

Nigeria-China Bilateral Relations: Trade, Investment and Political Influence

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Abstract

Nigeria-China bilateral relations have changed dramatically since diplomatic ties were established in 1971, covering commerce, investment, and political partnership. This qualitative research dives into the historical setting, looking at how the relationship progressed from initial reluctance to vigorous economic participation. China has made significant investments in Nigeria, notably in infrastructure projects, although there are still concerns about trade imbalances and possible economic reliance. Diplomatically, both countries have increased ties, with Nigeria backing China's international ambitions, particularly its pursuit for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The political economy approach provides a theoretical framework for evaluating the relationship's multidimensional dynamics, focusing on the interaction of economic interests, political power, and societal repercussions. Diversifying Nigeria's trade partners, improving local firms, and maintaining openness in investment agreements are among the recommendations made to promote mutual benefit and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Bilateral Trade, Economic Cooperation, Foreign Investment, Political Influence, Nigeria-China Relations

Introduction

Over time, the world's economies have become more intertwined through trade and other forms of international connections. The reality that various countries have diverse resource endowments, tastes, technical capabilities, levels of output, and capacity for growth and development provides the framework for this integration. To secure the free flow of international money, which is accelerated and enabled by the supersonic progress of information technology, all national obstacles must be eliminated. Trade barriers are gradually being removed, and the global market is becoming more integrated, as evidenced by the promotion of free-market economics, liberal democracy, good governance, gender equality, and environmental

sustainability, among other all-encompassing values (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). This interconnectedness has led to a more interdependent global economy, where countries rely on each other for trade and investment opportunities. As a result, policies that promote cooperation and collaboration among nations are essential for fostering economic growth and stability in the interconnected world.

Nigeria and China, two prominent players in their respective fields, have established strong bilateral ties over time. This relationship is based on shared economic interests and diplomatic collaboration, with both nations benefiting from trade deals and cultural exchanges. Nigeria frequently turns to China for infrastructure development projects, while China sees Nigeria as an important partner in growing its influence in Africa. China's involvement in African problems dates back to the 1950s. During that period, African republics began to liberate themselves from colonialism. As a result, China's connection with Africa in modern times has been marked by the former's backing for liberation movements that were at the time in critical phases, culminating in the liberation of the bulk of African states from colonial domination in the 1960s. The initial motivations for China's backing were ideological, but this would shift over the next few decades (Adigbuo, 2021).

China's involvement in Africa has since evolved to include economic investments, infrastructure development, and trade partnerships, solidifying its position as a key player on the continent. Today, China's presence in Africa continues to grow, with both positive and negative impacts on the region's development and geopolitical landscape.

As China's economic and political might expanded and it became increasingly resource-hungry, the intensity of its connections with Africa shifted. Since her independence, Nigeria's successive administrations' foreign policy orientations have correctly acknowledged bilateral and multilateral trade and economic links. China is one of Nigeria's trade partners. Unofficial connections between the two nations began in the 1950s, notably in 1957 (Zainab & Sheriff, 2018). This relationship has grown significantly over the years, with China becoming one of Nigeria's largest trading partners and investors. The two countries have also collaborated on various infrastructure projects and development initiatives to further strengthen their ties.

The benefits of Nigeria's connection with China have finally become clear. In Lagos, Onitsha, Aba, Kano, and nearly any Nigerian market, one may find Chinese textiles, food, pharmaceuticals, electronics, phones, laptops, and kitchen utensils. The Chinese company is in charge of the controversial rail restoration project. China planned, constructed, and funded Nigeria's communications satellite (NIMCOSAT 1). NIMCOSAT 1 was also launched in China. As a result, Nigeria is doing a lot of business and investing with China these days. Nigeria provides China with a market for its products as well as massive undeveloped resources such as oil. Also, the Nigerian government has recently discovered that Chinese enterprises are more responsive to economic issues than their Western counterparts (Nwachukwu, 2017). This has led to an increase in Chinese investments in Nigeria, particularly in infrastructure projects. Additionally, the relationship between Nigeria and China has raised concerns about potential economic and political influence from China in the region.

Despite the perceived symbiotic relations that characterize this bilateralism, the complex dynamics underscoring the (somewhat unequal) relationship between Nigeria and China have made scholars inquire, on the one hand, whether this interaction can be likened to a tale of two great powers or, on the other hand, whether it is a tale where Nigeria, one of many small third-

world powers, serves to sustain the interests and status of China, a great power (Mthembu in Oluwabiyi & Duruji, 2021). Consequently, an answer to this relationship structure, particularly concerning trade, investment, and political influence, will help reveal to an appreciable extent the impact of the same on Nigeria's quest for sustainable development. This study therefore, examines the Nigeria-China bilateral relations emphasizing on trade, investment and political influence.

Methodology

A qualitative study approach was used, using data obtained from an external source of secondary data from existing related literature. This technique was chosen because it allows researchers to investigate the unique historical, economic, and political settings of Nigeria-China ties. This includes studying previous diplomatic actions, economic agreements, and investment trends, which can provide vital clues about the changing nature of their relationship. Furthermore, the study's research and findings were based on qualitative content analysis.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Nigeria-China Bilateral Relations

Bilateral ties between Nigeria and China did not begin well, since Nigeria's generally pro-western orientation after independence hampered her external policy toward China. Evidently, this resulted in Nigeria's initial refusal of a China-proposed diplomatic interaction in 1964, implying that, unlike some of her African counterparts who had embraced China, Nigeria turned a blind eye to the infrastructure and other benefits associated with relations with China (Utomi, 2008; Bukarambe, 2005). Furthermore, China, which had supported the Biafran secessionists during the Nigerian Civil War, terminated the previously existing ties between the two nations. Despite the initially chilly ties between the two nations, this story did not last long as the tables reversed in the years following Biafra's defeat, which marked the end of the war in 1970 (Porter, 1986). China's decision to support Nigeria after Biafra's defeat led to a restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This shift in alliances highlights the complex and ever-changing nature of international politics.

Nigeria and China since the late 1950s, recognized and actual bilateral relations between the two countries did not begin until 1971 (Oke, Oshinfowokan, & Okonoda, 2019; Gimba & Ibrahim, 2018; Utomi, 2008). Since then, their commercial links have increased rapidly. According to Ibrahim and Sari (2019), Nigeria and China's commercial relationship, which has grown from early collaboration in science and technology to other areas, is one of the best in Africa since Nigeria serves as a viable market for China. China's investments in Nigeria have expanded beyond infrastructure projects to include telecommunications, agriculture, and manufacturing. The two countries have also strengthened their diplomatic ties through mutual visits and cooperation in international forums.

Furthermore, China has developed several enterprises in Nigeria, bolstering bilateral ties (Ibrahim & Sari, 2019). Nigeria's strong links with China, particularly in terms of oil exports, have reinforced the country's relationship with BRICS, a conglomeration of economic powerhouses that includes China (Abiodun, 2011). This strategic partnership has also led to an increase in Chinese investments in Nigeria's infrastructure, contributing to the country's

economic development. Additionally, Nigeria has benefited from China's expertise in technology and manufacturing, further enhancing their bilateral cooperation.

Political scientists anticipate that Chinese participation in Nigerian economic affairs would result in a repeat of westernized exploitation (Thompson & Olusegun, 2014). However, a connection as sophisticated and complicated as Nigeria and China indicates a more balanced kind of contact than in the West, even if these exchanges are still regarded as unequal. As a result, experts have recently noted a progressive change in Nigerian patronage away from the West and toward China and the other BRICS nations of Asia and Latin America. Nonetheless, others question the feasibility of Nigeria's relationship with China (Ibrahim & Sari, 2019).

Both Nigeria and China are giants in their own right, yet one's strength may outweigh the other; for example, Nigeria is the most populous country on the African continent, while China is the most populous country in the globe. Again, Nigeria and China both have strong economic capacities on their own continents, but when it comes to proportional size, China's economy vastly outperforms Nigeria's. To put things in perspective, whereas Nigeria's GDP was \$448.12 billion in 2019, Chinese GDP was \$14.343 trillion in the same fiscal year (World Bank Group, 2020).

The Nigeria – China Bilateral Relations: Trade

Nigeria and China have maintained commercial ties since 1971, when the two nations signed the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations. Since then, commercial relations between the two nations have evolved from limited and infrequent interaction to a more sophisticated and costly corporate partnership. The amount of commerce between Nigeria and China gradually expanded until fast expansion turned China from a net exporter of crude oil to the world's second-largest consumer of crude oil in 1993. Since 2004, commerce between the two nations has surged by about 300 percent, peaking at \$7.2 billion in 2008. Trade between the two nations totaled \$7.3 billion in 2009 and \$7.7 billion in 2010. Nigeria is currently Africa's second-largest commercial partner with China, after South Africa. Nigeria's increased imports of Chinese goods relative to its exports to China have resulted in a trade deficit with China, which is expected to grow significantly as trade relations improve until Nigeria can offer its industrial producers domestic alternatives of comparable quality at competitive prices (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023).

Global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank have all played a significant role in the destruction of Nigeria's manufacturing sector by requiring Nigeria to liberalize trade, freeze wages, devalue the currency, remove public subsidies, and implement other austerity measures that have resulted in increased underutilization of productive capacity. Nigeria's rising reliance on foreign capital, consumer goods, and services has paralyzed the home economy. Substandard items target Nigerian markets, and as a result of fierce competition, indigenous manufacturing enterprises have failed (Ayoola in Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). This has led to a decline in job opportunities for Nigerian citizens and a loss of economic independence. The country's manufacturing sector continues to struggle to compete with cheaper imported goods, further exacerbating the problem.

In September 2021, Nigeria reported a trade deficit of USD 1.1 billion. A trade surplus of NGN 362.7 billion in December 2019 was followed by a deficit of NGN 588.7 billion in December 2020. While imports rose 26.0 percent to NGN 1,760 billion, exports plummeted 33.4 percent to

NGN 1,171 billion, owing to a 29.6 percent drop in crude oil exports. When Q4 is included, the trade imbalance jumped from NGN 579 billion at the same time two years ago to NGN 2,731 billion in Q4. Nigeria recorded a trade imbalance of NGN 7,375 billion for the whole year 2020, compared to an NGN 2,232 billion surplus in 2019 (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). This significant shift in trade balance can be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global trade and the fluctuations in oil prices throughout 2020. The widening trade deficit highlights the challenges faced by Nigeria in maintaining a stable and sustainable trade position amidst external economic shocks.

Nigeria-China Investment Relations

China distinguished itself from other emerging countries, such as Nigeria, via its fast economic and technical progress. Nigeria and China have bilateral commercial connections because China is interested in Nigeria's oil resources, while Nigeria is interested in Chinese investment, both technological and non-technological. Nigeria and China committed to five principles when they initially established diplomatic ties in 1971, which bore some resemblance to China's change in foreign policy toward Africa. In a press release dated April 26, 1971, Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Information listed five guiding principles: mutual non-aggression, non-interference in one another's internal affairs, respect for one another's sovereignty and territorial integrity, sovereign equality, and harmonious coexistence (Osimen et al., 2022). These principles laid the foundation for the strong relationship between Nigeria and China, paving the way for increased Chinese investment in various sectors in Nigeria. As China continues to expand its global influence, Nigeria remains an attractive destination for Chinese investment due to its strategic location and abundant natural resources.

Without a doubt, China's political inventiveness has contributed to the achievement of her economic ambitions. China sells completed products to Nigeria as part of this commercial partnership. Gu Xiaojie, China's ambassador to Nigeria, boasted at a recent conference that Nigeria was China's top engineering market, second biggest export market, third-largest trade partner, and key African investment destination (Akinterinwa, 2016). In recent evidence, the Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria, Ambassador Cui Jianchun, indicated that despite the coronavirus outbreak, commerce between his nation and Nigeria will exceed \$20 billion in 2020. Nigeria buys more from China than from the US, India, and other countries combined. Only raw agricultural items like cotton and lumber, as well as minerals like crude oil, are imported into China from Nigeria.

With over 200 Chinese businesses working in Nigeria, China has increased its export portfolio to encompass mechanical and human knowledge, as well as investment money (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). This strong economic relationship between China and Nigeria is expected to continue growing, with both countries benefiting from the exchange of goods and services. The presence of Chinese businesses in Nigeria also contributes to job creation and technology transfer, further solidifying the partnership between the two nations.

The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation is primarily responsible for the repair of Nigeria's railway infrastructure. China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) and China National Petroleum and Chemicals Corporation (CNPCC) are winning rich contracts and constructing enviable access routes to Nigeria's deep sea oil resources. China National Overseas Oil Company (CNOOC) purchased a 45% share in OPL 246 at Nigeria's Akpo oil field. According to the terms of the arrangement, CNOOC would get 70% of the earnings, with

Nigeria's NNPC receiving the remaining 30%. Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) was awarded licenses for four oil blocks, OPL 471, 721, 732, and 298, in consideration of CNPC's contribution to the anticipated \$2 billion Kaduna refinery renovation project. China's interest in Nigeria's new liquefied gas is also obvious in the contracts struck by Petro China and other Chinese companies to acquire part of Nigeria's crude oil. China's key objective in these attempts is to sustain its domestic economic growth by extending its market and getting access to raw materials (Osimen et al., 2022).

Despite China's investments in Nigeria, the two nations have an imbalanced and lopsided relationship. As billions of US dollars flow through Nigeria's tin-tanks, causing issues with commerce, balances of payments, and national debt, among other things, China gains more in the long run than Nigeria. Nigeria exported commodities of \$1.77 billion to China in 2020, according to the United Nations' COMTRADE database (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). However, Nigeria has also benefited from the BRI projects, which include the Abuja/Kaduna Standard Gauge Rail Line connecting the nation's capital Abuja to Kaduna, a trade center and transportation hub in north-western Nigeria; the Lagos/Ibadan Standard Gauge Rail Line connecting Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital, to Ibadan, the former administrative capital of south-western Nigeria; and the ambitious Lagos/Kano Railway connecting the two most populous cities in that Others include new international airport terminals in Abuja, Port Harcourt in the oil-rich Niger Delta, and Kano, Nigeria's medieval capital.

Furthermore, the railway line between Lagos and Ibadan began operations in December 2020, the most recent of China's extensive industrial investments in Nigeria. It will cost around \$1.5 billion US and cover 156 kilometers. China has also assisted Nigeria in its fight against the "Boko Haram" insurgency by financing money and giving military support. According to the Debt Management Office, Nigeria's total debt to China as of March 31, 2010 was \$3.402 billion. Since 2010, the funds have been utilized to cover 11 loan facilities from China Exim Bank (Osimen et al., 2022).

Political Influence of Nigeria-China Bilateral Relations

China established diplomatic ties with Nigeria on February 10, 1971, following an earlier meeting in 1960 when a Chinese team attended Nigeria's independence celebration (Utomi, 2007). Although diplomatic relations began slowly, they grew significantly when Nigeria, along with other Asian, Latin American, and African countries, backed China's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), despite opposition from Western powers (Ocholi & Okonkwo, 2023). This support from Nigeria helped solidify the relationship between the two countries, leading to increased cooperation in various sectors such as trade, infrastructure development, and cultural exchanges. The strong diplomatic ties between China and Nigeria have continued to strengthen over the years, with both countries collaborating on various international issues and initiatives.

From 1971 until 1993, Nigeria and China strengthened their diplomatic ties to ambassadorial status, building embassies in each other's capitals (Kwanashe 2015). Political developments in both nations at the time had an important influence in improving their diplomatic connections. The emergence of authoritarian military administrations in Nigeria, along with worldwide criticism of the death of Ogoni activists, resulted in further isolation from Western Europe and the United States. Similarly, China endured censure and political isolation in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square tragedy. These common experiences drew Nigeria and China closer together.

Furthermore, from 1970 to 1993, China adopted a political and diplomatic policy in Africa that sought ideological allies against capitalism and supported national liberation movements (Kwanashie, 2015). Nigeria, while not a frontline state, acted as a conduit for China's assistance to liberation forces. This partnership improved diplomatic relations between China and Nigeria, resulting in more high-level diplomatic visits and boosted Chinese commerce and investment in Nigeria.

In 1974, General Yakubu Gowon, the Head of State, paid a visit to China. Ten years later, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, then vice president, paid a visit to China. General Abacha followed suit in 1998. With the restoration of democratic rule, President Olusegun Obasanjo paid visits to China in 1999, 2001, and 2005. Vice Premier Geng Biao of China paid a visit to Nigeria in 1978, followed by Vice Premier Huang Hua in 1981, President Jiang Zemin in 2002, and President Hu Jintao in 2006 (Ocholi & Okonkwo, 2023). These visits marked significant milestones in the diplomatic relations between Nigeria and China, showcasing the growing partnership between the two nations. The exchange of visits between high-ranking officials continued to strengthen economic and political ties between Nigeria and China over the years.

Theoretical Framework

The political economy approach was used as the theoretical basis for the investigation. The political economy method originated on the basis of classical political economics and has its roots in Karl Marx's works. Marx, building on the works of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and James Mill, was the first to attempt to re-establish political economy as a comprehensive field of study concerned with not only the management and distribution of social wealth but also the class relations that arise from such, as well as the impact of these on the evolution of society from one stage to the next. Karl Marx defined political economy as a science that not only understands but also profoundly changes society (Nna, 2000). Marx believed that the capitalist system inherently led to the exploitation and alienation of the working class, and he advocated for a socialist revolution to overthrow it. His theories on political economy continue to influence modern discussions on capitalism, socialism, and the role of the state in economic affairs.

Simply expressed, political economics is the study of the laws that control the production and exchange of tangible means of sustenance in human societies. It is the study of the conditions and forms under which distinct human civilizations create, trade, and distribute their products. However, the subject of political economics is not the process of production itself but the social connections into which humans engage during the production, trade, and consumption processes (Nwachukwu, 2017). These social connections include power dynamics, class structures, and the distribution of resources within a society. By examining these factors, political economics seeks to understand how economic systems impact social relations and vice versa.

The approach thus seeks to comprehend the social relationships into which humans engage during the processes of production, trade, and consumption. Kuznetsov et al. (1988) emphasize this issue by stating that "every society has a definite system of production relations or the economic system of the society, which is based on property relations." Political economics is the study of production relations and their relationship with productive forces. Thus, political economics is the study of production relationships in all economic and social structures." The political economics approach prioritizes material conditions, particularly economic elements, when explaining social life.

The political economy approach is especially significant in evaluating Nigeria-China bilateral relations, notably in terms of trade, investment, and political influence. Over the last few decades, commerce between Nigeria and China has increased dramatically. A political economics analysis would look at how political decisions, including trade agreements and policies, influence economic interactions between the two countries. For example, Nigeria's desire for manufactured goods and China's need for natural resources have improved trade relations. Furthermore, political variables such as diplomatic connections and geopolitical interests can have an impact on trade dynamics, including tariff talks, trade agreements, and dispute settlement.

China has been a big investor in Nigeria, mostly in infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications. A political economy viewpoint would look at the reasons for Chinese investments in Nigeria, which might include gaining access to resources, growing market presence, and establishing geopolitical alliances. Furthermore, it will examine how Nigerian government policies, laws, and political stability affect Chinese investments, as well as the socioeconomic consequences of these investments for local populations and sectors.

Nigeria-China ties go beyond commerce and investment to include diplomatic and political collaboration. China's expanding influence in Africa, particularly Nigeria, is frequently viewed through a political economics lens. This includes investigating how China's economic participation translates into political influence, such as gaining support for international concerns, influencing regional organizations, and defining development agendas.

Discussion

It was shown that Nigeria and China have maintained strong business connections since 1971, with considerable increases in trade quantities over time. China has developed as an important economic partner for Nigeria, with Nigeria being China's second-largest crude oil supplier. Despite this, Nigeria has a trade imbalance with China, mostly due to its reliance on imported Chinese commodities. This dependency causes issues for Nigeria's domestic manufacturing sector, emphasizing the need for targeted actions to support local sectors and reduce trade imbalances.

In addition, Chinese investment in Nigeria includes telecommunications, agriculture, and manufacturing in addition to infrastructure projects. Notably, Chinese corporations have made significant contributions to Nigeria's infrastructure development, notably in railway building and oil exploration. However, worries remain about the imbalance in Nigeria-China ties, with Nigeria possibly suffering the brunt of economic effects from unequal trade dynamics.

Also, on the diplomatic front, Nigeria and China have developed stronger ties throughout time, characterized by mutual support on international concerns. This diplomatic engagement has helped to strengthen relations between the two countries. Additionally, China's economic investments in Nigeria have translated into political influence, as seen by Nigeria's support for China's ambition for a permanent membership on the UN Security Council. This convergence of economic and political interests highlights the complexities of Nigeria-China relations and the multidimensional character of their bilateral interactions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Nigeria and China's bilateral relationship includes commerce, investment, and political collaboration. While both nations gain from this collaboration, there are certain underlying issues and inequalities that must be addressed. Nigeria's reliance on imported Chinese commodities, along with its trade imbalance, underlines the country's economic weakness. Furthermore, the level of Chinese investment raises concerns about Nigeria's economic sovereignty and long-term viability. However, diplomatic and political connections between the two countries have become stronger, reflecting joint interests and aspirations on a global scale.

Based on the findings the following recommendations were suggested:

- i. Nigeria should look at expanding its trading partnerships beyond China to decrease reliance and lessen the danger of trade imbalances.
- ii. The Nigerian government should undertake measures to boost native businesses and minimize dependency on imported commodities, promoting economic resilience and growth.
- iii. To achieve mutual benefit and long-term growth, Nigeria and China should stress openness and accountability in their investment agreements.
- iv. Nigeria's diplomatic relations should be balanced, taking into account both economic interests and strategic aims while maintaining its sovereignty.
- v. Nigeria should adopt long-term policies for economic growth and infrastructural projects, taking into account the impact of foreign investments on national interests and sustainability.

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