Simandou 2040:
A Case Study in Infrastructural Geoeconomics

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On 17 January 2026, General Mamady Doumbouya was sworn in as Guinea's head of state, five years after taking control in a coup d'état. Since 2021, he had been facing a challenge to appease popular discontent over the state's handling of mineral resources. His predecessor, President Alpha Condé, had attempted to develop the infrastructure necessary to exploit bauxite, alumina, gold, and iron-ore resources by requiring foreign mining companies to invest in billion-dollar projects. Yet, despite strong foreign appetite for Guinean resources, these projects failed to alleviate poverty, fuelling popular discontent and contributing to the military coup. Against this backdrop, General Mamady Doumbouya sought to solidify his legitimacy by leveraging geoeconomic competition between foreign powers over Guinea's substantial iron-ore resources. Specifically, he targeted the Simandou 2040 project to regain economic sovereignty and create economic benefits for the broader population. As such, the project is a laboratory for African countries' agency in the face of great powers' geoeconomic competition.

Simandou 2040 is the largest mineral extraction project in history.[1] With its estimated cost of 23 billion dollars, it is expected to reshape the domestic political economy of a country that is new to large-scale iron-ore exports and disrupt global iron-ore supply dynamics. Guinea exported negligible iron ore volumes prior to Simandou's ramp-up, but, according to CRU estimates, it will climb to the third-largest iron ore exporter (after Australia and Brazil) in just five years, in a market that today is worth 171 billion dollars[2]. Given Guinea's limited fiscal resources, the project has been highly dependent on foreign investment and on the strategic objectives of external states and firms, both of which are seeking influence over iron-ore supply. Guinea's domestic development strategy unfolds against the backdrop of a new geoeconomic order, in which industrialized economies increasingly compete to secure raw materials supplies. The project requires delicate coordination among many stakeholders, President Doumbouya included.

This essay analyses whether the Guinean government successfully leverages foreign investor competition to ensure that the development of the country's iron-ore industry advances its own development objectives and economic sovereignty. The essay explores how the state manages infrastructure negotiations with foreign investors supporting Simandou 2040, particularly for the railway and port that connect the mine to the sea and are both vital components for the success of the project. Through this case study, the essay also analyses the landscape that low- and middle-income countries must navigate to balance the new wave of geoeconomic tensions centring African countries and other economies across the Global South.

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The main argument developed in the following sections is that geoeconomic competition becomes a source of agency for resource-rich states only under specific conditions. Within the framework of Simandou 2040, the decisive issue is governance of the corridor that links extraction to export. Guinea's room for manoeuvre depends on its capacity to govern the railway and port system: where such rule-setting capacity is credible, external competition can be channelled into bargaining leverage and developmental gains; where it is not, the same competition risks consolidating into new forms of dependence. The remainder of this essay is structured as follows: section II describes the project and the main actors involved; section III gives a theoretical framework to navigate the proposed case and suggests a policy path for Guinea based on regional experiences; section IV concludes.

Simandou 2040

The history of the Simandou project begins with Rio Tinto. The Anglo-Australian company obtained in 1997 the right to explore the Southeastern Guinea's Simandou mountain range, a difficult terrain in a remote, forested area. From the total control of extraction to today's 25% participation in the project, many allegations of corruption and legal disputes have changed the influences over this resource hub. First Lansana Conté gave half of the mine to BSG Resources, an Israeli company run by Beny Steinmetz, who was later sentenced to five years' imprisonment for bribery of Guinean officials by a Swiss court [3]. Before legal actions were taken, BSG had already sold the shares to Brazilian mining company Vale. After a period of stagnation, Winning Consortium Simandou (WCS), a Chinese and Singaporean company, accelerated construction for the railway expected to connect the mine to the coast. With the entry of Chinese-linked partners, the project's final structure consisted of four blocks split between two consortia. In the South, Blocks 3 and 4 are held through the SimFer joint venture: Simfer S.A. (the licence holder) is owned 15% by the Government of Guinea and 85% by Simfer Jersey Limited, itself a joint venture between Rio Tinto (53%) and Chalco Iron Ore Holdings (47%). The latter is a Chinalco-led vehicle composed of other Chinese SOEs.

In the north, Blocks 1 and 2 are held by Winning Consortium Simandou (WCS), with the Government of Guinea holding a 15% interest in the mining vehicle and WCS holding 85%; WCS is led by Winning International Group and Weiqiao Aluminium (China Hongqiao) together with Baowu Resources. The rail-and-port system is structured separately from the mines: once commissioned, the co-developed infrastructure and rolling stock are transferred to Compagnie du TransGuinéen (CTG), the operating company in which SimFer and WCS each hold 42.5% and the Guinean state holds 15%[4].

As it stands, the project is a complex mix of diverse interests and international pressures, all aimed at obtaining the largest share of benefits from this mine. It is worth briefly examining these interests. First of all, Rio Tinto. Already the biggest iron ore extracting company, Simandou's mine would expand Rio Tinto's share of seaborne iron ore and strengthen its market position, especially with the recent discussions over a possible merger with Glencore[5].

Chinese interests are represented by Chinalco and the Winning Consortium, which seek to increase trade security of raw materials, especially for steelmaking. A healthy relationship with the Guinean government could grant them access both to bauxite and iron ore, the main ingredients in steel

production. These dynamics could also tip the balance in favour of Chinese manufacturing companies, which have been forced to act as price-takers on the iron ore market [6].

Finally, Guinea seeks to avoid the fate of other resource-endowed countries that have discovered substantial, lucrative reserves, only to fall for the (in)famous resource curse. A projected global price decline associated with oversupply on the international market could prevent Guinea and the private companies from recovering capital costs. Corruption and political distress are other common risks that always lurk behind such projects. The government thus plans to avoid the "Dutch disease" by creating a sovereign wealth fund headed by a foreign national, with a major share of the revenues to be directed towards education. This is closely followed by infrastructure and energy investments, all long-term, growth-spurring fields. Another step is to convince investors to build iron ore refineries in Guinea, thereby localising important phases of the value chain and moving closer to becoming an industrial, steel producing country [7].

The local population may also be influential. Although the president and the project both currently enjoy high levels of public support, the situation may change. In particular, support may weaken once the construction boom ends and demobilisation begins, with an expected difference between required workers for the construction phase and operational jobs in the order of 35 to 45 thousand people [8]. If the project fails to retain local workers, or, worse, if foreign workers replace the locals, there could be dire political costs. The construction stage is vulnerable to protests, work stoppages, and corridor blockades.

Simandou 2040 thus holds the promise of substantial economic and social benefits for Guinean populations while being a rich ground for (geo)political and economic tensions. As such, this essay speaks to academic debates focusing on the agency of the Global South government in a geoeconomic age. Guinea's iron-ore mines demonstrate how a low- and middle-income country seeks to develop by leveraging natural resources. For these countries, a vital element in retaining economic and geopolitical agency is the successful governance of the chokepoints through which resources enter global markets. This demands a careful management of foreign participation in extractive and connective infrastructure, ensuring that no single actor becomes non-substitutable.

The path to the sea: governing the corridor, not just owning the ore

When faced with the issue of allocating infrastructure contracts, the Guinean government opted for a hedging approach. American-owned locomotives, built in India, rattled onto Chinese rail tracks. French signals direct the iron ore towards the sea. When China attempted to bundle some Chinese locomotives together with the shipment of rails, the Guinean government promptly sent them back[9].

This arrangement predated the current regime. Simandou was already politically and institutionally divided before Doumbouya: the southern blocks (3 and 4) were already governed through the Simfer framework, while the northern blocks (1 and 2) followed their separate trajectory; and earlier Guinean pressures had insisted that the railway and port should serve a national-development logic rather than a simple export shortcut. What changed after 2021 was not the existence of a diversification approach, but the state's ability to turn it into leverage. In March 2022 the junta suspended works, explicitly

demanding clarification on how Guinea's interests would be preserved[10]; days later the presidency tied the new framework agreement to a precise timetable backed by penalties up to withdrawal of mining licences[11]; and in July 2022 the parties were folded into La Compagnie du TransGuinéen (CTG), the joint infrastructure vehicle that centralized the co-development of the rail and port and granted the Guinean state a 15 percent stake.

This episode exemplifies the delicate balance around claiming authority over infrastructure and the supply corridor. While the Simandou project is often described primarily in terms of resource extraction, its political economy is particularly revealing when examined through the lens of infrastructure-mediated integration into global markets. Railways, ports, logistics systems, and standards regimes do more than facilitate trade; they are key sources of bargaining power. They condition the distribution of rents, effectively acting as one of the battlefields of geoeconomic influence: in Simandou's case, about 650 km of railways connect the SimFer mine (the furthest out of the two, held by the government, Rio Tinto and Chinalco) to the Morébaya port, also specifically built for iron shipments.

This insight is rooted in a long-standing tradition of political economy scholarship. Albert O. Hirschman's classic analysis of trade dependence already emphasised that power derives not from absolute volumes of trade, but from asymmetric control over points of exchange and exit options [12]. Work on complex interdependence has shown that vulnerability is not evenly distributed across economies, but rather concentrated at specific nodes where flows can be disrupted or redirected [13]. Contemporary geoeconomics relies on these studies, and demonstrates how control over network hubs and chokepoints has become a central instrument of state power, especially in the works of Farrell and Newman [14] and Drezner, Farrell, and Newman [15]. Although their theory was developed mainly through financial and informational networks, the same logic can be extended to material infrastructures, where ports, railways, and logistics corridors function as geoeconomic chokepoints by concentrating control over movement, pricing, tariffs, standards and timing.

Recent scholarship has refined these concepts by focusing explicitly on regional infrastructure hubs and corridors as sites of political contestation. Jana Hönke [16] in particular argues that African ports and transport corridors function as experimental governance spaces in which states, firms, and external actors negotiate authority, often producing fragmented forms of sovereignty. These corridors operate simultaneously as sources of state power and as constraints on it: they offer leverage over global flows, but they can also lock countries into enclave-like forms of dependency.

This literature shifts attention from resource ownership to the governance of resource mobilization. When states retain the capacity to regulate access and prevent exclusive control, chokepoints can be transformed into instruments of strategic agency. At the same time, corridors can easily become the target of de facto privatizations or fall under external control, thus tending to reproduce dependency even under conditions of competition. A practical illustration is Nigeria's Lekki Deep Sea Port, where a 45-year Build, Own, Operate and Transfer (BOOT) concession left control with a foreign consortium led by China Harbour Engineering Company and Tolaram, holding 75 percent of the equity, while a US$629 million China Development Bank loan helped finance the project. Formally national, the

asset's governance was nonetheless substantially externalized, showing how strategic infrastructure can reproduce dependence even without formal alienation of sovereignty [17].

From this perspective, strategies such as "hedging" or "diversification" acquire a more practical meaning. Effective hedging depends on domestic rule-setting capacity, meaning the ability to impose constraints on investors and manage distributional conflicts at home. Without such capacity, partner competition risks degenerating into what appears as choice but functions as constraint, with states navigating between alternatives they do not fully control [18].

Applied to Simandou 2040, this framework explains why the governance of rail, port, and logistics systems is central to Guinea's geoeconomic trajectory, and why having a strong and credible government is of vital importance. The project's significance lies in its contribution to global iron ore supply, but domestic gains will depend on Guinea's ability to manage the corridor, discipline external actors, stabilize revenues, and generate spillovers.

Alongside Guinea's formal participation in the project, a key issue is its ability to keep the corridor rule-based and contestable over time. This requires more than an initial bargaining success or a diversified set of foreign partners: it requires a very practical capacity to prevent technical lock-in, regulate access and pricing, and preserve enough domestic legitimacy that the railway and port do not become either a foreign-controlled enclave or a focal point of social disruption. The remainder of this section examines the corridor design features that would allow Guinea to preserve autonomy over the project, using insights from other experiences in the region.

Defining "control" in practice: rules, interoperability, and exit options

In geoeconomic terms, control over a corridor rarely comes from equity stakes alone. It comes from the capacity to set and enforce rules that govern access (who can use the rail/port and under what conditions), standards and interoperability (whether the system can switch suppliers, integrate components, and avoid technical lock-ins), pricing and allocation (tariffs, scheduling priority, capacity allocation), and dispute settlement (where conflicts are adjudicated). If the government lacks control over these channels, it may lose control over the infrastructures; losing control over the infrastructures can cause a series of both short- and long-term difficulties [19].

To begin with, external influences can be hard to manage and result in enclave-like systems. The Djibouti–Ethiopia standard gauge railway, financed and built largely by Chinese state-owned enterprises, is an example of this. Studies of its operation show that the line improved connectivity, but also entrenched external operational control through management contracts, technology standards, financing and operational dependencies that constrained renegotiation of tariffs and independence [20].

A different but complementary illustration is the Berbera port in Somaliland, where DP World obtained a 30-year concession in 2016 and initially took a 65 percent stake; after Ethiopia joined in 2018, DP World retained 51 percent, while Somaliland held 30 percent and Ethiopia 19 percent, within a project framed as a broader US$442 million port-and-corridor investment [21]. The case is analytically useful not only because it placed a strategic gateway under long-term foreign influence and technical

dependency, but because it linked infrastructure geoeconomics to disputes over Somaliland's legitimacy: port governance became inseparable from wider diplomatic struggles over recognition and territorial authority [22].

Managing domestic stakeholders can also prove challenging. Guinea itself has already had difficulties in balancing this equilibrium during the bauxite boom: in the Boké region, grievances over land, dust, compensation, jobs, electricity, and water repeatedly escalated into disruptions of mining logistics, showing how quickly corridor infrastructure becomes the most effective target when the distribution of costs and benefits is perceived as unjust. Episodes of discontent have included roadblocks and attacks on mining-related assets: protesters have also blocked rail lines and attacked logistics assets to prevent ore transport to the port.[23]

Finally, an instructive contrast: the Maputo Development Corridor shows how a state can use public–private partnerships to retain strategic oversight. South Africa and Mozambique jointly structured concession agreements with transparent tariff regimes and dispute-resolution mechanisms set in domestic law. Research on the corridor highlights that this institutional design allowed both governments to attract investment while maintaining regulatory control and ensuring local economic spillovers.[24]

These West African and Sub-Saharan cases support the thesis that extraction is politicised and externally leveraged through corridors. Corridors most clearly reveal the costs; such as land loss, employment volatility, and dependency; and benefits; including jobs, public goods, and fiscal revenue; of natural resource extraction projects. Whenever the judgment turns negative, corridors are disrupted because it is the fastest route to leverage. When governance is weak, external and internal actors can capture the corridor via technical and operational measures and protests. When institutions are strong, the corridor can become a platform for negotiated development.

Solutions for Simandou: Corridor Governance and Strategic Autonomy

Guinea should aim to maintain infrastructure agency by asking: what types of rules and institutional designs reduce lock-in and the risk of the corridor becoming a geopolitical or domestic hostage?

a) Technical contestability

The practical goal is interoperability and supplier substitutability. Concretely, this means procurement that avoids single-vendor systems for critical components, contractual requirements for open standards, maintenance and data access provisions that prevent operational dependency, and periodic retendering for specific segments (signalling upgrades, rolling stock servicing) to keep credible outside options. The logic is already visible in Guinea's approach: diversification functions as an insurance policy against concentrated dependencies.

b) Economic contestability

A corridor becomes captive when access and pricing are privately internalized. A rule-based corridor therefore needs enforceable provisions on who has access rights, how tariffs are set and revised,

capacity allocation rules and transparency. Even if Simandou's rail is initially "purpose-built," credible third-party use rules (or at a minimum, credible state step-in rights, such as with CTG, and tariff review mechanisms) reduce the risk that the corridor becomes a private state-within-a-state. The Guinean government is actively trying to avoid this risk. Using the words of Djiba Diakite, chairman of the Simandou 2040 Strategic Committee: "The infrastructure is not only for mining. The railway is also expected to open corridors for agriculture, other resource sectors such as transport and trade, […] which widens the effect beyond ore alone" [25].

c) Social contestability

West African experience suggests that chokepoint governance fails when the corridor lacks social legitimacy. Here control depends on the political capacity to manage expectations around the project, distributional effects and especially employment transitions. Two design features matter in practice: a credible benefit channel to corridor-adjacent communities and a labour transition strategy that anticipates the post-construction employment drop. Recent reporting on Simandou's demobilisation underscores this risk: large-scale layoffs after the construction peak can increase the probability that resentment attaches to the corridor as the most visible (and attackable) symbol of extraction [26].

Returning to Doumbouya's role, corridor governance requires credible enforcement capacity, and this is only possible in today's Guinea through a strong and credible government. The Simandou 2040 case illustrates the central importance of governing the infrastructure that connects resources to markets. The analysis has shown that preserving control over these assets demands political authority and the capacity to withstand external pressures. At the same time, rivalry among external actors creates opportunities for Guinea to preserve bargaining leverage and avoid dependence on any single partner. In this light, Simandou is a test of whether geoeconomic rivalry can be managed through infrastructure governance. The decisive question is whether Guinea can attract powerful external partners while keeping the corridor open to substitution, subject to public rules, and politically governable beyond the construction boom. If these conditions hold, the railway and port may become instruments of national integration and structural development rather than mere tools for ore exports. If they do not, the same infrastructures risk consolidating into a new architecture of dependence.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that intensifying geoeconomic competition does not automatically increase or reduce the agency of Global South states, but reshapes it in ways that depend on how states govern the infrastructural chokepoints linking domestic resources to global markets. While great-power rivalry may widen the set of potential partners, it also heightens the risks of technical lock-in and infrastructural dependency. Agency, in this context, is the capacity to translate external competition into enforceable domestic rules governing access, expectations, tariffs, spillovers and use.

The case of Simandou 2040 is a well-fitted example of this conditional logic. Beyond its sheer scale or its impact on global iron ore markets, Simandou's significance lies in the governance of the corridor that connects extraction to export. Whether the project evolves into a platform for national integration

or consolidates an extraction economy will depend less on the number of external actors involved and more on the durability and credibility of rule-based corridor governance.

As great powers increasingly pursue industrial resilience through trade policy and supply-chain reconfiguration, the politics of chokepoints is likely to become a critical feature of the global economy. For many Global South states, the stakes will not lie in securing access to resources alone, but in governing the corridors through which those resources are integrated into global systems. The future of geoeconomic agency, therefore, could be shaped less by grand alignments than by the daily politics of access and enforcement along the railway of globalisation.

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