through a shared passion for the sport, the collaboration creates a positive political atmosphere that can be leveraged to support broader foreign policy and economic objectives for both China and Cameroon. The diplomatic capital generated for both nations could be listed as followed:

- **Demonstrates South-South Cooperation:** As both developing nations, successful cooperation showcases alternative development models outside traditional North-South aid paradigms
- **Creates Positive Narratives:** Media coverage of successful partnership projects generates positive publicity countering skeptical narratives about China-Africa relations
- **Facilitates High-Level Engagement:** Football events (tournament openings, friendly matches, facility inaugurations) provide occasions for presidential and ministerial diplomacy, reinforcing bilateral ties
- **Builds Popular Support:** Unlike abstract diplomatic agreements, football cooperation directly engages popular enthusiasm, creating grassroots support for bilateral relations.
- **Provides Conflict Mitigation Mechanisms:** Sports exchanges maintain communication channels and positive engagement even during periods of diplomatic tension in other domains

#### b. Economic Dimensions and Commercial Opportunities

Beyond diplomatic benefits, football cooperation creates tangible economic opportunities:

**Infrastructure Construction Contracts:** Chinese construction companies gain profitable contracts for stadium and training facility construction, providing employment for Chinese workers and markets for Chinese equipment manufacturers. The \$44.2 million Limbe and Bafoussam stadium contracts exemplify such opportunities (Mbajon Vanessa, 2019) <sup>[20]</sup>. Expanded cooperation could generate hundreds of millions of dollars in construction contracts over coming decades.

**Sports Industry Development:** Football cooperation stimulates sports industry growth in both countries:

- **Merchandising:** Chinese manufacturers could produce official Cameroon national team merchandise, while

Cameroonian-themed products could be marketed to Chinese consumers

- **Broadcasting:** Chinese sports broadcasters (CCTV Sports, Tencent Sports, Alibaba Sports) could acquire rights to Cameroonian league matches, introducing Chinese audiences to African football, while Cameroonian broadcasters could show CSL matches
- **Sponsorship:** Chinese companies could sponsor Cameroonian clubs and national teams, gaining brand exposure in African markets, while Cameroonian companies could engage Chinese markets through football
- **Tourism:** Football tourism could develop, with Chinese football enthusiasts visiting Cameroon for matches and Cameroonians traveling to China for tournaments, benefiting hospitality and tourism industries

**Player Transfers and Agent Fees:** Commercial intermediaries facilitate player movements between countries, generating agent fees, transfer payments, and related financial transactions. While individual transactions may be modest, cumulative flows could become significant.

**Technology Transfer and Innovation:** Cooperation in sports technology creates opportunities for:

- Chinese technology companies to establish African operations providing sports analytics, performance monitoring, and digital services
- Joint ventures between Chinese and Cameroonian companies developing sports technology products for African markets
- Intellectual property generation through collaborative research producing innovations marketable globally

**Employment Generation:** Infrastructure projects, sports programs, and administrative exchanges create employment for Chinese and Cameroonian workers, coaches, administrators, technical staff, and support personnel. China's pledge to create jobs for African populations is fulfilled through such initiatives, with Chinese enterprises having "created more than 1.1 million jobs (in Africa) in just the past three years" (Ngozi Egenuka, 2025) <sup>[21]</sup>.

### c. Geopolitical Ties Strategic Partnership on the Global Stage

Football cooperation serves as an entry point for broader strategic engagement:

**Enhancing Overall China-Cameroon Relations:** Sports cooperation strengthens comprehensive bilateral ties. In 2024, China and Cameroon elevated their relationship to a Global Strategic Partnership during the FOCAC Beijing Summit. Football initiatives operationalize this elevated partnership through tangible cooperation projects building mutual trust and understanding.

**Demonstrating BRI Success:** Successful football infrastructure projects provide visible, popular BRI achievements contrasting with criticism of "debt trap diplomacy." Well-functioning stadiums hosting major

tournaments that generate economic and social benefits demonstrate BRI's positive developmental impact.

**Supporting China's Africa Policy:** China positions itself as Africa's development partner supporting African Union Agenda 2063 and continental integration. Football cooperation demonstrates commitment to African development priorities (youth employment, infrastructure, cultural development) beyond extractive resource relationships.

**Triangular Benefits Through Regional Integration:** Cameroon is part of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC). Football infrastructure in Cameroon benefits the entire sub-region, as stadiums host regional tournaments and training facilities serve athletes from neighboring countries. This regional multiplier effect enhances China's reputation throughout Central Africa.

**Creating Models for Replication:** Successful China-Cameroon football cooperation provides templates for similar initiatives with other African nations (Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa), scaling impact across the continent. Cameroon could serve as a pilot project with lessons learned applied to subsequent partnerships.

## 6. Challenges and Risk Mitigation

While the opportunities for collaboration are significant, it is equally important to recognize and proactively address the associated challenges. A comprehensive approach requires not only leveraging the potential benefits but also identifying and mitigating obstacles that could hinder the effectiveness or sustainability of the partnership. This balanced perspective ensures that progress is both meaningful and resilient in the face of evolving complexities.

**Financial Sustainability:** Infrastructure projects must be economically sustainable to avoid burdening Cameroon with unsustainable debt. The example of the Paul Biya Stadium in Olembé, which "has remained empty and its construction incomplete" with "no economic activity" since the 2021 AFCON, illustrates risks of white elephant projects (Fanta Mabo, 2025) <sup>[22]</sup>.

### Mitigation strategies include

- Rigorous feasibility studies ensuring projects generate sufficient revenue to service debts
- Designing multi-purpose facilities serving sports, conferences, concerts, and community events
- Implementing professional facility management from inception
- Including commercial components (hotels, shopping centers) generating operating revenues

**Cultural Sensitivity and Local Participation:** Chinese projects sometimes face criticism for insufficient local labor employment or cultural insensitivity. The Yanda community's displacement for stadium construction and lack of compensation exemplifies risks. In fact, the *Yanda people*, a long-settled ethnic community in *Olembé*, Cameroon, had their ancestral lands expropriated by the government for the construction of a 60,000-seat sports

complex. Despite Cameroon's support for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which protects such lands, the community's promised compensation has not materialized over a decade later (*Fanta Mabo, 2025*).



**Fig 4:** A 2018 image of the Paul Biya stadium under construction on the site where the Yanda community says their ancestors are buried. Image by Nana Padrino via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

#### Mitigation requires

- Mandatory environmental and social impact assessments with community consultation
- Ensuring fair compensation for displaced communities with formal titling processes
- Maximizing local labor and materials in construction (training programs could reduce dependency on imports, fostering self-sufficiency in African construction industries)
- Respecting local customs and involving local stakeholders in project design

**Governance and Corruption Risks:** Both Chinese and Cameroonian football have experienced corruption issues. China's recent anti-corruption campaign has targeted football officials, while African football has faced persistent governance challenges. Mitigation strategies include:

- Transparent procurement processes with international oversight
- Anti-corruption clauses in cooperation agreements with penalties for violations
- Third-party monitoring of project implementation
- Capacity building for governance institutions in both countries

**Geopolitical Sensitivities:** China-Africa cooperation faces skepticism from some Western powers concerned about Chinese influence. Cameroon must navigate relations with traditional partners (EU, USA, RUSSIA) while engaging China. Managing this requires:

- Framing cooperation as complementary to, not replacing, existing partnerships
- Ensuring transparency in agreements dispelling "hidden agenda" concerns
- Maintaining strategic autonomy, with Cameroon defining its own priorities rather than blindly accepting Chinese proposals
- Diversifying partnerships to avoid over-dependence on any single partner

#### 7. Policy Recommendations for Enhanced Cooperation

To maximize the potential of China-Cameroon football cooperation, specific policy initiatives should be pursued at multiple levels including:

#### Institutional Framework

- Establish a China-Cameroon Football Cooperation Commission with representation from both governments, football federations, clubs, and civil society to oversee implementation of cooperation agreements
- Create dedicated liaison offices in both countries' football federations with staff responsible for coordinating bilateral initiatives
- Institute annual bilateral football summits alternating between China and Cameroon to review progress, address challenges, and plan future initiatives

#### Financial and Investment Policies

- Negotiate concessional loan packages specifically for football infrastructure through China Exim Bank or China Development Bank
- Establish tax incentives for Chinese companies investing in Cameroonian football and Cameroonian entities operating in China
- Create joint investment funds combining Chinese capital, Cameroonian government contributions, and private sector investment for sustainable football development projects
- Develop insurance and guarantee mechanisms to mitigate risks for investors and ensure project completion

#### Regulatory Facilitation

- Implement special visa categories for athletes, coaches, and technical staff facilitating easier movement between countries
- Create mutual recognition frameworks for coaching certifications, allowing coaches qualified in one country to practice in the other
- Establish player transfer protocols simplifying administrative processes for player movements between Chinese and Cameroonian clubs
- Develop broadcast rights frameworks ensuring Cameroonian and Chinese broadcasters can access each other's football content

#### Educational and Cultural Policies

- Integrate football exchange programs into existing educational cooperation frameworks between Chinese and Cameroonian universities
- Establish scholarship programs for Cameroonian football coaches and administrators to study sports management in Chinese universities
- Create Chinese language training programs for Cameroonian football personnel and French/English programs for Chinese personnel
- Develop joint research programs between Chinese and Cameroonian sports science institutions investigating topics of mutual interest (altitude training, tropical climate preparation, talent identification methodologies)

#### Conclusion: A Vision for Transformative Partnership

This analysis has addressed the strategic importance, mutual benefits, and forward-looking prospects of China-Cameroon football cooperation based on the available research. China-Cameroon football cooperation represents a compelling case study in South-South collaboration, sports

diplomacy, and strategic development partnership. Cameroon's "Indomitable Lions" embody football excellence forged through decades of competitive success, producing legendary players and achieving historic milestones that have inspired African football. This rich heritage constitutes invaluable expertise—in coaching methodologies, player development, competitive psychology, and tactical sophistication—that could significantly accelerate China's ambition to become a global football powerhouse.

China, pursuing its ambitious 2015-2050 Football Reform Plan with unprecedented financial resources and political commitment, possesses the capacity to address Cameroon's critical infrastructure deficits. Through stadium construction, training center development, equipment provision, and technology transfer, China can help Cameroon unlock its vast football potential constrained by inadequate facilities. This reciprocal exchange creates a foundation for genuine partnership transcending donor-recipient dynamics.

The institutional frameworks provided by FOCAC and the Belt and Road BRI offer proven mechanisms for elevating football cooperation from ad hoc initiatives to strategic partnership. FOCAC's emphasis on people-to-people exchanges and the BRI's infrastructure connectivity align perfectly with football cooperation's dual nature as both cultural exchange and infrastructure development. Policy initiatives integrating football into these frameworks, supported by dedicated financing mechanisms and institutional structures, can transform cooperation from aspiration to implementation.

The strategic importance of this partnership extends far beyond football. Sports diplomacy builds people-to-people connections undergirding broader bilateral relations. Economic opportunities in construction, sports industries, broadcasting, and tourism generate tangible benefits for both nations. Most fundamentally, successful cooperation demonstrates possibilities for South-South collaboration based on mutual respect, complementarity, and shared development objectives.

The ultimate measure of success will not be counting stadiums built or coaches exchanged, but transforming lives—of young Cameroonians gaining opportunities through improved football pathways, of Chinese players achieving international competitiveness through enhanced training, of communities enriched by modern facilities serving sports and social functions, and of two nations bound closer through shared passion for the beautiful game. In this transformative partnership lies potential not only for football development but for demonstrating how developing nations can collaborate to achieve mutual prosperity and shared dreams. The time for action is now; the foundation is firm; the prospects are limitless.

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