

A Theoretic Analysis of Key Issues and Challenges in Nigeria-China Relations

Jacob Babajide Eyitayo Adewumi & Oluranti Ayomola

Abstract

Foreign relations, often known as international diplomacy, have the primary objective of advancing a country's interests and managing its relationships with other international actors. In this regard, Nigeria and China established official relations in 1971, although contacts between them dated long before that period. The relationship has since grown to encompass major areas of mutual economic, strategic, trade, and infrastructure cooperation. However, much of the controversies trailing most analysis on Nigeria-China relations revolve around Beijing's role as "development partner", or "neo-colonizer" in Nigeria. This paper investigated some contentious issues in Nigeria-China relations. The paper adopted a qualitative research design supplemented with interview with purposively selected experts in Nigeria's foreign affairs and Nigeria-China relations. Participants were drawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. Interview guide was used for data collection which was thematically analyzed. Anchored on the complex interdependence theory, the paper argued in favour of mutual interdependence of the countries notwithstanding the perceived imbalance in the relationship. The study found that Nigeria-China relations have been both asymmetric and complementary. While Nigeria hopes to replicate China's development trajectory, commercial interests underlie China's partnership and relations with Nigeria. The study concluded that Nigeria-China relations have yielded meaningful gains to both countries. Over the years, the gains manifested in economic, strategic, and other benefits which have also become a subject of controversy in the literature. The study recommended a more deepening of the Nigeria-China relations that focus on addressing the imbalance. Nigeria should exercise agency in its relations with China as co-equals and development partners.

Keywords: China, China-Nigeria, Cooperation, Development, Interdependence

Introduction

Nigeria and China have maintained mutually reinforcing foreign relations since the 1970s with the recognition of the sovereignty of the Communist China. While Nigeria believes that

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political-diplomatic interactions with China would lead to desired economic development through commerce and infrastructural development, Nigeria's natural richness and ready markets for Chinese goods and services attract China to Nigeria. Five decades down the line, observers and analysts are today concerned that Chinese expanded involvement results in adverse balance of trade for Nigeria (Tar & Wapmuk, 2023). China mostly buys raw materials but sell back value-added products. Nwabia (2019) asserted that commercial relations between Nigeria and China have expanded in which China has emerged the greater beneficiary.

The relationship between Nigeria and China, like other African states, is predicated on non-interference and respect for the independent development paths of the parties in "South-South" collaboration. The development of Nigeria-China relations was buoyed by the need to diversify Nigeria's international cooperation which was hitherto Western-centric. Nigeria's imports from China grew significantly in 1997 and have continued to rise since then. The Nigerian government and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) entered into a contract in 1995 for the US\$529 million rehabilitation of the Nigerian railway system (Nesiam, 2013). During the administration of President Obasanjo, relations between Nigeria and China grew amicably and steadily. Two times, in 1999 and 2001, President Olusegun Obasanjo travelled to China to further explore and solidify the two countries' diplomatic ties. Both countries reached agreements bothering on trade, economic, scientific and investment protection as a result of these trips (Page, 2018).

By 2010, ties between Nigeria and China had undergone steady development following high-level cultural exchanges, mutual economic benefits and people-to-people interactions. Ma et al. (2022), quoting the World Bank, reported that the trade in goods between Nigeria and China expanded from around USD 1.2 billion in 2003 to USD 13.7 billion in 2019. Chinese investment in Nigeria climbed from USD 24.4 million to USD 123.27 million within the same time frame, and Nigeria ranked among the top five Chinese investment locations in Africa in 2020. In addition to commerce and investment, China is funding critical development projects through concessional loans and aid. These projects include the construction of roads, railways, and the rehabilitation of Nigeria's four main airports in Abuja, Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt. China has also provided the Nigerian military with tanks and artillery worth millions of dollars (Lamidi, 2020). China is a crucial partner to Nigeria's development financing.

However, the growing presence of China in Nigeria creates major identifiable issues in the literature. Page (2018) posited that Chinese financing and infrastructure contracts are opaque and may foster corruption and other undemocratic tendencies. This arises from the administration of infrastructure loan or aid by Chinese companies which make accountability and public scrutiny difficult. This prompted the Nigerian House of Representatives to move to investigate Chinese loans in May, 2020 after alleging lack of compliance with the Fiscal Responsibility Act (Abuh, 2020; Yakubu, 2020). This move was, however, abandoned. There are also worries that imports of Chinese goods are harmful to the growth of local industries. In the same vein, Nigeria's debt has increased as a result of Chinese development finance, thereby raising the fear of Chinese debt trap. Thus, this paper examined selected contentious issues in literature on Nigeria-China relations.

Theoretical Framework: Complex Interdependence Theory

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in the 1970s developed the complex interdependence theory. The theory explains contemporary international relations and international political

economy in terms of increasingly deep and complex webs of interactions among states and non-state actors. Dynamic and complex transnational interactions characterized by multiple channels of actions increase the possibility of cooperation and understanding, as opposed to military or coercive power, among states. Complex interdependence theory stresses the complex ways in which transnational actors (states and non-states) become mutually dependent, vulnerable to each other's actions and sensitive to each other's needs as a result of growing ties between them (Hussain et al., 2020).

Interdependence does not mean a situation of peace or evenly balanced mutual dependence, but rather a system of "give and take" marked by cooperation and competition. In pursuit of national interest, therefore, Nigeria and China depend on each other on different levels of needs. Complex interdependence is a major critique to the classical and structural realists' claim which explains the behaviour of states only in terms of military or economic capabilities. Keohane and Nye objected to the one-way, rigid, and straight-jacketed view of realism about the international system, noting that transnational and international non-governmental organizations now exert tremendous influence and connections on the behaviour of states (Keohane & Nye, 1987). Thus, rather than military rivalry, states find cooperation in competition for mutual benefits.

Thus, the case of Nigeria and China presents a series of channels for interactions and partnership which enhance mutual cooperation, trust, and benefit between them. These channels include bilateral (state to state) relations, binational (people to people) relations, multilateral relations through the United Nations and African Union, and geopolitics or ideological alignment. Nigeria and China are equally interdependent in the areas of energy, natural resources, human resources, technology, trade, and aid generally. These are the multiple channels connecting the countries in relationship. Both countries have benefitted, and continue to benefit, richly from each other in a mutually dependent order regardless of their relative global power status and influence. Interestingly, typical of interdependence theory, the two countries have deepened relationships on both the realists' high-politics (security cooperation) and low-politics (socio-economic and environmental cooperation) arena of international politics on mutually agreed terms.

Foreign Relations and National Interest

Foreign relations and national interest are twin concepts in international politics. Foreign relations, or trans-border relations, traditionally denotes interactions between and among sovereign states and governments on some defined strategies and objectives. Foreign relations are the manifestation of states' foreign policy outlook. Over the years, the concept of foreign policy has broadened to encompass a multitude of concerns, ranging from trade and human rights to energy security, environmental sustainability, commercial, scientific and cultural undertakings. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, foreign policy is a vital area of study as countries navigate a constantly evolving and intricate global landscape to achieve their national objectives. On a global scale, each country has its own set of goals regarding foreign relations influenced by their national interests, regional contexts, and priorities.

Ostermann and Mello (2022) outlined that states' objectives in foreign relations include promotion of national security. The primary purpose of international relations is to ensure the safety and security of a country's population. This involves conflict prevention, counterterrorism, and managing possible risks from foreign governments or non-state actors.

Countries also have the goal of contributing to global peace and stability through their involvement in activities such as conflict resolution efforts, peacekeeping missions, and mediation processes. Related to this is the protection of state's sovereignty. Countries fiercely uphold the principle of sovereignty in international relations, working tirelessly to protect their territorial integrity and maintain unyielding control over their domestic affairs. Another objective is to secure national economic prosperity. This is a country's propensity to enhance its economic well-being through trade, investment, and access to global markets is a key objective. States strive to facilitate favorable conditions for its industries and businesses to flourish internationally. Therefore, the choice of who to relate with and how to relate in international politics is often conditioned by the national interest of the state however nebulous it is defined. The conduct of foreign relations by states also often reflects the personality and ideology of the leader or the dominant elite class in the state. By conception, national interest denotes the objectives or goals that a state aspires to promote in her foreign policy. The word "national" is an assumption that the goals aggregate the interests of the population, and its achievement serves to benefit the citizenry or the nation. It is important to note that contrary to this assumption, national interest is what the decision makers define it to be, especially in an autocratic regime where the citizens have little to no say in policy formulation and implementation. Thus, the question of what constitutes national interest relates closely to that of who determines it. The broad range of the objectives for relations among states can be summarized in the pursuit of national interest, as whatever a state does in international politics is presumed done in the interest of the state. Promotion and protection of national interest has been described as the primary objective of states' foreign policy (Adewumi & Babajide, 2021). Self-interest remains the fundamental and legitimate cause for national policy. Such "self-interest" a state can achieve in collaboration with other state(s) and international actors.

Nigeria-China Relations

Nigeria and China established formal bilateral relations on February 10, 1971. The two countries have expanded their relations, particularly in bilateral trade and strategic cooperation. China is one of Nigeria's most important trading and export partners. Although Nigeria has trade relations with Taiwan and has a representative office in Taipei, it has reaffirmed in a joint communiqué with China in 2005 that Beijing is the only legitimate government representing the whole of China and that Taiwan is an unalienable part of its territory. In fact, in a show of its commitment to "one China", Nigeria directed the relocation of the Taipei office in Abuja to Lagos in 2017. Nigeria and China maintain diplomatic presence through embassies, consulate and consulate-general. The relationship between the two nations grew closer following Nigeria's isolation and condemnation from Western countries due to its military dictatorships in the 1970s to 1990s.

Nigeria has since become an essential source of oil and petroleum for China's rapidly growing economy, and it is looking to China for assistance in achieving high economic growth. China has provided extensive economic, military, and political support to Nigeria. Taylor (2017) identified that the institutional frameworks for China-Nigeria relations include the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce and its departments, Chinese policy banks (China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China), China's IR think tanks and state-owned enterprises. China is a significant financial backer and options in contrast to different wellsprings of improvement finance like the Global

Money-related Asset (IMF), World Bank and other reciprocal loan specialists. China is now Nigeria's most important bilateral lender (Olajide et al., 2023; Inuwa & Usman, 2023). According to Page (2018, p. 5), "China's strategic interest reflects Nigeria's status as an emerging global power: the largest economy in Africa, a major oil and gas producer, and on track to become the world's third-most populous country by 2050".

Three phases are observable in China-Nigeria relations. These are the ideological enticement of the pre-independence and independence period, the era of widespread diplomatic recognition in the 1970s, and the growing economic partnerships of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Martinez (2015), and Zheng (2016) variously comprehensively categorized Nigeria-China interest into trade, energy, security, and the United Nations. These strategic interests are often conceived as of mutual benefit to both parties, and provide prospects for a win-win progress. Some observers, however, regard China's goals and techniques as self-serving and potentially predatory.

According to Alden (2007) Chinese investment in retail commerce and other economic areas in Nigeria is on the rise. Chinese traders mostly sell light industrial items, textiles, and electrical and electronic devices. Apart from oil and gas, other industries that have benefitted from Chinese investment include construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and services. Chinese expanding influence in Nigeria in the 21st century is a reality. Chinese businesses have become part and parcel, if not the dominant, of the domestic business milieu.

In large projects requiring large capital outlays, such as oil exploration, mining and construction, Chinese businesses have actually become major investors. This impact of Chinese commercial activities on the host country has sparked heated debate among scholars and commentators. In this case, there is a division in this argument between those who see an opportunity for Nigerian development and those who see the increased interaction with China as ongoing exploitation of Nigeria's development goal. This has expanded the debate to establish if Chinese commitment will be that of an improvement partner, financial contender or new authority (Edinger & Pistorius, 2011). Much as these debates are worthwhile, this paper takes a complementary view of the relationship which has engendered positive developments for both countries.

Key Aspects of China-Nigeria Relations

Strategic alliances based on comparative advantage have traditionally characterized relations among countries across the world. This is the foundation upon which Nigeria-China ties were built. The benefits accruing to each country, however, have sparked controversy and criticism. China's political and economic power on the world stage has expanded at an unparalleled rate in this decade (Ngobeni et al., 2023). Ocholi (2023) suggested that this has been made possible by China's "going out" strategy, which resulted in the signing of multiple multilateral and bilateral trade treaties with many nations, notably African countries through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). China has become one of Nigeria's major trade and investment partners, with a focus on infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and trade and investment.

Infrastructure Development

China's investment in Nigeria's infrastructures is one of the most significant benefits of Nigeria- China relations. Chinese organizations have been engaged in the development of basic foundations like roads, rail lines, ports, and air terminals. This has further developed

Nigeria's transportation organizations, working with monetary development and network inside the country. Many significant infrastructural projects in Nigerian are financed by low-interest Chinese loans as a result of China's state-directed participation in key infrastructure and industrial projects. Chinese companies are working on more than \$20 billion in rail construction projects in Nigeria, including new commuter rails in Abuja and Lagos. After decades of stalling and false starts, the \$5.8 billion hydropower Mambilla Dam, built by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and financed mostly by the China Export Import (Exim) Bank, appears to be taking shape. The \$550 million China Energy Engineering Corporation deal with a private Nigerian energy supplier to develop a 400-megawatt gas-fired power station in Sagamu, and the \$200 million Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, built by CCECC were backed by an Exim credit arrangement (Fatima, 2022).

The China Harbor Engineering Company recently broke construction on a \$1.5 billion deepwater harbour complex in Lekki, Lagos, to ease congestion at the adjacent port. The Lekki facility is designed to accommodate 2.7 million containers per year. It is encircled by a massive free-trade zone from which Nigerian and foreign enterprises may operate. Nonetheless, the long-term economic effect of several of these initiatives remains to be evaluated, given their exorbitant costs.

Furthermore, the two communications satellites developed and deployed by China for Nigeria looked to be white elephants and conduits for bureaucratic corruption. Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano gas pipeline, a consortium led by China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau and a Nigerian business, Brentex, would build one leg of the \$2.8 billion, 614-kilometre (382-mile) contractor-financed pipeline; two Nigerian corporations would build the other and construction of 3,050MW Mambilla electricity project at \$5.7 billion (Oyebade, 2017; Fatima, 2022). This project has failed to materialize since it was inaugurated by the Buhari-led government.

The rail system in the transport industry is one crucial sector that Nigeria is now benefiting from its partnership with China. The train system has been abandoned for decades. President Goodluck Jonathan's government initiated efforts to revitalize the train infrastructure. Under President Mohammadu Buhari administration, efforts to build a functional rail infrastructure have been supported and boosted by the Nigeria-China relations (Adewumi & Akinnuga, 2021). Through Chinese financing and expertise, the Buhari government created a multibillion-dollar revamp. The \$1.5 billion Lagos-Ibadan railway of over 150 kilometres was built by Chinese corporation. The train connects Ibadan with Lagos in the country's southwest, largely financed by the Chinese Export-Import Bank. The Chinese engineering behemoth, CCECC, is also building the Lagos-Kano standard gauge north-south railway. Sustained investment on the rail system is expected to enhance economic growth in the country, expand job possibilities and relieve strain on the road system.

Notwithstanding that these projects are admirable, many people are concerned that the Chinese infrastructural investments may lead to more economic dominance in Nigeria. These loans are expected to exert pressure on the economy. Chinese MNCs have recently been accused of neglecting safety norms, and favouring their nationals and corporations in these projects. The insufficient utilization of local material and inventive talent is an issue for discussion. For whatever it is worth, China has been a critical partner to Nigeria through its extensive infrastructural investments and aid like the deep seaport, railway corridors and

others.

Trade and Investment

China is now a major trading partner for Nigeria. The exchange between the two countries has developed considerably, with the two nations profiting from expanded exchange in different areas, including oil and non-oil items. Chinese interests in Nigeria have likewise prompted work creation and monetary development. Nigeria also relied on China for supply of some military hardware such as tanks and cannons. According to Lamidi (2020), in an effort to reinforce its land troops in the fight against Boko Haram insurgents, Nigeria's military has received VT-4 main battle tanks, SH-5 self-propelled howitzers, and other weapons from China. The equipment was purchased from China's Norinco after being bought under a \$152 million deal. The materiel, included VT-4 main combat tanks, SH5 105 mm self-propelled artillery, and other goods. Trade is the most important part of this interest. Bilateral commerce, particularly the importation of Chinese-made consumer and manufacturing products into Nigeria, underlies nearly every aspect of the two nations' relationship. Nigeria is a net importer of manufactured products from China.

One distinguishing feature of the commercial relationship is the prominent participation of Nigerian businesses in enabling Chinese imports. Between 2010 and 2016, Nigerian imports from China nearly quadrupled. Nigerian bulk buyers headquartered in major trading centres such as Lagos, Onitsha, and Kano travel to Chinese industrial locations such as Guangzhou on a regular basis. The Nigerian migrant population in China may number in the hundreds of thousands, with its own elected community institutions, informal court structures, and social-welfare systems. Chinese-owned businesses operate in a variety of industries in Nigeria, including steel production, textile manufacturing, communications and information technology, and home consumer products.

Trade serves as a catalyst for collaboration. Despite the pandemic's negative impact, China-Nigeria trade reached 25.68 billion USD in 2021, up 33.3% year on year, while Nigeria's exports to China reached 3.04 billion USD, up 22.4% year on year. This bilateral trade climbed by roughly 142% between 2016 and 2021. Nigeria is now China's third largest commercial partner in Africa, while China is Nigeria's major import source (Ojeme & Okolo, 2023). Expatiating further, Abiodun (2023), quoting Yan Yuqing, Consul General of the People's Republic of China in Lagos, said trade volume between Nigeria and China reached close to \$5.4 billion in the first quarter of 2023 only. This comes as the Chinese government has reiterated its commitment to working with Nigeria to promote development strategy, dialogue, and close relations at all levels. Nigeria is China's largest civil engineering contracting market, second largest export destination, third largest trading partner, and key investment destination.

The trade relations, however, have its effect on domestic economy. For instance, Chinese textile firms in Nigeria are exerting pressure on indigenous textile industry in the country. The rising buying of previously manufactured items at low costs from China will drive Nigerian producers out of business. Obikaeze et al., (2023), and Dane et al., (2022), found in their empirical research that Nigeria-China ties have been less productive for Nigeria because it only sold restricted items to China such as oil and gas, ores, seeds, fruits, elegiac, forests, skins, leads, and so on. They argued that Nigeria made only little gains in its export-import relationship with China between 1990 and 2018. Although many factors contribute to Nigeria's poor manufacturing performance, Egbule and Zheng (2011) argued that the country's manufacturing sector is underperforming primarily due to inadequate

infrastructures. China has taken advantage of this by exporting Chinese goods to meet demands that would otherwise go unsatisfied.

Transfer of Technology

Nigeria has received assistance from China in the transfer of technology, particularly in information and communication technology (ICT) and telecommunications. This has improved access to digital services and contributed to the expansion of Nigeria's technology sector. Data and ICT have become the most valuable resources and industries on a global scale. The ICT industry in Nigeria has expanded from 3.08 per cent of GDP in 2001 to 18.44 per cent of GDP in 2022. The telecommunications industry has fueled most of the growth in the ICT sector since further privatization and the sale of GSM licenses to private businesses in 2001.

Chinese firms such as Huawei and Zhong Xing Telecommunication Equipment Company Ltd. (ZTE), in addition to providing profitable and critical infrastructure for Nigeria's ICT and digital economy, are currently involved in the construction of new 5G network infrastructure. Opay, a Chinese fintech business, has over 18 million registered app users in Nigeria, while Egatee, another Chinese e-commerce company, is working to establish itself as a top cross-border logistics, online payment, and settlement company in Nigeria (Uwanaka, 2023).

China's arm-twisting policy ideas and tactics contributed considerably to the Asian country's extraordinary economic performance which has brought about 800 million people out of poverty in the previous 40 years, and the eradication of absolute poverty – an economic miracle. In Nigeria, 133 million people, or 63 per cent of the population, live in multidimensional poverty. As a result, in order to combat poverty and joblessness, Nigeria must implement comprehensive and strategic policy initiatives. Because China is now a major player in Nigeria's ICT sector, bilateral relations between Nigeria and China should include adequate representation and input from relevant digital economy agencies in Nigeria. Such agencies include the Federal Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, National Office for Technology Acquisition and Promotion, Nigerian Communications Commission, and National Information Technology Development Agency. Indigenous firms such as Global Communication (GLOBACOM) and First Atlantic Semiconductors and Microelectronics (FASMICRO) also play significant roles in the technology acclimation process. All these contribute sustainably to the growth of Nigeria's tech industry, strengthen national security, and support socioeconomic development (Gunter, & Legarda, 2022; Ocholi, 2023; Uwanaka, 2023).

Moreover, Chinese involvements in other areas of Nigeria sectors over the years have been duly acknowledged in the literature. Rehman et al., (2022), Fon & Alon (2022), and Ocholi (2023) observed, among others: energy and cooperation, education and cultural exchange, medical cooperation, capacity building, and multilateral engagement.

Discussion of Key Issues

As there are an avalanche of literature supporting Chinese giant strides in economic, trade, and infrastructural partnership with Nigeria, a majority of the participants agreed that China is interested in trade and essential raw materials to service its home industrial needs and growth. Investment in oil and gas, and solid minerals, construction of railway, road, airport, and telecommunication, trade in goods, technological gadgets, fashion industry, among others, are regarded as consistent pattern and priority areas in Sino-Nigeria relations. The

Chinese Consul General in Lagos (Ms. Yan Yuqing) also noted that “the cooperation between China and Nigeria in the field of airport, seaport, railway, road, communication network and other infrastructures has made great achievement” (Egole, 2024, para. 12).

A senior research fellow at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, highlighted that “China-Nigeria has maintained robust bilateral relations over the years, very proactive and fruitful relations which has grown to a level of binational commission”. He noted that “economically, China and Nigeria have been doing so well. Nigeria has the resources for Chinese industries and the market for Chinese goods” (Interview with Participant, Jan. 17, 2024).

Trade volumes and economic relations between the two countries have increased sporadically over time. The Chinese Consul General in Lagos, Ms. Yan Yuqing, posited that the bilateral trade between Nigeria and China stood at \$22.6bn in 2023, making China Nigeria’s top global trading partner and Nigeria the third largest trading partner of China in Africa (Egole, 2024). This accords with the findings of Ubi (2013) and Emewu (2021) on growing trade and development partnership between Nigeria and China. However, apart from its overall benefits, the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and China raises certain issues particularly for Nigeria, including debt sustainability, cybersecurity hazards, espionage, resource competitiveness, the local economy, and geostrategic placement.

Debt sustainability

Concerns over debt sustainability have arisen as a result of Nigeria’s increasing involvement with China. If Nigeria becomes unduly reliant on Chinese loans and struggles to repay them, the country’s economic stability and national security may suffer, and therefore become a victim of “debt-trap diplomacy”. Chinese loans to Nigeria at the end of December 2020 were \$3.3 billion of the country’s total external debt (USD 33.3 billion). By December 2022, total borrowing from China stood at \$4.29 billion (Balogun, 2023). Debt-trap diplomacy, according to Sebastian et al., (2020), refers to an international financial relationship in which a creditor country or institution lends to a borrowing country in order to improve the lender’s political influence. When a debtor country is unable to satisfy its repayment commitments, the creditor country is considered to have extended excessive credit to the debtor country in order to obtain economic or political concessions. The terms of the loans are not always made public. Borrowed funds are frequently used to pay for contractors and goods acquired from the creditor countries.

The phrase “debt trap diplomacy” is a neologism used to argue that Chinese government lends and then leverages smaller nations’ debt burdens for geopolitical goals. Nigeria executed three loan agreements with China’s Exim Bank under the Goodluck Jonathan administration. The deal includes \$500 million for the Abuja Light Rail Project, \$500 million for the development of four airport terminals in the country, and \$100 million for the backbone expansion of connection across Nigerian federal departments (NICAF, 2013). Goodluck Jonathan’s state visit to the People’s Republic of China in 2013 expressed interest in over \$25 billion in Chinese investment in Nigeria, including a \$20 billion memorandum of understanding signed between the Ministry of Energy in China and the Nigeria’s Ministry of Energy to generate 20,000 megawatts of electricity for Nigeria.

Moreover, during the administration of Muhammadu Buhari, China also offered a \$6 billion loan to Nigeria for infrastructure development projects, as well as a \$1.5 billion loan for infrastructure development in Nigeria, including the expansion of four airports in Lagos, Kano, Abuja, and Port Harcourt (Mbara et al., 2021). The skepticism on the negative impacts

of loan to Nigeria from China may not be out of place. China's economic efforts are typically beneficial, but occasionally disruptive. In the same vein, Nigeria's over-reliance on China for essential infrastructures and economic assistance may jeopardize its sovereignty and decision-making autonomy, thereby creating vulnerabilities. The notion of "dependence" has been attributed to Nigeria-China relations.

However, authors and commentators have labeled the concept of a Chinese debt trap as a "myth" or "distraction" or "propaganda" (Brautigam, 2020; Emewu, 2021). A Director in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed the idea as "mere media propaganda orchestrated by distractors". She emphasized that "relations between the countries are governed by agreements, and at no point in time has Nigeria's sovereignty and territorial integrity being compromised. That is vital to Nigeria's national interest" (Interview with Participant, Feb. 14, 2024). While China is Nigeria's top bilateral lender (83.57%), the percentage of Chinese loan to Nigeria's total external debt is 12.7% (Ashinze, 2022). The rest were sourced from Western (bilateral and multilateral) lenders. These authors would wonder what happens to the other 87% if only 12.7 per cent constitutes debt trap for Nigeria. The reality is that countries are up for competing interests, and China's lending to Nigeria should not be seen as charity. However, Nigeria's commitment to bilateral terms with China means it is not liable to any foreign threat to its sovereignty.

Cybersecurity and Espionage Concerns

As the Nigeria-China partnership expands into digital infrastructure, cybersecurity issues may develop if adequate safeguards are not implemented. Cyberattacks on critical infrastructures might have major ramifications for Nigeria's national security. China also assisted in the development and deployment of Nigeria's communications satellite and owns an interest in the parent satellite communications firm. Huawei has been a key partner of the Nigerian government in the development of smart cities and e-government apps to improve government public services (Ikusika, 2022).

Concerns about cybersecurity are crucial in today's linked world, affecting governments, corporations, and individuals alike. This may leave Nigeria vulnerable to cyberattacks, which may destroy essential infrastructures, steal valuable data, and jeopardize national security. These assaults might be carried out by state-sponsored actors, cybercriminals, or hacktivists. Cyberattacks against essential infrastructure such as electricity grids, and transportation networks will be disastrous. These attacks, which frequently target government institutions, defense contractors, and other sensitive organizations, might entail espionage, sabotage, or the disruption of essential systems. China's significant role in critical cyber sectors in Nigeria raises cyberattack concerns (Fidler, 2018; Ikusika, 2022).

Espionage has crucial implications for national security as it pertains to Nigeria-China relations, since intimate contacts between states may also generate opportunities for intelligence gathering and potential espionage operations, which may have an impact on national security objectives. The practice is gathering secret, sensitive, or classified information or intelligence from an individual, organization, or government without their knowledge or consent through human intelligence, signals intelligence, imagery intelligence, and open source intelligence. This operation is usually carried out for political, military, economic, or strategic reasons.

Concerns about cybersecurity and espionage are an essential component in China-Nigeria ties, as the bilateral relations tilted in favor of China. China dominates the internet and telecommunication sectors of Nigeria. Here is some of the cyber security concerns

associated with the China-Nigeria relationship identified by the participants. China has been accused of engaging in global digital surveillance operations, focused on state-run administrations, organizations, and associations. As Ibrahim and Sari (2019) earlier found, there are fears that Chinese programmers would attack Nigerian government offices or privately held firms in order to steal sensitive data or gain an advantage. Chinese firms are involved in a few fundamental framework initiatives in Nigeria, such as media communications and computerized foundation.

Also, China's attitude to data privacy differs from that of many Western countries. Chinese technology companies are known to acquire a large amount of user data. While Chinese innovation ventures might help Nigeria's computerized foundation and mechanical capabilities, participants expressed concern that such speculations may be accompanied by innovation move or arrangements that are used for reconnaissance. Chinese-made innovative products, particularly media communications equipment, are popular in Nigeria. Research participants raised concerns on the security of these supply chains, since flaws in equipment or code may be exploited by malicious performers. Without dismissing the capacity of private persons for criminal ventures, some other participants insisted that China is Nigeria's trusted ally.

Nigeria's Security Concerns

China's security interests in Nigeria are an offshoot of its trade and investment ambitions, rather than a separate entity. In this setting, China's security interests in Nigeria are inextricably tied to its trade and investment objectives, reflecting both Nigeria's difficult investment climate and the inherent restrictions of Beijing's nonintervention policy. Issues that come to fore on how Chinese economic activities affect Nigeria's overall security and stability are China's changing interest in Nigeria's oil-rich Delta region, characterized by inter-tribal and resource-based conflicts; China's continued agricultural investment in the rural Jigawa or Plateau, where farmers are at odds over land tenure; and how Chinese nationals, through Nigerian intermediaries, carry out illegal mining operations in different places where crime and land tenure conflicts have fueled ethnic and religious violence (Abegunde & Dada, 2021).

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of the Chinese companies and suppliers in the Delta region appear to be inadequate resulting in the kidnappers' focus on Chinese nationals (Natsa, 2017). Lu (2023), and Abegunde and Dada (2021) emphasized that agricultural investments by the Chinese in Jigawa State has become a political game. According to Alao (2010), there are clear links between natural resources and conflict. The Federal Government stated that two alleged "illegal" mining companies - Solid Unit Limited, and Geotess Nigeria – which were shut in Zurak (Wase local government area) Plateau state had illegally extracted minerals worth over N100 billion (Ewepu, 2017).

Nigeria's national security challenges have also been attributed to activities of foreigners who are exploiting Nigeria's weak domestic guidelines, regulations and legal enforcement to sabotage societal peace and security. Some of the participants averred that the Chinese contributed to insecurity in Nigeria especially through illegal and secretive economic activities. They are alleged to be responsible for funding some resource-related instability in Zamfara and other states. This aligns with the report by the *Africa Defense Forum* (2024) which alleged Chinese illegal miners of collaborating with extremist militants and corrupt government officials to cause violence, destroy farmlands, and pollute water with mercury and lead. Onuoha and Ojewale (2023, para. 7) also reported that "in the banditry-affected

north-west and central areas, loose criminal networks engaged in illegal gold mining, have ties to foreign actors, and facilitate trafficking flows...in remote villages and forests”. According to them, Nigerian authorities have arrested several Chinese nationals since 2020 for involvement in illegal mining:

In April 2020, the Nigeria Police Force in Zamfara State arrested two Chinese nationals for allegedly engaging in illegal mining in Bukkuyum local government, where the federal government had banned all mining activities to curb killings by armed bandits. In September 2022, a Chinese national was arrested by Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) operatives in Ilorin, Kwara State, in possession of a truckload of minerals suspected to be lepidolite. In July 2023, the EFCC arrested 13 more Chinese nationals for allegedly engaging in illegal mining activities. In August 2023, the Akwa Ibom State Government closed down an illegal mining company operated by Chinese nationals for the firm’s inability to provide authorization documents for titanium ore mining in Ibeno community (para. 4,5).

However, some other participants disagreed with identifying China with illegal activities of Chinese nationals in Nigeria. They emphasized the importance of differentiating official relations between governments from actions of individuals, and particularly the need for the government of Nigeria to exercise agency. A Director at the Centre for China Studies, Abuja, noted that:

The personal activities of Chinese nationals or firms in Nigeria should not be interpreted as official relations. There is no Chinese policy that supports or encourages their businesses or citizens to undermine domestic regulations. The Chinese embassy restates that often. Anybody may want to exploit any situation. Nigerians also commit crimes outside the country without holding Nigeria to ransom. Nigeria should develop capacity to deal with any such infractions by foreigners, whether Chinese or Malians (Interview with Participant, Feb. 14, 2024).

A Director at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, also agreed that official state-to-state relations should not be reduced to the misbehaviour and illegal tendencies of its nationals, cautioning that analysis of China-Nigeria relations should be deeply interrogated beyond the anti-China media frenzy. The Chinese embassy in Nigeria had equally objected to such reports, and distanced itself from the actions of Chinese individuals:

The Chinese government, as well as the Chinese Embassy in Nigeria, have always encouraged and urged the Chinese companies and nationals in Nigeria to abide by the laws and regulations of Nigeria, and to implement the local rules and guidance on labour, environment, health, and safety, etc., and would continue their efforts in this regard. The Chinese government was and would never be involved in any form of funding terrorism (Odeyemi, 2023, para. 1).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The long established and booming Nigeria-China relations have impacted the countries in different dimensions. While both partners have recorded significant benefits, China has benefitted more in this relationship, hence, the appellation of asymmetric relationship. Nigeria also stands to benefit more than it currently does only if necessary economic and trade reforms that would enhance local production and value addition are put in place. China remains Nigeria’s strategic partner only to the extent that Nigeria positions itself for greater reckoning in foreign relations.

Therefore, the government of Nigeria should be more proactive and result-oriented in its

relations with China in order to address the perceived imbalance in China-Nigeria relationship. It is important Nigeria prioritizes what it wants from China, as opposed to a generic foreign policy disposition. For instance, a clarification of what Nigeria wants from China at what time will allow an objective analysis of its success or failure. Nigeria should be more strategic in its foreign relations to promote its economic and security interests. Mitigating the concerns in Nigeria's relations with China is critical to ensuring that the relationship stays mutually beneficial. Making agreements between Nigeria and China clear and open to public scrutiny would reduce the danger or fear of hidden commitments or unfair conditions. Transparency and accountability will be improved by openly debating and releasing information of contracts, loans, and infrastructure projects. This decreases the risk of conflicts originating from unclear or concealed clauses bilateral agreements. In the same manner, transparent agreements and relations between the two countries are more likely to be implemented properly because parties have a clear plan of action.

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