# *NIGERIA-CHINA ECONOMIC RELATIONS: EVALUATING CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS*

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**Keywords**

Catalyst, Data-driven Journalism, Health Reporting, Precision Journalism, Print Media

**Abstract**

***Research Problem***
*The rapid expansion of Nigeria-China economic relations since 1971 presents a paradox of significant opportunity alongside profound structural challenges. While engagement has brought infrastructure development and trade growth, persistent issues like a massive trade imbalance, dumping of substandard goods, limited technology transfer, and concerning labour practices constrain Nigeria's developmental outcomes and threaten its economic sovereignty. This study critically evaluates these asymmetries and their strategic implications.*

***Methods/Theory***
*This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data from books, journal articles, official reports, and credible media sources. A content analysis and comparative method were employed to interpret the dynamics of the relationship systematically. The analysis is guided by dependency theory, which frames Nigeria as a peripheral state, and realism, which highlights China's pursuit of national interest and power maximization.*

***Results***
*The findings reveal a deeply asymmetrical relationship. Nigeria's overreliance on imports of manufactured goods undermines domestic industries and exacerbates deindustrialization, while its exports remain limited to raw commodities. Chinese infrastructure investments and loans, though substantial, deepen debt exposure and show minimal evidence of meaningful technology transfer or fair labour practices, consolidating Nigeria's dependent position.*

***Conclusion***
*The relationship is structurally skewed in China's favour, reflecting both the systemic inequalities explained by dependency theory and the strategic power pursuit illuminated by realism. Without strategic recalibration, Nigeria risks deepening its dependency.*

***Key Contribution to Knowledge***
*This paper provides a critical, Nigeria-specific analysis that integrates dependency and realist theoretical perspectives to offer a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics and structural constraints within the bilateral engagement.*

***Recommendations***
*The study recommends Nigeria prioritize industrialization, enforce import regulations to curb substandard goods, negotiate binding technology transfer clauses, ensure transparent and sustainable loan agreements, and adopt a principle of reciprocity in its economic diplomacy with China.*

## Introduction

The evolving relationship between Nigeria and China has become one of the most significant bilateral engagements in Africa, reshaping trade patterns, investment flows, and diplomatic alignments. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1971, the two countries have expanded cooperation in critical sectors including oil and gas, infrastructure, telecommunications, and manufacturing. This relationship is framed within broader China–Africa relations, where China has emerged as Africa's largest trading partner and a leading financier of infrastructure development (Global Times, 2025). Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy and most populous country, represents a strategic partner in China's global expansion. Yet, despite the growing intensity of this partnership, concerns persist about its asymmetrical nature, especially the widening trade imbalance, dependence on Chinese loans, and limited technological transfer (Abubakar, 2025).

Nigeria occupies a central position in Africa's political economy, with abundant natural resources, a strategic geographic location, and a population exceeding 200 million. These endowments make it a natural target for China's foreign policy, which has shifted towards Africa since the early 2000s under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). China's interests are rooted in securing energy resources, expanding markets for its manufactured goods, and projecting its influence globally. Nigeria's interests, in contrast, are driven by the search for foreign direct investment, infrastructure financing, and trade diversification (Abubakar, 2025). However, the interaction between these divergent interests has produced a relationship characterized more by dependency than mutual benefit.

The historical trajectory of Nigeria–China relations reflects both opportunity and constraint. Early contacts date back to Nigeria's independence in 1960, with formal diplomatic ties established in 1971 (Okwara, 2023). Since then, successive Nigerian governments have engaged China to advance economic goals. Under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), relations deepened through oil-for-infrastructure agreements, which promised roads, railways, and refineries in exchange for crude oil (Mthembu-Salter, 2009). Subsequent administrations under Presidents Yar'Adua, Jonathan, and Buhari sustained these engagements, leading to large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Abuja–Kaduna railway, the Lagos–Ibadan railway, and

new airport terminals. In addition, Nigeria became a signatory to China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, signaling a long-term strategic alignment (Pine, 2023).

Despite these gains, the relationship is fraught with challenges. Nigeria imports disproportionately more from China than it exports, creating a trade deficit that undermines domestic industry and perpetuates dependency. Statistics from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics indicate that between 2018 and 2021, Nigeria spent over ₦19 trillion on imports from China while exporting only ₦2.09 trillion worth of goods, mostly crude oil and raw materials. This imbalance reflects a broader structural problem: China exports finished products to Nigeria while importing raw commodities (Adewole and Ogunrinu, 2018), a pattern reminiscent of colonial economic relations. Additionally, issues such as dumping of substandard goods, maltreatment of Nigerian workers in Chinese firms, and weak enforcement of environmental and labor standards have further exposed the vulnerabilities in the partnership.

This paper therefore seeks to provide a critical evaluation of the challenges inherent in Nigeria–China economic relations and explore policy options for Nigeria to maximize the benefits while mitigating the risks. Specifically, the paper addresses two questions: (i) What are the key challenges and limitations in Nigeria–China economic relations? and (ii) How can Nigeria rebalance the partnership to achieve more equitable trade, investment, and development outcomes? The study is significant because it situates Nigeria's experience within global debates on South–South cooperation and economic diplomacy, while also offering policy lessons applicable to other African states engaging with China.

## Historical Evolution of Nigeria–China Relations

The trajectory of Nigeria–China relations is deeply rooted in post-colonial diplomacy and South–South cooperation. The first formal diplomatic contact occurred in 1971, when Nigeria recognized the People's Republic of China and established embassies in both capitals. This development coincided with China's admission to the United Nations Security Council, signaling the country's reemergence as a global actor. In subsequent decades, Nigeria–China relations progressed gradually, often shaped by shifts in domestic leadership and international conditions (Ogunsanwo, 2008; Agyeno, 2021).

A significant turning point came during President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration (1999–2007), when Nigeria pursued an "oil-for-infrastructure" agreement with China. Under this framework, China invested in Nigeria's petroleum and transport sectors in exchange for crude oil concessions (Davies, 2007). This era witnessed heightened Chinese participation in Nigeria's economic landscape, particularly through the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). Subsequent administrations under Presidents Yar'Adua, Jonathan, and Buhari continued to deepen these ties, albeit with varying strategies. Jonathan's government signed multi-billion-dollar loan agreements with China's Exim Bank to finance airports and light rail projects, while Buhari's administration concluded a currency swap arrangement and secured infrastructure loans worth over $6 billion (Onuah et al., 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further consolidated relations. Nigeria joined the BRI in 2019, opening opportunities for large-scale projects such as the Lagos–Ibadan railway and new airport terminals. Yet, beneath this surface-

level cooperation lies a growing concern over asymmetry. Nigeria imports predominantly manufactured goods from China while exporting crude oil and raw materials, reinforcing a pattern of dependency (Iyatse, 2021).

## Scholarly Debates on Nigeria–China Economic Relations

Scholarly discourse on Nigeria–China relations has been polarized between optimism and skepticism. Optimistic perspectives argue that Chinese engagement provides Africa—and Nigeria in particular—with a viable alternative to Western-dominated international finance institutions. Proponents highlight China's willingness to finance infrastructure, transfer skills, and expand markets without imposing stringent political conditions (Raji & Ogunrinu, 2018). From this perspective, Nigeria benefits from access to affordable loans, improved physical infrastructure, and growing trade volumes.

Skeptics, however, emphasize the lopsided nature of the relationship. They argue that Nigeria's reliance on Chinese imports has undermined domestic industries, leading to job losses and deindustrialization, particularly in the textile sector (Campbell, 2011). Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the quality of Chinese goods, non-fulfillment of contractual agreements, and the absence of meaningful technology transfer (Mbamalu, 2015). Scholars also warn of the risk of "debt-trap diplomacy," where excessive borrowing from China could compromise Nigeria's sovereignty (Adigbuo, 2021).

At a broader level, critics argue that China's engagement in Africa mirrors historical patterns of exploitation, albeit under South–South rhetoric. Azaiki (2006) describes it as "colonialism in new clothing," where raw materials flow to China while Africa becomes a market for surplus manufactured goods. This aligns with dependency theorists who argue that such relationships reproduce global inequalities rather than dismantle them.

## Trade Patterns and Economic Asymmetries

Empirical evidence highlights the uneven structure of Nigeria–China trade. Between 2018 and 2021, Nigeria spent over ₦19 trillion on imports from China, while exports to China amounted to only ₦2.09 trillion (Iyatse, 2021). Imports from China accounted for 27–30 percent of Nigeria's total imports during this period, dominated by electronics, textiles, and industrial equipment. In contrast, Nigeria's exports to China were limited to crude oil, timber, and agricultural commodities, demonstrating low value addition.

Such trade asymmetry has significant implications. First, it exacerbates Nigeria's balance of payments deficit (Ode, as cited in Okwara, 2023), contributing to macroeconomic instability. Second, it undermines local industries, which struggle to compete with cheaper Chinese imports (Chukwudozie, 2025). Third, it deepens dependency, as Nigeria relies heavily on external supply chains rather than developing indigenous manufacturing capacity (Quadri, 2020). These outcomes echo findings from the African Economic Research Consortium, which noted that Chinese trade inflows often lead to deindustrialization in African economies (Ogunkola & Adewuyi, 2008).

## Chinese Investment and Its Implications

Chinese investment in Nigeria spans diverse sectors including oil, construction, telecommunications, and manufacturing. The CCECC has been central to railway modernization projects, while Chinese oil firms such as Sinopec and CNOOC hold significant stakes in Nigeria's energy sector. In addition, Chinese companies operate across states like

Lagos and Ogun, partnering with Nigerian firms such as Dangote Group for cement production (Mbamalu, 2015).

While these investments create jobs and improve infrastructure, they are not without problems. Reports indicate that Nigerian workers employed in Chinese firms face poor working conditions, wage discrimination, and limited career advancement (Campbell, 2011). Furthermore, technology transfer remains minimal, as Chinese firms often import skilled labor from China rather than training local staff. The lack of environmental safeguards in Chinese projects also raises questions about sustainability.

## Theoretical Framework

### Dependency Theory

Dependency theory offers a useful lens for analyzing Nigeria–China economic relations. Rooted in Latin American structuralist thought, dependency theory argues that global capitalism creates a structural division between core and periphery states, where resources flow from the periphery to enrich the core (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1981). In this framework, Nigeria functions as a periphery, exporting raw materials and importing finished goods, while China increasingly assumes the role of a core state.

The Nigeria–China trade imbalance exemplifies this dependency. By importing cheap consumer goods and machinery while exporting unprocessed commodities, Nigeria perpetuates an economic structure that undermines local industries and inhibits technological advancement. The reliance on Chinese loans further entrenches dependency, as debt servicing diverts resources away from domestic development. As Samir Amin noted, such dependency is not accidental but a systemic feature of global capitalism that reproduces underdevelopment in peripheral states.

### Realism

Realist theory provides a complementary perspective by focusing on state interests and power dynamics. Realism assumes that states are rational actors operating in an anarchic international system, seeking survival and power (Morgenthau, 1978; Waltz, 1979). From this viewpoint, China's engagement in Nigeria is less about altruistic cooperation and more about securing energy resources, expanding markets, and consolidating geopolitical influence.

China's Belt and Road Initiative illustrates this realist logic. By financing infrastructure in Nigeria and other African countries, China not only secures access to raw materials but also embeds its companies in strategic sectors. Nigeria, in contrast, has weaker bargaining power and often negotiates from a position of need. The realist framework therefore underscores the asymmetry of interests: while Nigeria seeks development and financing, China seeks long-term strategic advantage.

### Integrating Dependency and Realism

Together, dependency theory and realism offer a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria–China relations. Dependency theory explains the structural inequalities in trade and investment, highlighting how Nigeria's economy is conditioned by external forces. Realism, on the other hand, illuminates the agency of China as a rising power strategically pursuing its interests. By combining these perspectives, this study situates Nigeria–China relations within both systemic and actor-oriented analyses, showing that asymmetry is both a structural outcome of global capitalism and a deliberate strategy of Chinese foreign policy.

## Result/Findings

This section presents the major findings of the study based on a critical analysis of secondary data, organized under thematic issues that define the Nigeria–China economic relationship. The findings reflect both the opportunities created by Chinese engagement and the challenges that undermine Nigeria's economic sovereignty and development.

### i. Growth of Nigeria–China Trade Relations

The findings reveal that trade between Nigeria and China has expanded significantly since the early 2000s. China is now Nigeria's largest source of imports, accounting for between 25 and 30 percent of Nigeria's total imports in recent years (Iyatse, 2021). Nigeria's imports from China include electronics, textiles, machinery, construction equipment, and consumer goods, many of which are cheaper than locally produced alternatives.

By contrast, Nigeria's exports to China remain limited to crude oil, timber, and agricultural products, with little value addition. In 2020, Nigeria exported goods worth only US$1.77 billion to China, while imports from China exceeded US$20 billion. This imbalance reflects a structural problem in which Nigeria functions primarily as a supplier of raw commodities while importing finished goods (Abubakar, 2025).

The evidence demonstrates that Nigeria's trade dependency on China has deepened over time. Between 1999 and 2019, imports from China increased by over 4,200 percent, while Nigerian exports grew marginally (CARI, 2020). This creates a persistent trade deficit that undermines Nigeria's balance of payments and reduces foreign exchange reserves.

### ii. Chinese Investments in Infrastructure and Energy

Another key finding is that Chinese investment in Nigeria has been concentrated in infrastructure and energy (Chukwudozie, 2025). Through companies such as the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), Sinopec, and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China has become a dominant player in Nigeria's transport and oil sectors.

According to Emewu (2021) and Ubi (2023), Major infrastructure projects financed or constructed by Chinese firms include:

- The Abuja–Kaduna standard gauge railway (operational since 2016).
- The Lagos–Ibadan railway (commissioned in 2020 at a cost of US$1.5 billion).
- New airport terminals in Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Lagos.
- Road construction projects such as the Lagos–Badagry expressway.

In the energy sector, Chinese companies have secured oil blocks and long-term supply contracts in exchange for infrastructure financing. The 2006 "oil-for-infrastructure" deal awarded China four oil blocks and refinery rehabilitation contracts in exchange for US$2 billion in infrastructure projects (Egbula and Zheng 2011). Although many of these projects were partially implemented or abandoned, they illustrate China's strategic interest in Nigeria's energy resources.

### iii. The Role of Loans and Debt Exposure

The findings also reveal Nigeria's growing reliance on Chinese loans to finance development projects. Between 2010 and 2020, Nigeria secured 11 loan facilities worth US$3.4 billion from the China Exim Bank (Debt Management Office, 2021). These loans financed major projects including railway

modernization, airport terminals, and telecommunications upgrades (Ubi, 2023).

While Chinese loans are often presented as concessional with low interest rates, concerns arise about their long-term sustainability. Critics argue that loan agreements lack transparency and may include clauses that compromise Nigeria's sovereignty in the event of default. Although Nigeria's total debt to China represents only about 3.9 percent of its overall external debt, the symbolic and political implications of debt dependence are significant.

### iv. Trade Imbalance and Deindustrialization

A striking finding is the negative impact of Chinese imports on Nigeria's domestic industries. The influx of cheap Chinese textiles, electronics, and manufactured goods has weakened Nigeria's manufacturing base, particularly in Kano's once-thriving textile industry. Reports suggest that over 28,000 jobs were lost in the textile sector by 2015 due to competition from Chinese imports (Campbell, 2011).

Local manufacturers are unable to compete with low-cost Chinese products, leading to factory closures, unemployment, and a decline in Nigeria's industrial output (Okwara, 2023). This outcome reinforces the dependency theory perspective that Nigeria's economic structure is being conditioned to serve external interests.

### v. Technology Transfer and Labour Practices

Contrary to the rhetoric of mutual benefit, the study finds limited evidence of meaningful technology transfer from China to Nigeria. Chinese firms often import their own skilled labor rather than training Nigerians, limiting the potential for knowledge sharing and capacity building. Even in cases where Nigerians are employed, they are frequently confined to low-skill roles with limited upward mobility (Bukar and Arabaci, 2023).

Labour rights violations are also reported in Chinese-owned firms operating in Nigeria (Chukwudozie, 2025). Instances of poor working conditions, wage discrimination, and disregard for health and safety regulations have been documented (Ogunsanwo, 2008). These practices raise concerns about the social sustainability of Chinese investments.

### vi. Quality of Imports and Dumping of Substandard Goods

Another recurring theme is the influx of substandard and counterfeit goods from China into Nigerian markets (Abubakar, 2025). Many Nigerian traders and consumers patronize these goods because they are cheaper, even though their quality is often inferior. This has undermined consumer welfare, displaced local industries, and exposed Nigerians to health and safety risks.

The dumping of low-quality goods is facilitated by weak regulatory enforcement in Nigeria and the willingness of local traders to profit from cheap imports. While this practice benefits China by expanding its export market, it undermines Nigeria's long-term development objectives.

### vii. Political and Strategic Implications

The findings highlight the broader political implications of Nigeria–China relations. China positions itself as a partner in South–South cooperation, emphasizing principles of non-interference and mutual respect. However, in practice, the asymmetrical nature of the relationship reflects realist calculations. China secures access to resources, markets, and political support in international forums, while Nigeria receives infrastructure financing but at the cost of dependency (Abubakar, 2025).

China's engagement also extends beyond economics. It has provided military assistance to Nigeria in the fight against Boko Haram and invested in satellite technology, such as the construction of Nigeria's first communications satellite (NIGCOMSAT-1) in 2007 (Ubi, 2023). These initiatives broaden the scope of cooperation but also deepen Nigeria's reliance on China across multiple sectors.

### viii. Positive Outcomes of Engagement

Despite the challenges, findings also indicate several positive outcomes. Infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loans have improved Nigeria's transport and communication systems, reducing travel time and enhancing trade logistics. The currency swap agreement signed in 2018 has also eased trade by reducing transaction costs for Nigerian importers (Ajah and Onuoha, 2024; Business Day, 2024)).

Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative has facilitated Nigeria's integration into global trade networks, potentially opening new opportunities for investment and industrialization. Nigerian businesses such as Dangote Group have successfully partnered with Chinese firms to expand cement production and increase regional exports (Mbamalu, 2015, Business Insider, 2023).

### ix. Persistent Challenges

Overall, the findings underscore persistent challenges:

- Structural trade imbalance that undermines Nigeria's economic sovereignty.
- Debt dependency, with opaque loan agreements and long-term repayment risks.
- Deindustrialization, driven by cheap imports.
- Lack of technology transfer and weak labor protections.
- Dumping of substandard goods, facilitated by poor regulation.
- Asymmetrical bargaining power, with China setting terms favorable to its own interests.

## Conclusion

This study set out to critically evaluate the Nigeria–China economic relationship, with particular focus on its opportunities, challenges, and implications for Nigeria's development. The findings show that while the partnership has yielded important gains in infrastructure development, trade expansion, and diplomatic cooperation, it remains structurally asymmetrical and largely skewed in favor of China. Nigeria's trade imbalance with China is widening, with imports dominated by manufactured goods while exports are limited to raw commodities. This pattern not only undermines Nigeria's balance of payments but also accelerates the decline of local industries that cannot compete with cheaper Chinese imports.

The analysis further reveals that Chinese loans, while providing much-needed capital for infrastructure, have deepened Nigeria's debt exposure and raised concerns about transparency and long-term sustainability. The absence of meaningful technology transfer and the prevalence of substandard imports reflect additional layers of dependency, echoing the central claims of dependency theory. At the same time, realism helps explain the strategic logic underpinning China's engagement: Nigeria represents a vital source of resources, a large consumer market, and an important partner in China's global quest for influence. Thus, what appears as cooperation is in practice

a carefully calibrated strategy by China to maximize its national interest.

For Nigeria, the lesson is clear. Without recalibrating its foreign economic policy, the country risks reinforcing dependency rather than achieving sustainable development. Nigeria must therefore adopt proactive measures to rebalance the relationship, including promoting industrialization, enforcing regulatory standards, strengthening institutions, and pursuing economic diplomacy grounded in reciprocity. Only by negotiating from a position of strength can Nigeria transform its engagement with China from one of dependency to one of mutual benefit.

In conclusion, Nigeria–China relations embody both opportunity and risk. The challenge before Nigeria's policymakers is not whether to engage with China but how to structure the engagement in ways that advance national development goals. If strategically managed, the relationship can contribute to Nigeria's infrastructural modernization and integration into global trade networks. However, if left unchecked, it risks deepening structural dependency and undermining long-term economic sovereignty.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations are proposed to help Nigeria maximize the benefits of its relationship with China while mitigating the associated risks.

i. Nigeria must prioritize industrialization by supporting domestic manufacturing through subsidies, tax incentives, and infrastructure improvements. By creating a competitive industrial base, Nigeria can reduce overreliance on Chinese imports and expand value-added exports.

ii. Nigeria must enforce import standards and regulatory mechanisms to curb the dumping of substandard goods, Nigerian regulatory agencies such as the Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON) and the Nigerian Customs Service must be strengthened to ensure that only quality imports are allowed into the market. Transparent enforcement mechanisms will protect consumers and local industries.

iii. Loan agreements and investment contracts with China should include binding clauses on technology transfer and local content participation. Nigeria must insist that Chinese companies train and employ Nigerian workers at all skill levels to ensure knowledge sharing and capacity building.

iv. The Nigerian government should negotiate loan agreements with greater transparency and parliamentary oversight. Debt sustainability analyses must guide borrowing decisions, with preference for concessional financing tied to productive projects.

v. Nigeria should move beyond passive engagement and adopt reciprocity as a principle of economic diplomacy. This entails negotiating trade and investment deals that ensure proportional benefits, including market access for Nigerian products in China.

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