

**Prospects And Challenges Of South-South Cooperation: An Appraisal Of The
Nigeria-China Relations (2015-2023)**

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Abstract

South-South cooperation is a concept adopted to describe the relationship among developing countries. Nigeria and China belong in this group of countries. In addition, Nigeria and China are in bilateral relationship spanning four decades. Between 1970s and 1990s China transformed to becoming a leading global economy while Nigeria remains a toddler despite their shared values. The main objective of this study is to analyze the Nigeria-China relations within the purview of the South-South cooperation with a view to identifying its prospects and challenges. The study used data collected from secondary source and adopted content and thematic approaches to analyze its findings. It adopted Interdependence theory as its theoretical framework. The study identified the economic complementarities that exist between the two countries and finds that the prospect of Nigeria maximizing opportunities in her relations with China is high. This is because there are complementarities between them. In its findings, the study discovers that while China is maximizing the opportunities from the relationship, Nigeria is not, owing to leadership deficit, absence of political will, corrupt practices. The study recommends that Nigeria should develop a leadership group that has the requisite qualifications in terms of education, moral latitude, the political will and economic wisdom to harness the abundant human and material resource for the overall development of the country.

Key Words: *South-South, Cooperation, Leadership, Prospects, Challenges*

Introduction

The concept of *South-South Cooperation* (SSC) refers to the exchange of resources, knowledge, technology, and expertise among countries of the Global South, most of which share similar historical, political, and socio-economic backgrounds. Originating in Southeast Asia over five decades ago, SSC has evolved into a viable strategy through which developing nations pursue mutual development while reducing their reliance on traditional donor-recipient relationships with the Global North (UNOSSC, 2003; UNDP, 2009). These countries—largely former colonies—sought to redefine their development trajectory by rejecting the Western-centric model, which often proved inadequate for their unique challenges (Chaturvedi, Fues & Sidiropoulos, 2012). Instead, they adopted a collective approach that emphasized solidarity, mutual benefit, and shared experiences.

The historical foundations of SSC can be traced to early multilateral efforts such as the *Bandung Conference* in 1955, which brought together Asian and African leaders to promote economic and cultural cooperation outside the influence of Cold War blocs. This conference laid the groundwork for the establishment of the *Non-Aligned Movement* (NAM) in 1961 and the *Group of 77 (G-77)* in 1964, all of which aimed to promote collective self-reliance and to reshape the global economic order in favor of the developing world (UNCTAD, 2016).

SSC has since grown both in scope and scale, with strong support from international institutions such as the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for instance, has consistently promoted SSC in areas such as education, science, technology, policy development, health, and security. According to UNESCO (2012), SSC involves various types of cooperation, including experience-sharing, knowledge exchange, capacity building, network strengthening, and technical partnerships.

A practical manifestation of SSC is evident in the activities of the *African Union (AU)*, which represents a collective regional effort to promote peace, stability, and development on the African continent. With 54 member states, the AU has actively pursued SSC objectives as outlined in Article 3 of its Constitutive Act. Notably, its peacekeeping initiative in Somalia—implemented through the *African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)*—demonstrates the

capacity of African states to address regional security challenges without depending entirely on external intervention (Williams, 2018).

Beyond multilateral platforms, SSC is also reflected in *bilateral partnerships* between developing nations. A key form of such cooperation is the *Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC)*, which facilitates knowledge transfer, personnel training, and joint infrastructural development. As highlighted by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC, 2003), TCDC has become one of the most widely utilized frameworks within SSC. A notable example is the 2013 bilateral meeting between Sierra Leone and Vietnam under the auspices of SSC. The partnership explored areas such as rice cultivation, aquaculture, irrigation, and agro forestry, emphasizing the relevance of experience-sharing in addressing specific developmental needs.

SSC has been defined differently by institutions that support it. The *Partners in Population and Development (PPD)*, for instance, describes SSC as "an international cooperation strategy that aims at empowering developing countries to uplift the quality of life of their citizens in mutual respect and in recognition of the specificity and comparative advantage of each country" (PPD, 2010). Similarly, the *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* defines SSC as "a means of promoting effective development by learning and sharing best practices and technology among developing countries" (UNDP, 2019). The *Nairobi Outcome Document* (2009) adds that SSC must be guided by the principles of national ownership, respect for sovereignty, and freedom from conditionalities.

In practical terms, countries like India and China have emerged as key players in SSC. As of April 2008, India had provided over US\$3 billion in technical assistance to 156 developing countries (UNDP, 2007). China, on the other hand, has engaged extensively in infrastructural development across Africa. A major example is the construction of the *Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA)*, a landmark symbol of early China-Africa solidarity. In Nigeria, China's footprint is evident in multiple sectors—most notably in transport infrastructure. Through the *China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC)*, China is partnering with Nigeria to modernize and expand its railway network. These efforts are often carried out under the

strategic umbrella of China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which aims to connect economies through infrastructure and investment, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Europe (Chin, 2016).

Despite the optimism surrounding SSC and its potential benefits, the involvement of China in African infrastructure development has not been without controversy. Critics argue that such partnerships often come with hidden costs, such as debt dependency, neocolonial tendencies, and limited local capacity-building. Nevertheless, given the infrastructural deficit in Nigeria and the long-standing economic and diplomatic ties between both nations, Nigeria has a viable opportunity to strategically leverage its relationship with China under SSC and the BRI to drive sustainable national development (Alden & Jiang, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing optimism surrounding South-South Cooperation (SSC) as an alternative development model for the Global South, the outcomes of many bilateral engagements within this framework remain mixed and, in some cases, underwhelming. Nigeria and China have enjoyed decades of bilateral relations characterized by diplomatic, economic, and infrastructural partnerships. Particularly since 2015, Nigeria's engagement with China has intensified, with China emerging as a dominant trading partner and infrastructural financier under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, this growing relationship has not translated into significant structural transformation or sustainable development for Nigeria.

The Nigerian economy continues to grapple with challenges such as infrastructural decay, high unemployment, over dependence on oil exports, poor technological capacity, and weak institutions. While Chinese investments have provided notable support in sectors like transportation, energy, and telecommunications, the extent to which these projects promote local industrialization, technology transfer, and human capital development remains questionable. Critics argue that Nigeria's cooperation with China is increasingly skewed, with Nigeria playing a passive role as a consumer of Chinese goods and recipient of loans, often under opaque terms that raise concerns about debt sustainability and sovereignty.

Moreover, Nigeria's domestic governance environment—marked by weak policy coordination, corruption, and a lack of political will—has often hindered the optimal utilization of

opportunities offered through SSC. The mismatch between Nigeria's strategic development interests and its implementation of foreign partnerships has raised questions about the actual benefits accruing from its alliance with China. This problem is compounded by the absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the long-term impact of Chinese projects on Nigeria's development.

Thus, the central problem this study seeks to address is: To what extent has the Nigeria-China bilateral relationship, within the framework of South-South Cooperation from 2015 to 2023, contributed meaningfully to Nigeria's socio-economic transformation? It also interrogates the challenges that limit the realization of the full benefits of this cooperation, such as asymmetry in power relations, policy incoherence, and inadequate local capacity.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the prospects and challenges of South-South Cooperation (SSC) through an appraisal of Nigeria-China relations between 2015 and 2023.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the historical development and current nature of Nigeria-China bilateral relations within the framework of South-South Cooperation.
2. Evaluate the extent to which Nigeria has benefited from its cooperation with China in terms of infrastructure development, trade, technology transfer, and capacity building within the BRI framework.
3. Analyze the challenges limiting Nigeria from maximizing the opportunities inherent in its relationship with China.

Research Questions

To guide the investigation, the study will address the following questions:

1. What are the historical and strategic foundations of Nigeria-China relations under the framework of South-South Cooperation?

2. In what ways has Nigeria benefited economically, technologically, and infrastructural from its partnership with China between 2015 and 2023 within the context of BRI and SSC?
3. What are the major challenges and limitations facing Nigeria in leveraging its bilateral relationship with China?

Research Method

This study employed qualitative method in carrying out the assignment. This entails the use of existing literatures, textbooks, journals and relevant online materials. This approach is chosen because international relations is a specialized field of study. It is only knowledgeable individuals in the field that supply necessary data for the study.

Literature Review

The concept of *South-South Cooperation* (SSC) has been widely studied by scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners as an alternative to the traditional North-South model of engagement. SSC emphasizes horizontal partnerships based on mutual benefit, shared experiences, and solidarity among countries in the Global South. According to Chaturvedi et al. (2012), SSC is built on principles such as respect for sovereignty, non-interference, equality, and mutual gain—principles largely absent in traditional aid arrangements.

Scholarly literature on SSC has broadly focused on areas such as trade, infrastructure development, technological exchange, and capacity building. Alden and Large (2015) note that China's role in SSC has expanded significantly, with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerging as a centerpiece of its foreign policy. China's engagement with African countries, especially Nigeria, includes large-scale infrastructural projects, oil and gas, concessional loans, and trade expansion. However, many scholars raise concerns about the long-term sustainability and strategic balance of such partnerships. Obi (2010) and Mohan & Lampert (2013) argue that while China provides much-needed infrastructure, its investment model often lacks transparency and may lead to debt dependency or undermine local industries.

Foster et al. (2009), in a World Bank study, identified Nigeria as a major destination for Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly in rail, road, and power sectors. However, they observed limited local content and technology transfer, indicating that Nigeria's absorptive capacity remains weak. Ogunlesi (2019) highlights that while Nigeria-China trade volume has grown significantly, it is heavily skewed in favor of China, with Nigeria largely exporting raw materials and importing finished goods—a pattern reminiscent of colonial economic structures.

In addition, Egbula and Zheng (2011) underscore that although Nigeria benefits from Chinese funding and technical expertise, governance challenges such as policy inconsistency, corruption, and a weak industrial base continue to limit Nigeria's ability to maximize the gains of SSC. These structural weaknesses have raised debates about whether SSC, particularly the Nigeria-China framework, genuinely promotes mutual development or reinforces asymmetrical dependence.

Literature also reflects on China's evolving policy approach. The introduction of the *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation* (FOCAC) and BRI have deepened economic ties with Africa. Scholars like Taylor (2016) and Carmody (2020) contend that China strategically engages African countries to secure raw materials and expand geopolitical influence. Nevertheless, these engagements present opportunities for African countries to develop infrastructure and access new markets, if well-managed.

While existing literature presents valuable insights into the dynamics of Nigeria-China relations, there is a significant gap in examining the relationship through the lens of SSC principles and evaluating its prospects and challenges over a focused period—particularly from 2015 to 2023, a period marked by Nigeria's economic recessions, policy shifts, and increased Chinese infrastructural involvement. This study intends to fill that gap by analyzing how Nigeria can reposition itself to derive more value from SSC with China.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the **Theory of Complex Interdependence**, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), as the most appropriate framework for analyzing Nigeria-China relations within the South-South Cooperation paradigm.

This theory challenges the realist notion of international relations, which emphasizes state power, military dominance, and zero-sum competition. Instead, *complex interdependence* posits that in a globalized world, states and non-state actors interact through multiple channels, such as economic, political, and cultural linkages, where military power plays a less central role. It argues that international relations today are shaped more by cooperation, mutual interests, and the intertwining of national economies than by mere power struggles.

Key assumptions of the theory include:

1. **Multiple Channels of Interaction:** Relations are not confined to intergovernmental diplomacy but include interactions among multinational corporations, NGOs, and sub-national actors.
2. **Absence of a Hierarchy of Issues:** Issues like trade, environment, and development are as important as military security.
3. **Reduced Role of Military Force:** In economic relations, particularly among interdependent nations, the use of military power is less likely and less effective.

Applying this theory, the Nigeria-China relationship under SSC reflects a situation where both countries pursue mutual economic benefits rather than dominance. China needs access to Nigerian markets and natural resources, while Nigeria seeks infrastructure development, investment, and technical assistance. However, the success of such interdependence depends on how Nigeria navigates the power asymmetry in the relationship and aligns the cooperation with its development priorities.

The theory also helps in assessing whether the interdependence between Nigeria and China is symmetrical or asymmetrical. Given China's economic advantage, Nigeria must strategically manage the cooperation to avoid being a passive actor. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how SSC, ideally based on mutual respect and benefit, can sometimes result in unequal outcomes unless effectively managed.

Historical Development of Nigeria-China Bilateral Relations within the Framework of South-South Cooperation

Nigeria-China bilateral relations have evolved from a diplomatic partnership into a multifaceted strategic alliance deeply rooted in the broader ideological and economic framework of South-South Cooperation (SSC). These relations date back to February 10, 1971, when both countries formally established diplomatic ties. Initially, the relationship was driven by political solidarity and mutual support in global affairs, particularly in decolonization efforts and non-alignment movements, it later gradually transformed into an economic and developmental partnership (Alden & Alves, 2008).

During the Cold War era, both countries were part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to resist the dominance of the Western and Eastern blocs. This ideological foundation became the basis for a relationship marked by mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and shared developmental goals—core principles of SSC (Chaturvedi, Fues, & Sidiropoulos, 2012).

The turning point in Nigeria-China relations occurred in the early 2000s when China shifted its Africa policy to a more pragmatic and economic-oriented approach. This was institutionalized with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Since then, FOCAC has served as the primary platform for engaging African countries, including Nigeria, on economic, infrastructural, and diplomatic initiatives under the SSC model (Taylor, 2016).

From 2015 to 2023, bilateral cooperation between Nigeria and China has intensified under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nigeria joined the BRI framework in 2018, thereby aligning its developmental aspirations with China's global infrastructure strategy. This period witnessed increased Chinese investments in Nigerian infrastructure, including the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan railway lines, airport renovations, and power sector projects (Foster et al., 2009; Ogunlesi, 2019).

Furthermore, the cooperation has expanded into areas such as information and communication technology (ICT), agriculture, oil and gas, education, and defense. Numerous Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed on technology transfer, capacity building, and technical

cooperation, showcasing the diversification of the relationship beyond traditional aid and trade paradigms (Mohan & Lampert, 2013).

Despite these advancements, Nigeria-China relations are not without challenges. These include trade imbalances, concerns over the sustainability of Chinese loans, limited local content in Chinese projects, and weak institutional capacity on the Nigerian side to negotiate and monitor agreements. Nonetheless, the relationship continues to reflect the SSC ideals of mutual benefit, non-conditional assistance, and shared developmental goals (UNOSSC, 2003).

In sum, Nigeria-China relations represent a dynamic and evolving partnership framed within SSC principles. The trajectory suggests significant prospects for future collaboration if Nigeria can overcome internal governance challenges and strategically position itself to maximize the benefits of this bilateral engagement.

An Appraisal of Nigeria-China Cooperation: Impacts on Infrastructure, Trade, Technology Transfer, and Capacity Building

Nigeria has significantly benefited from its cooperation with China across several key areas: infrastructure development, trade, technology transfer, and capacity building. This partnership has helped Nigeria address critical developmental challenges and is contributing to its overall modernization and economic growth. The cooperation between the two countries spans several decades and has grown stronger in recent years, with China emerging as one of Nigeria's most important international partners. This analysis evaluates the various dimensions of this partnership and its impacts on Nigeria.

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development has been one of the most significant areas of Nigeria-China cooperation. The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) has been a key player in constructing vital infrastructure across Nigeria. CCECC has completed major projects, such as the rehabilitation of airports, the construction of railways, and the development of highways. One of the most notable infrastructure projects is the ongoing work on the Lagos metro system, which aims to transform urban transportation in one of Africa's largest cities. The

metro project is expected to ease traffic congestion, improve mobility, and stimulate economic activities by connecting different parts of Lagos more efficiently (Reuters, 2025).

Additionally, CCECC has completed several other rail projects, such as the Abuja-Kaduna rail line, and has been involved in upgrading other transportation infrastructure, including roads and bridges. These projects are a direct response to Nigeria's infrastructural deficits and are critical to the country's economic development. Furthermore, China's involvement in the construction of the Lekki Deep Sea Port in Lagos has had significant economic implications. The \$1.5 billion port, financed by Chinese loans, is designed to boost Nigeria's maritime capacity, which is expected to improve trade and facilitate economic growth by increasing the country's container-handling capacity and boosting port revenues (Reuters, 2025).

This extensive infrastructure development is vital for Nigeria's long-term economic growth. By improving transport, energy, and trade infrastructure, China's investment has helped modernize key sectors of Nigeria's economy, positioning it to compete better in the global market.

Trade

Bilateral trade between China and Nigeria has flourished over the past decade, with China emerging as Nigeria's largest trading partner. The volume of trade between the two countries reached \$25.68 billion in 2021, reflecting a 33.3% increase from the previous year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Nigeria's exports to China have mainly been oil, gas, and agricultural products, while it imports a wide range of products from China, including electronics, machinery, and textiles. This trade relationship is essential for Nigeria's economic diversification, as it opens new markets for Nigerian goods while also providing access to affordable Chinese goods, including infrastructure-related materials and consumer electronics (China Daily, 2024).

The establishment of trade zones such as the Lekki and Ogun-Guangdong Free Trade Zones has also enhanced economic ties. These zones, built with Chinese investment, have attracted over \$1.51 billion in investments, created thousands of jobs, and provided opportunities for local entrepreneurs to engage in production and trade (China Daily, 2024). The zones facilitate exports, attract foreign direct investment, and promote the transfer of technology and skills. By

positioning China as a major source of foreign investment, these trade agreements have helped boost Nigeria's industrial and manufacturing sectors, thus diversifying its economy away from an overreliance on oil.

Technology Transfer

Technology transfer has been a central feature of Nigeria-China cooperation, particularly in the fields of information and communication technology (ICT), fintech, and renewable energy. One of the most significant players in this area is Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant. Huawei has been involved in providing cloud services, telecom infrastructure, and fintech solutions to Nigeria's banking sector. This has enhanced Nigeria's digital economy by improving financial transactions and access to banking services, especially in remote areas where traditional banking infrastructure is limited (China Daily, 2024).

Additionally, Huawei has helped establish a joint solar photovoltaic test lab in Nigeria, aligning with the country's renewable energy goals. This partnership is expected to contribute to Nigeria's energy transition and foster the development of sustainable energy solutions. China's role in promoting renewable energy through technology transfer is particularly important for Nigeria, as it faces energy shortages and is looking for alternative sources to meet its energy demands. The introduction of Chinese technology, both in the energy sector and in ICT, has allowed Nigeria to make significant strides in modernizing its infrastructure and developing a more resilient economy.

Moreover, Chinese investments in the fintech sector have given rise to digital platforms like OPay and Palmpay, which are revolutionizing financial inclusion in Nigeria. These platforms are becoming dominant players in Nigeria's rapidly expanding mobile money market, enabling millions of Nigerians to access financial services. This level of technology transfer not only provides Nigeria with state-of-the-art solutions but also contributes to the long-term development of its technology sector.

Capacity Building

China has also made significant contributions to Nigeria's capacity building, particularly through educational initiatives and training programs. Since 2019, China has provided scholarships to Nigerian students in fields such as satellite engineering, railway management, and information technology (China Daily, 2024). These scholarships have enabled Nigerian students to pursue higher education in China, thereby enhancing their skills and knowledge. Upon their return, many of these students have contributed to the development of Nigeria's technological, infrastructural, and industrial sectors.

Furthermore, China's efforts to train Nigerian professionals in various fields have had a lasting impact. The CCECC, for example, has trained 85 Nigerian graduates in railway engineering and management, further solidifying the human resource base necessary for maintaining and expanding the country's infrastructure projects. These training programs contribute to Nigeria's capacity building by equipping local professionals with the skills required to manage and operate the infrastructure developed through China's support.

By investing in human capital development, China is helping Nigeria create a workforce that is better equipped to handle the demands of a growing and modernizing economy. This is particularly important for sectors like construction, technology, and engineering, where skilled labor is essential for sustaining long-term growth.

The cooperation between Nigeria and China has yielded substantial benefits for Nigeria, particularly in infrastructure development, trade, technology transfer, and capacity building. Through Chinese investment in infrastructure projects like railways, airports, and ports, Nigeria has made significant progress in addressing its infrastructure deficits. Additionally, the growth of trade between the two countries has enhanced Nigeria's economic diversification and opened up new markets. In terms of technology, China's transfer of knowledge and expertise has boosted Nigeria's digital economy and renewable energy efforts. Finally, China's commitment to capacity building has improved Nigeria's human capital and provided vital skills for sustaining development. As Nigeria continues to modernize and diversify its economy, its partnership with China will likely remain a key driver of progress in the coming years.

Challenges Limiting Nigeria from Maximizing the Opportunities in her Relationship with China

Nigeria's relationship with China holds considerable potential for fostering economic growth, improving infrastructure, and boosting trade. However, despite the benefits that have emerged from this partnership, several challenges hinder Nigeria from fully maximizing the opportunities inherent in its cooperation with China. These challenges span various dimensions, including political, economic, and social factors that limit the extent to which Nigeria can leverage its relationship with China for long-term sustainable development.

Debt Dependency and Financial Sustainability

One of the primary challenges faced by Nigeria in its partnership with China is the growing debt burden. China has extended several loans to Nigeria to finance infrastructure projects, including railways, roads, and ports. While these loans have helped address critical infrastructure gaps, the high level of indebtedness has raised concerns about Nigeria's ability to service its debts in the long term. The China-Nigeria relationship is heavily reliant on loans from the Chinese government and Chinese banks, such as the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM Bank) (Olusola, 2023).

In 2021, Nigeria's external debt to China stood at approximately \$4 billion, a figure that continues to rise as new loans are taken out for infrastructure projects (Abdulrahman, 2023). The growing debt burden poses a risk to Nigeria's financial sustainability, as the country faces challenges in meeting debt repayments, especially with volatile oil prices and other economic constraints. This creates an over-reliance on Chinese financing, and while such loans have fueled infrastructure development, the long-term costs could outweigh the immediate benefits if Nigeria fails to manage its debt effectively.

Lack of Technological and Skill Transfer

Although China has played a significant role in the technology transfer to Nigeria, the full potential of this transfer has yet to be realized. Chinese companies, such as Huawei, have been involved in the provision of telecommunications infrastructure, fintech services, and renewable

energy solutions. However, the transfer of advanced technology and know-how has been limited in scope. In many cases, the technology brought by Chinese firms is not accompanied by comprehensive local capacity-building programs that would enable Nigerian workers and companies to operate, maintain, and innovate on their own (Adewumi & Olanrewaju, 2022).

This lack of deeper technological and managerial skills transfer means that Nigerian professionals are often relegated to lower-level roles in the implementation and maintenance of Chinese-funded projects. As a result, Nigeria has not yet fully benefited from the kind of skills and knowledge transfer that could lead to sustainable technological advancement and innovation. In sectors like ICT, where China has significant expertise, the absence of a robust local capacity-building framework limits Nigeria's ability to develop and maintain its own tech infrastructure, hindering long-term growth in this sector.

Trade Imbalance and Economic Dependence

While trade between China and Nigeria has flourished, it has also resulted in a significant trade imbalance. Nigeria's exports to China are primarily raw materials such as oil, gas, and agricultural products, while the bulk of Nigeria's imports from China consist of manufactured goods, electronics, machinery, and textiles. This imbalance reflects the asymmetry in the trade relationship, where Nigeria remains largely a supplier of raw materials, while China benefits more from the added value through the production of high-end goods (Akinola & Olatunji, 2023).

The dependency on Chinese imports has stifled the growth of Nigeria's domestic manufacturing sector. Nigerian industries, such as textiles and electronics, have struggled to compete with the influx of cheap Chinese goods. This has undermined local production and created a dependency on Chinese goods that threatens Nigeria's industrialization efforts. If Nigeria is to maximize the opportunities presented by its relationship with China, it must diversify its exports to China and invest in enhancing its domestic industries to add value to raw materials rather than continuing to export them in unprocessed forms.

Dominance of Chinese in local industries in Nigeria

Chinese firms employing large numbers of Chinese workers rather than hiring locals, especially in infrastructure projects is one area loathed by Africans. This practice not only limits local job creation but also compounds unemployment situation in Nigeria.

Environmental and Social Concerns

Many of China's infrastructure projects in Nigeria, particularly in the areas of mining, construction, and energy, have raised concerns about their environmental impact. For example, large-scale construction projects often fail to adhere to environmental protection standards, leading to deforestation, land degradation, and pollution. While China's involvement in developing Nigeria's infrastructure has been beneficial, it has sometimes come at the cost to the environment and local communities.

The Lekki Deep Sea Port, while a significant economic investment, has raised concerns about the potential environmental impacts on local marine life and the livelihoods of nearby communities. Furthermore, some Chinese-backed mining operations in Nigeria have been criticized for neglecting environmental protection and causing harm to the local ecosystem (Olusola, 2023). The lack of sufficient regulatory oversight from Nigerian authorities has allowed these practices to persist, undermining the long-term benefits of the cooperation.

Limited Involvement of Local SMEs and Private Sector

Another challenge is the limited involvement of Nigeria's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the broader private sector in the China-Nigeria partnership. Chinese firms often dominate the projects funded by Chinese loans, and Nigerian SMEs are sometimes excluded from direct participation. This limits the opportunities for local businesses to benefit from contracts, technology transfers, and capacity-building programs (Umejei, 2020; Ovadia, 2016).

In sectors like construction, telecommunications, and manufacturing, Chinese companies typically employ their own workers, bring in their own materials, and use their own technologies. As a result, Nigerian SMEs miss out on the chance to contribute to large-scale projects, reducing the multiplier effect that such investments could have on the local economy (Brautigam, 2020;

Akinrinade & Ogen, 2011). By involving Nigerian businesses more effectively in the value chain, Nigeria could benefit from additional economic growth and skill development.

While Nigeria's relationship with China has brought many benefits, including infrastructure development, trade expansion, and technology transfer, several challenges continue to limit Nigeria from fully maximizing these opportunities. These challenges include the burden of debt dependency, a lack of comprehensive technology transfer, trade imbalances, political and cultural differences, environmental concerns, and the exclusion of local SMEs from key projects. To maximize the potential of this partnership, Nigeria must address these issues by focusing on debt management, enhancing local capacity, diversifying trade, and ensuring that Chinese investments are aligned with Nigeria's long-term development goals (Onuoha, 2022; Obiorah et al., 2008).

Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Nigeria's Economic and Developmental Goals

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a global development strategy aimed at enhancing trade and investment through infrastructure development across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Yu, 2017). As a significant part of China's international expansion, the BRI seeks to improve connectivity and foster economic cooperation (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018). Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy and a critical partner in China's Belt and Road framework, has substantial stakes in the initiative (Olayiwola, 2020; Udeala, 2021).

This investigation examines the implications of the BRI on Nigeria's economic and developmental goals, highlighting both the benefits and challenges posed by China's extensive infrastructure investments and trade relationships through this initiative. While the BRI has enabled Nigeria to access critical infrastructure financing, including for railways, highways, and power projects, concerns remain about debt sustainability, transparency, and the limited involvement of local contractors and SMEs (Brautigam, 2020; Okereke & Agupusi, 2015).

Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development

One of the most direct implications of the BRI for Nigeria is the potential for accelerated economic growth through infrastructure development. The BRI emphasizes the construction of key infrastructure projects, such as highways, railways, ports, and airports, which are critical to Nigeria's economic modernization and growth. Through the BRI, Nigeria has seen significant Chinese investments in infrastructure. Notably, the construction of rail lines, such as the Abuja-Kaduna rail project, and the development of key ports, including the Lekki Deep Sea Port, are pivotal steps toward improving Nigeria's logistical capacity and transportation networks (Olusola, 2023). These projects are designed to reduce the costs of transportation, facilitate trade, and improve Nigeria's connectivity with global markets, thereby boosting the country's economic potential.

In particular, the rail projects funded by China, such as the Lagos-Kano railway and the Lagos-Ibadan railway, are expected to ease the movement of goods, enhance trade efficiency, and stimulate industrial growth (Adewumi, 2023). The improvement in transportation networks will also provide a foundation for other sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and energy, to flourish by providing the necessary infrastructure for better distribution of goods and services. For a country like Nigeria, where poor infrastructure has historically hindered economic growth, the BRI's focus on infrastructure development is seen as a step toward closing these gaps.

Trade Enhancement and Market Access

The BRI is expected to significantly enhance Nigeria's trade relationships, not only with China but also with other countries along the Belt and Road routes. China is already Nigeria's largest trading partner, and through the BRI, this relationship is expected to deepen. By improving trade routes, facilitating the development of Free Trade Zones, and establishing infrastructure for efficient trade, Nigeria will benefit from increased exports and imports.

Under the BRI framework, Nigeria is poised to have better access to Chinese markets, which are massive and diverse, and to other countries participating in the initiative. This has the potential to stimulate Nigeria's agricultural exports, such as cocoa, oil, and solid minerals, to China and other markets (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The opening up

of new trade routes will also enable Nigeria to diversify its trade portfolio by fostering economic relationships with other Belt and Road participants.

Additionally, Chinese investments in sectors like telecommunications, energy, and infrastructure will allow Nigerian companies to increase their productivity and improve their competitiveness on the global stage (Kazeem, 2023). However, it is important to note that while the BRI may enhance trade opportunities, it could also exacerbate Nigeria's reliance on Chinese manufactured goods, potentially affecting local industries that may struggle to compete with the influx of cheaper Chinese products.

Debt Sustainability and Financial Risks

One of the most pressing concerns surrounding Nigeria's participation in the BRI is the potential for increased debt burden. China has funded a considerable number of infrastructure projects in Nigeria through loans from institutions like the China Exim Bank and the China Development Bank. Although these loans are essential for addressing Nigeria's infrastructure deficits, they have raised questions about the sustainability of the country's debt.

Nigeria's debt to China has been growing steadily, and as of 2021, the country owed China over \$4 billion in infrastructure loans (Abdulrahman, 2023). While these investments have contributed to the growth of critical infrastructure, the burden of servicing these debts remains a challenge, particularly in times of economic uncertainty and fluctuating oil prices, which are Nigeria's primary source of revenue. If Nigeria is unable to manage its debt levels prudently, there is a risk of debt overhang, which could undermine long-term economic stability.

Moreover, debt-related concerns have sparked debates about the "debt trap" diplomacy associated with the BRI. While Nigeria has thus far avoided falling into a debt trap, the risks remain, particularly if the country's debt repayments outstrip its ability to generate the expected returns from BRI-funded projects.

Technology Transfer and Skill Development

The BRI holds significant potential for technology transfer and skills development in Nigeria. As part of Chinese investments in infrastructure, Chinese firms often bring in advanced technologies and practices, particularly in sectors such as telecommunications, renewable energy, and construction. In Nigeria, companies like Huawei have been involved in providing telecommunications infrastructure, boosting the country's digital connectivity (China Daily, 2024). Similarly, Chinese investments in renewable energy projects, such as solar power, are expected to contribute to Nigeria's energy diversification goals.

Additionally, through joint ventures and skill-building programs, Nigerian workers have the opportunity to acquire new skills in various industries, especially in construction, engineering, and technology. Chinese companies have provided training and knowledge-sharing opportunities for Nigerian workers, which could enhance local capacity to manage infrastructure and industrial projects in the future.

However, critics argue that while technology is transferred, the depth and scope of this transfer are limited. Chinese companies often retain control over key technologies and managerial aspects of projects, which limits the extent to which Nigerian workers can gain practical experience and expertise in high-level project management and innovation.

Socio-Environmental Concerns

Despite the positive economic outlook, the BRI has raised several socio-environmental concerns. Large-scale infrastructure projects funded by China have had mixed environmental impacts, particularly in areas related to mining, construction, and energy. Some critics argue that Chinese-funded projects in Nigeria lack sufficient environmental safeguards, leading to deforestation, land degradation, and the displacement of local communities (Akinola, 2023).

The Lekki Deep Sea Port project, for example, has faced scrutiny over its potential environmental consequences for local marine ecosystems (Olusola, 2023). Although the Nigerian government has made efforts to address these issues, the sheer scale of infrastructure

development under the BRI poses significant risks to the country's natural resources and biodiversity.

Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the social impact of Chinese investments in Nigeria, particularly regarding labor practices. While Chinese projects have created jobs, there are concerns that these jobs are often low-wage and may not lead to long-term skill development for the local workforce.

In Conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative presents both opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's economic and developmental goals. On the one hand, the BRI has the potential to stimulate economic growth through infrastructure development, trade expansion, and technology transfer. It offers significant opportunities for enhancing Nigeria's connectivity, improving its infrastructure, and boosting trade relations with China and other countries in the Belt and Road network. However, the risks associated with debt sustainability, environmental degradation, and unequal technological transfer cannot be overlooked.

For Nigeria to fully maximize the benefits of the BRI, it must address these challenges through careful debt management, environmental protections, and a focus on local capacity building. By ensuring that the benefits of Chinese investments are equitably distributed and that local industries are empowered to compete, Nigeria can unlock the full potential of its partnership with China under the BRI.

Strategic Approaches Nigeria Can Adopt to Strengthen Its Position and Improve Gains from Cooperation with China

To maximize the benefits of its cooperation with China, Nigeria must take a proactive and strategic approach. While Nigeria has made notable strides in infrastructure development, trade, and technology transfer through its relationship with China, there are opportunities to further strengthen this partnership and ensure that the country's long-term development goals are met. Below are strategic approaches that Nigeria can adopt to enhance its position and improve gains from its cooperation with China.

Strengthening Debt Management and Financial Sustainability

One of the most critical challenges for Nigeria in its relationship with China is the rising debt burden from loans that fund infrastructure projects. Nigeria must adopt more sustainable debt management strategies to avoid the risks of debt overhang and ensure that its partnership with China does not lead to financial instability.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Negotiate Better Loan Terms:** Nigeria should seek to renegotiate the terms of existing loans, especially those related to infrastructure projects, to ensure lower interest rates, longer repayment periods, and better alignment with Nigeria's economic capacity. Transparent and favorable terms can reduce the financial burden on Nigeria's economy.
- **Diversify Financing Sources:** To avoid excessive reliance on China, Nigeria should explore alternative financing options such as public-private partnerships (PPPs), international financial institutions (e.g., World Bank, African Development Bank), and bonds. Diversifying financing sources will allow Nigeria to reduce the risks associated with overdependence on Chinese loans.
- **Improve Debt Transparency:** Nigeria must strengthen its capacity to monitor and manage public debt effectively by implementing comprehensive debt-tracking systems. This will ensure transparency in borrowing and spending, enabling the government to assess and manage its liabilities better.

Fostering Technology Transfer and Innovation

While China's investments in infrastructure have brought some level of technological innovation to Nigeria, there is a need for more focused efforts on ensuring that the country can leverage these investments to boost its domestic technological capacity. Nigeria should aim to build a sustainable technological ecosystem that reduces dependency on foreign expertise over time.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Promote Local Technology Firms:** Nigeria should create incentives for local tech companies to engage with Chinese firms through joint ventures and partnerships. This can include tax breaks, access to funding, and regulatory support. Encouraging local firms to work alongside Chinese companies will ensure that Nigerian workers and businesses gain exposure to advanced technologies and increase their capacity to innovate.
- **Establish Technology Transfer Programs:** To ensure the successful transfer of knowledge and skills, Nigeria should implement comprehensive technology transfer programs as part of Chinese investments in sectors like telecommunications, renewable energy, and manufacturing. This can involve the establishment of innovation hubs, research partnerships with Chinese firms, and training programs for Nigerian professionals in high-tech industries.
- **Focus on Research and Development (R&D):** Nigeria should strengthen its focus on R&D by establishing partnerships with Chinese universities and research institutions. Joint research initiatives in fields such as renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and agriculture will ensure that Nigeria keeps pace with global technological advancements.

Ensuring Economic Diversification and Local Industry Development

China's dominance in manufacturing and exports to Nigeria has led to an imbalance in trade, with Nigeria primarily exporting raw materials while importing manufactured goods. To maximize the benefits of its relationship with China, Nigeria should prioritize economic diversification and the development of its local industries.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Support Local Manufacturing and Value-Addition:** Nigeria should focus on adding value to its raw materials before exporting them. This could include investments in processing industries, such as refining oil and gas, producing consumer goods from agricultural products, and developing local manufacturing industries to compete with Chinese imports.

- **Create Special Economic Zones (SEZs):** Nigeria can collaborate with China to establish additional Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that focus on manufacturing, technology, and services. These zones should offer incentives for local businesses to engage with Chinese companies and increase domestic value creation.
- **Strengthen Agricultural Processing:** As one of Nigeria's key economic sectors, agriculture can benefit significantly from Chinese technology and investment. The government should work with Chinese companies to develop agricultural processing industries, focusing on adding value to crops like cocoa, cassava, and rice. This would help reduce Nigeria's reliance on imports and increase its exports.

Improving Infrastructure and Connectivity for Trade Expansion

Improving Nigeria's infrastructure, particularly transportation and logistics, is essential to enhancing trade with China and other Belt and Road participants. Efficient transport networks will reduce costs, improve trade efficiency, and boost Nigeria's position as a key player in regional and global trade.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Prioritize Multimodal Transport Projects:** Nigeria should continue working with China to develop a multimodal transportation network, including rail, road, and port infrastructure. Projects like the Lagos-Kano railway and Lekki Deep Sea Port are critical for improving trade and connectivity. However, Nigeria must ensure that these projects are integrated into a broader national strategy that prioritizes regional and international connectivity.
- **Upgrade Existing Infrastructure:** While new projects are essential, upgrading and maintaining existing infrastructure is equally important. Nigeria should work with China to modernize and maintain its existing infrastructure, including airports, road networks, and power grids, to ensure that they support the country's long-term growth and development goals.
- **Boost Regional Connectivity:** Nigeria should take a regional leadership role in ensuring that its infrastructure connects to neighboring countries within the West African region.

By facilitating trade and transport across borders, Nigeria can position itself as a key player in regional economic integration.

Strengthening Governance, Transparency, and Accountability

For Nigeria to fully capitalize on its cooperation with China, it must improve governance structures to ensure that Chinese investments align with its national development priorities and are not marred by corruption, inefficiency, or poor project implementation.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Enforce Regulatory Standards:** Nigeria must ensure that Chinese investments comply with national laws and regulations, especially regarding environmental protection, labor rights, and corporate governance. This can be achieved through stronger regulatory oversight and enforcement of standards for foreign investments.
- **Establish Independent Oversight Bodies:** Nigeria should establish independent oversight bodies to monitor the implementation of Chinese-funded projects and ensure that they meet the expected standards of quality, transparency, and accountability. These bodies should be empowered to investigate any irregularities and hold stakeholders accountable.
- **Promote Public Participation:** It is essential that Nigerian citizens and local communities are involved in decision-making processes related to Chinese investments. Public consultations, community engagement, and transparency in project planning will ensure that investments benefit the wider population and do not lead to displacement or environmental degradation.

Strengthening Bilateral Relations and Diplomacy

Building a stronger diplomatic relationship with China will help Nigeria secure better deals, protect its interests, and ensure that its long-term developmental objectives are met through the partnership.

Approaches to Consider:

- **Engage in Regular Dialogue:** Nigeria should engage in regular diplomatic dialogues with China to address concerns, renegotiate terms of investment, and align bilateral cooperation with Nigeria's long-term development strategy. This will also help Nigeria strengthen its voice in international forums related to the BRI.
- **Diversify China-Nigeria Cooperation Areas:** While infrastructure is a key focus, Nigeria should seek to diversify its cooperation with China into other sectors such as healthcare, education, and green energy. These areas of cooperation will support broader economic and social development.

Conclusion

For Nigeria to fully capitalize on its relationship with China and the opportunities presented by the Belt and Road Initiative, the country must take a holistic and strategic approach. By improving debt management, fostering technology transfer, diversifying its economy, enhancing infrastructure, and strengthening governance, Nigeria can ensure that it not only benefits from Chinese investments but also maximizes the long-term growth potential of its relationship with China. Strategic collaboration, effective oversight, and sustainable planning will be critical in ensuring that Nigeria's cooperation with China aligns with the country's broader development goals.

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