

## REPORT ON THE MASTER THESIS

GPS – Geopolitical Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

|                                |                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Title of the thesis:</b>    | China's Debt Trap Diplomacy in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A case study of a failed state (2006-2023) through Neoclassical Geopolitics |
| <b>Author of the thesis:</b>   | Pauline Lempereur                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Referee (incl. titles):</b> | Nuno Morgado, Ph.D.                                                                                                                          |

**Remark:** It is a standard at the FSV UK that the Referee's Report is at least 500 words long. In case you will assess the thesis as "non-defendable", please explain the concrete reasons for that in detail.

### **SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED** (for details, see below):

| <b>CATEGORY</b>                         | <b>POINTS</b> |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Theoretical background (max. 20)</i> | 20            |
| <i>Contribution (max. 20)</i>           | 15            |
| <i>Methods (max. 20)</i>                | 15            |
| <i>Literature (max. 20)</i>             | 15            |
| <i>Manuscript form (max. 20)</i>        | 7             |
| <b>TOTAL POINTS (max. 100)</b>          | <b>72</b>     |
| <b>The proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F)</b> | <b>C</b>      |

**Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings (following the 5 numbered aspects of your assessment indicated below).**

#### **1) Theoretical background:**

Pauline holds a very good knowledge of the model of neoclassical geopolitics within the Geopolitics and IR debate – especially when compared with the neoclassical realist theory of international politics. She applied the model successfully in this work, and, therefore, she is comfortable dealing with this methodological approach, its variables, concepts, and predictions.

#### **2) Contribution:**

I agree with the (realist) idea or assumption that great powers tend to seek extension of their influence in the international chessboard, and the case of China's influence over the DRC is a clear-cut case of that. The disappearance of a colonial tutor, the lack of infrastructures, the corruption of the political class, the existence of valuable resources, the vastness of a territory and its central position, and the mismanagement or collapse of the administrative system are elements of potential and systemic constraints that create an almost ideal pool of conditions to invite a great power to exert influence over a certain territory. Especially China, which is referred to in a vast amount of literature as having ambitions to become the global hegemon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The thesis is a good empirical contribution to sustain this general argument, and it includes important possibilities (even predictions).

However, one of the main weaknesses of the thesis is the confusion of categories, considering debt trap diplomacy as a soft power instrument (p.11). Economic relations fall under the category of hard power tools (I have called Pauline's attention to this fact in the first revision of the Introduction).

Despite this weakness, the thesis does a good job of characterizing the case study, and the application of the theory suggests the correct assessment that not all the variables have the same weight in all the cases.

I finally evaluate the content of this thesis as a good contribution to the cutting-edge agenda of studies in neoclassical geopolitics.

### **3) Methods:**

Pauline appropriately followed the set of methodological steps that cascaded from the theoretical approach. However, I am still missing some specific methodological techniques that she used to conduct the research (e.g., content analysis).

The hypotheses are coherent with the RQs and the general argument of the thesis, but they could have been a little more ambitious by being contradictory and offering alternative explanations.

Still, they are sufficient to guide the thesis, and their confirmation adds to persuading the reader about the main argument of the work.

### **4) Literature:**

It is clear that Pauline has a very good knowledge of the literature on the model of neoclassical geopolitics.

Other sources on debt trap diplomacy, DRC politics, and rare earths were appropriate too.


Still, I believe that some more scientific articles and books could have been added to make the body of the literature even stronger.

### **5) Manuscript form:**

The structure of the work is rational, compact, and coherent, from the analysis of the theoretical literature to the conclusions. The entire thesis was built on a solid theoretical axis, which is the backbone of the text.

However, the presentation of the text is insufficient. Whereas this final version of the thesis is far better than the initial versions I was given to read – and despite my recommendations and warnings – the final text could still use a final proofreading to make some sentences/terms clearer, the text more fluid and easier to follow, and to avoid misspelling and the malposition of technical concepts (e.g. “*geopolitical strategy*”)

**DATE OF EVALUATION:** 17.06.2024

  
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**Referee Signature**

**The referee should give comments to the following requirements:**

**1) THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:** Can you recognize that the thesis was guided by some **theoretical fundamentals** relevant for this thesis topic? Were some important theoretical concepts omitted? Was the theory used in the thesis consistently incorporated with the topic and hypotheses tested?

Strong                      Average                      Weak  
20                              10                              0                      points

**2) CONTRIBUTION:** Evaluate if the author presents **original ideas** on the topic and aims at demonstrating **critical thinking** and ability to draw conclusions based on the knowledge of relevant theory and relevant empirical material. Is there a distinct **value added** of the thesis (relative to knowledge of a university-educated person interested in given topic)? Did the author explain **why** the observed phenomena occurred? Were the policy implications well founded?

Strong                      Average                      Weak  
20                              10                              0                      points

**3) METHODS:** Are the **hypotheses** for this study clearly stated, allowing their further verification and testing? Are the theoretical explanations, empirical material and **analytical tools** used in the thesis relevant to the research question being investigated, and adequate to the aspiration level of the study? Is the thesis **topic comprehensively analyzed** and does the thesis not make trivial or irrelevant detours off the main body stated in the thesis proposal? More than 10 points signal an exceptional work, **which requires your explanation "why" it is so**.

Strong                      Average                      Weak  
20                              10                              0                      points

**4) LITERATURE REVIEW:** The thesis demonstrates author's full understanding and **command of recent literature**. The author quotes relevant literature in a proper way and disposes with a representative bibliography. (Remark: references to Wikipedia, websites and newspaper articles are a sign of **poor research**). If they dominate you cannot give more than 8 points. References to books published by prestigious publishers and articles in renowned journals give much better impression.

Strong                      Average                      Weak  
20                              10                              0                      points

**5) MANUSCRIPT FORM:** The thesis is **clear and well structured**. The author uses appropriate language and style, including academic **format** for quotations, graphs and tables. The text effectively refers to graphs and tables, is easily readable and **stimulates thinking**.

Strong                      Average                      Weak  
20                              10                              0                      points

**Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:**

| TOTAL POINTS | GRADE    | Czech grading                        |
|--------------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| 91 – 100     | <b>A</b> | = excellent                          |
| 81 - 90      | <b>B</b> | = good                               |
| 71 – 80      | <b>C</b> | = satisfactory                       |
| 61 - 70      | <b>D</b> | = satisfactory                       |
| 51 - 60      | <b>E</b> |                                      |
| 0            | <b>F</b> | = fail (not recommended for defence) |