

## Beyond Rail Revolution: Rethinking Nigeria-China Relations for the Next Decade

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**Abstract.** Nigeria and China have come a long way in matters of diplomatic relations. The Nigeria-China relations has spanned five decades in the face of changing global dynamics and different political epochs in both countries. This paper reflected on the diplomatic relations so far, China's near indispensable role in Nigeria's infrastructure development with particular to its rail revolution, and the dynamics that should shape the nature of the diplomatic relations between the two countries into the next decade. The paper adopted the qualitative methods, which is mainly narrative and historical, and relied extensively on secondary sources of data. The data gathered were thematically and content analyzed. The paper argued that although Nigeria will continually remain a strategic partner to China and at the heart of its foreign policy on Africa, China has continually had the upper hand as the dominant state in the relationship. The paper identified this as a major failure, the paper recommended that new national priorities along with the bilateral relations should be reevaluated into the next decade of relations.

**Keywords:** Rail Revolution, Rethinking, Nigeria-China, Infrastructure and Development

### 1. Introduction

The Nigeria-China relations has over the years evolved in nature, scale and impact. As a consequence, there existed a considerable number of scholarly commentaries that underpinned the dynamic relationship between both countries. The governments of Nigeria and the People's Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China) activated diplomatic relations on February 10, 1971, with the signing of the Joint Communique on the

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations (China Embassy in Nigeria, 2004). Following this was first the opening of the Chinese Embassy in Nigeria on April 6, 1971 - a gesture that was reciprocated six months later in October 1971 by the government of Nigeria (Osondu-Eti, 2018). While it was widely acknowledged that the motivating factor for the establishment of the relationship was mostly political, the scope of the relations between the two countries has assumed economic dimensions over the years (Odeh, 2014). In examining the dynamics of the China-Nigeria economic relations from the outset, Odeh (2014) opined that the relations had its fair share of stress and strain.

He further established that the first 28 years of diplomatic relations between 1971 - 1999 was of little economic significance largely because of the political instability due to the military interregna that marked that era in Nigeria's history. The development in relation to economic relations received a boost with Nigeria's return to Civilian rule in 1999, a period which also coincided with the period China adopted a new orientation towards Africa in 2000 (Egula & Zheng, 2011).

In essence, the improvement in economic investment in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, since 2000, was occasioned by a revamped Chinese policy towards Africa as part of an overarching strategy (anchored on trade, cultural and diplomatic ties) of the Chinese government to look outward (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). As a result of this strategy, and in an effort to integrate China-Africa relations, the government created the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). As articulated in the FOCAC framework and reiterated in its January 2006 white paper titled "China's African Policy", Hanauer and

Morris (2014) point out that China's central goal for increasing ties with Africa was hinged on a 'win-win' approach that would manifest through enhanced opportunities for trade and investment for China, and economic opportunities for Africans without an undue interference in their governments. This goal presents a fundamental flaw that stems from China's privileged stance as a world power to be seen doing Africa a favour as opposed to relating with each African country on a state-by-state basis as equal. This position lends credence to the observations China's strategic reach towards was not borne out of altruism but out of its interest in the African market, its natural resources (Osondu-Eti, 2018) as well as the need to sustain its position as a global economic hegemon (Li, 2016).

In relation to the latter, China's original interest in Africa was borne out of a necessity, birthed through bilateral trade with African nations and support for the continent's developmental needs, as a strategy to counter the growing influence of the West in Africa which were inimical to its interests (Odeh, 2014). It is against this backdrop that the understanding of Nigeria's position as a strategic African trading partner for Africa can be understood. Nigeria has the market (the largest on the continent) and an abundance of raw materials that China is looking for (Igbokwe, 2020).

On a comparative note, Nigeria and China shared some uniqueness in common, both are at the same time the economic and demographic giants of Africa and Asia respectively, although China is much bigger in comparison on both counts. China is a \$14-trillion economy - the second-largest in the world, and with a population of 1.4 billion people while Nigeria is a \$450-billion dollar economy with a population slightly over 200 million people (World Bank, 2019). On the other side of the divide, they also have a number of cultural and political differences. China is a Mandarin-speaking communist republic, while Nigeria is an English-speaking federalist state. In spite of these differences, both countries have continued to enjoy a mutual bond that has spanned five decades. For example, by 2010, as Egbula and Zheng (2011) observed, "Nigeria had become China's fourth biggest African trading partner, and the second largest Chinese export destination on the continent." This drives the point about Nigeria's strategic importance to China, but this has not come to be without some controversies. Scholars are united in the view that while it was acknowledged that the relations had improved, it has largely been one-sided in favour of China, hence one of the focus of this paper.

In trying to highlight this situation, Egula and Zheng (2011), pointed out that 87% of Nigeria's exports to China were oil and gas products, which was a sharp contrast to China's diversified range of product exports to the Nigerian market. To stress this situation, in what could be described as a gaping trade imbalance between the two countries, Odeh (2014) stressed that the unidirectional pattern of Sino-Nigerian investments with the imbalance in favour of China has been worrisome. While Chinese investments in Nigeria continued to grow, Nigeria's Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in China has been put on hold since 1999/2000. This position was complemented, along similar lines, by Opusunju, Akyuz and Inim (2020) who concluded that Nigeria's trade engagement with China was not nearly as beneficial to Nigeria as it was to China. This situation represents both a gap that points to exploitation rather than mutual beneficial relations, which could consequently hinder deeper ties. In this regard, Rindap (2015) observed that a major challenge is Nigeria's inadequate industrial infrastructure when compared to that of China's. Igbokwe (2020) reasoned along these lines when he submitted that apart from China's imperialistic tendencies as a world power and foreign investor in Nigeria, the widening gap between China and Nigeria's industrialised status has the potential to threaten deeper ties between both countries. Now, after 50 years, what is the next phase for the state of the Nigeria-China relations particularly for the next decade? This remained the preoccupation of this paper.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The current dynamics of the Nigeria-China relations can be viewed through the lens of the dependency theory. At its core, the theory held that the interaction of less developed countries with more developed and industrialised countries has worked to the detriment of the less developed ones (Ahiakpor, 1985). First conceived in the late 1950s by Paul Prebisch who was then the Director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, as a way to explain development in Latin America, the theory expounded the reality that the economic growth in advanced industrialised countries did not have any significant consequence in improving the economic lot of poorer, less industrialised countries. In explaining the phenomenon, Prebisch raised the situation in which poor countries only exported primary commodities to the rich countries who in turn, sold the finished products back to the poor countries at exorbitant prices. This situation, in which the poor countries do not add value to their

commodities, denies them significant export earnings. (Ferraro, 2008).

Matunhu (2011) noted that discontentment with the modernisation theory stirred the thinking that birthed the dependency theory. In this connection, dependency theory argues that the underdevelopment of countries is not naturally inherited but instead imposed by the very development of industrialized countries (Azizli, 2013). But how is the concept of dependence conceived in the broader development context? Dos Santos (1970) submitted that by dependence, reference is made to the situation in which the economies of certain countries are subjected to the development of other countries. This submission created a fundamental distinction of countries - one being the dominant one, and the other being the dependent one. In this connection, Dos Santos (1970:1) asserted that:

*The relation of interdependence between two or more economies, and between these and world trade, assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and can be self-sustaining, while other countries (the dependent ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion which can have either a positive or a negative effect on their immediate development.*

This theory of dependence applies both in the economic context, outlined above, and in the infrastructure development context which is the thrust of this paper. Within the context of infrastructure advancement as it pertained to Nigeria-China relations, China is a far more advanced country and as such, Nigeria has had to depend on China's expertise and finance to support its railway infrastructure development. In the Nigeria-China bilateral equation, China is the dominant state while Nigeria is the dependent state.

Within the ambit of this theory, it is important to stress that it is not in the interest of China (dominant) for Nigeria (dependent) to become a highly industrialised state. The highly industrialised states would rather have the less advanced and industrialised one dependent on them rather than support their aspirations for a possible global hegemony. This thinking conformed with the argument that the more advanced states will rather support than compete with the less developed ones. However appropriate that the theory of dependency is in explaining the dynamics of the bilateral relations, it is not without criticism. First, there is the argument that what the theory explained as dependent interstate relations is actually interdependent interstate relations (Azizli, 2013). Another notable criticism is in the

inability of the theory to critically analyse other sectors other than manufacturing (Romaniuk, 2017).

### **3. The Changing Dynamics in the Relations: Infrastructure in View**

When viewed only through the lens of the economic relations between the two countries, there was the possibility to conclude that it has not all been rosy for Nigeria, and bloomy for China. To an extent - particularly in the context of a comparative analysis of benefits enjoyed over the years, this may be true. But viewed strictly on the basis of mutual benefits, the assertion would prove to be incorrect. Although the nature and quantum of benefits may be debatable, it is not easy to dismiss that Nigeria has not benefited, to a significant extent, from its relations with China. While China's strategic interests in Nigeria have been identified earlier, it is imperative to note that the motivations for Nigeria, within the context of the relations, lie in China's successful economic transformation, capacity and ability to deliver on, and finance large-scale infrastructure projects (Egbula and Zheng, 2011). Along similar lines, Bandurina (2020) reasoned that Nigeria-China relations are hinged on reciprocity, mutual benefit and common development which was why China's interests in Nigeria's raw materials and markets have aligned with Nigeria's interest in China's investment, skills and transfer of technology which it needed to pursue its unique developmental needs.

Some of China's interventions in supporting Nigeria's infrastructure gap have come in various forms such as soft loans to fund infrastructure projects in sectors like transport, agriculture and telecommunications and a direct involvement of Chinese companies in the construction of these infrastructure such as railways, roads and airports. There is sufficient literature to substantiate these interventions. For instance, in 2006, during the second term of President Olusegun Obasanjo, China agreed to loan Nigeria \$1 billion to support efforts to upgrade its railway network (Odeh, 2014). This fact was corroborated by Odeh and Aghalino (2018). Nigeria continued to enjoy similar gestures under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua.

For example, during the president's visit to China in 2008, both countries signed for Nigeria to get a US\$500 million concessionary loan to fund projects that would be determined by the Nigerian government (Rindap, 2014). The president after him, President Gooluck Jonathan, also enjoyed a similar hand of fellowship with the Chinese government. A Chinese delegation attended his inauguration and

reaffirmed its commitment to increase its involvement in railway and other projects as well as contribute to Nigeria's economic development (Egbula & Zheng, 2011). It would appear that the Chinese government made good its word when in 2015 for instance, during President Jonathan's visit to China, there was the signing of a Chinese loan agreement of US\$1.5 billion for infrastructure development initiatives, which included the expansion of the Lagos, Kano, Abuja and Port Harcourt airports (Agubumah, 2015).

The Chinese government has given higher, albeit interest-free loans. And Nigeria, under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (GCFR) has particularly enjoyed this gesture. Osondu-Eti (2018:7) gave an insight:

*Recently in 2016, for instance, China gave Nigeria an interest-free loan of 5 billion US dollars for development of its infrastructure- railway upgrade, satellite telecommunication construction, construction of boreholes, hydropower and rural telephone services, among others. Since 2006, Nigeria has received loans from China for different types of assistance for projects concerning infrastructure and agricultural development.*

The other part of the Chinese intervention is the direct involvement of Chinese companies in the construction of these infrastructures. Egbula and Zheng (2011:3) affirmed this with the statement that "while initially driven by its vast demand for energy resources, China's involvement in Nigeria has since expanded far beyond oil. China's public and private companies are making forays into Nigeria's manufacturing and information and communication technologies sectors.

#### **4. Examining Nigeria's Rail Revolution and China's Indispensable Role**

Nigeria is a country with a wide infrastructure gap, and this gap represented one of its biggest impediments to socio-economic development (Rindap, 2015). In particular reference to transportation infrastructure, and by extension, railway, Chen (2018:2) noted that "poor transportation infrastructure in Nigeria has been a major economic bottleneck to the development of its industries and exports because high transport costs lower the competitiveness of its goods." This statement underscored the far-reaching consequences of the dearth of adequate infrastructure to support economic activities and overall productivity.

In this section, the focus is on the country's railway. Over the years, the neglect that the railway sector suffered had a concomitant bearing on the high cost of maintaining highways and other transport infrastructure, which had in turn negatively impacted the country's trade and economic growth (Oxford Business Group, 2019). This current administration in Nigeria, led by President Muhammadu Buhari (GCFR) seemed determined to reverse this trend with the initiatives to rehabilitate the country's rail network. It was the government's ambition in this regard that has spurred what is now being described as the rail revolution.

A little retrospection is useful here. It was established earlier in this paper that the infrastructure inadequacy was one of the major factors impeding on the prospects of deeper ties between Nigeria and China. In the midst of this dilemma, it has been established that Nigeria's relations with China have helped to bridge the country's infrastructure to an extent (Agubumah, 2015). The massive investment in the railway sector by the Nigerian government may not be a welcome idea for the revamp of the transportation sector but also a sound economic decision. Chen (2018:4) reasoned along this line in terms of the multiple benefits of investments in the sector when he submitted that development of railway "has positive spillover effects for complementary industries in upstream manufacturing supply chains, such as steel and construction materials, and generates demand for retail services, all of which promote employment." In the foregoing, a recent statement by the Minister of Transport, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi, agreed with this position and emphasized the investment as a priority of the current administration to bolster job creation. In his words, "the essence of the President's investment in the project is to create employment, he hopes that we are able to grow the economy of Nigeria through Transportation, create employment in the cause of these infrastructure" (Vanguard, 2020).

Since 2015, the government of Nigeria has recorded some significant landmarks in the rail sector. For instance, in July 2016, barely a year into his first-term tenure, President Buhari launched the 187-kilometre standard gauge line between the country's capital - Abuja and Kaduna (Railway Gazette International, 2016). Although the project was initiated in 2011 and almost completed by his predecessor in office, President Goodluck Jonathan, the government has taken several other strides in this regard. It is imperative to note the Abuja-Kaduna segment was the first segment completed as part of the bigger Lagos-Kano standard gauge project which

stemmed from the railway modernisation effort in Nigeria to replace the existing narrow gauge system with the standard gauge system (Railway Technology, 2020).

In supporting these efforts, China has played an undismissible role in this instance (Kaduna-Abuja rail), and in several other railway projects both in terms of construction and project financing. For example, the China Civil and Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) built the rail line for the Nigerian government.

More recently, President Buhari launched a \$3.2 billion project for the construction of the “1443km Port Harcourt – Maiduguri 1067mm-gauge line from the south to the northeast of the country, along with new branch lines to Owerri, Imo state, and Damaturu, Yobe state” (Burroughs, 2021). The report also mentioned that the Nigerian subsidiary of the CCECC would undertake the project, and also outlined the project funding arrangement which spelt out the Nigerian government would pay 15% of the project cost while the remaining 85% would be sorted by a loan to be sourced by a syndicate of Chinese financiers. Other standard gauge line projects in the pipeline include: Lagos-Benin City (300km), Benin-Abakaliki (500km), Benin-Obudu Cattle Ranch (673km), Lagos-Abuja high-speed (615km), Zaria-Birnin Koni (520km), Ega nyi-Otukpo (533km) and Ega nyi-Abuja, all of which would be undertaken by the China Civil and Engineering Construction Corporation (Railway Technology, 2020). The 156km Lagos-Ibadan railway line began operations in January 2021, which is West Africa’s first double-track standard gauge railway, and was also built by the CCECC. To underscore the near indispensable role that Chinese companies, and by extension, China, is playing in Nigeria’s rail revolution, Richard (2019:927) echoed the point when he asserted that “the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation is almost exclusively in charge of rehabilitating Nigeria’s railway system.”. Chen (2018) had expressed a similar position when the author submitted that the biggest projects in Nigeria’s railway sector were being undertaken by China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) which is a subsidiary of the China Railway Construction Company. These submissions reiterated China’s critical role in Nigeria’s effort to bridge its infrastructure gap, and in this instance, initiatives in the railway transport sector.

Beyond this reality, it is noteworthy that funding these projects has cost Nigeria huge amounts of

money, some of which it has had to borrow from China. This reality represents a fraction of Nigeria’s external debt stock. Information from Nigeria’s Debt Management Office (DMO), as at December 31, 2020, showed that the debt owed to China (through the Exim Bank of China) is \$3.26 billion (DMO, 2021). It is also important to mention that although this bilateral loan is quite substantial, it pales into insignificance in comparison with other multilateral loans which account for the significant fraction of Nigeria’s debt portfolio.

### 5. After the Rail Revolution; What next?

The relationship between China and Nigeria over the last five decades, in spite of the numerous controversies, has had a significant impact on both countries. Sustaining 50 years of diplomatic relations with major diplomatic schisms is no mean feat for which the governments of both countries may be commended. Now, on the one hand, China has benefitted largely from doing business with, and in Nigeria. On this trade front, it has been established that Nigeria has not benefitted nearly as much. There are no indicators to think that this trend might be altered anytime. It would appear China would do all it can to sustain doing business with Nigeria for as long as the African market and minerals remain of interest to it. Again, there is no fore-seen indication to suggest that China is going to lose its grip on Africa anytime soon. On the other hand, China, more than any country, has played the most impactful role in Nigeria’s major infrastructure projects particularly in the transport sector, including the rail revolution which has been discussed in the previous section. But at this momentous period, the question is: what next? For one, it is apposite to establish that Nigeria, when compared to China, has a severe infrastructure deficit. This situation points to the fact that as long as the Nigerian government - both current and succeeding ones, stays on course with the infrastructure drive, China would always be in business in Nigeria. But there has got to be more to it. No country can help another solve all of its problems. This also applies to the Sino-Nigerian relationship. China cannot solve all of Nigeria’s developmental challenges. But this does not dismiss the fact that China can play very critical roles in supporting Nigeria in key national priorities beyond the rail revolution. A number of these priorities are examined below:

#### - Security

Over the last 10 years, Nigeria has battled with the scourge of insurgency in the Boko Haram sect. More recently, the country has been faced with a multiplicity of insecurity issues. Some of these

include kidnapping and banditry which have been more rife in recent times. It is very clear the roles that the Chinese government has played, or is playing, in supporting the Nigerian government in effort to arrest the insecurity crisis. But the insecurity crisis represents a dire national situation. And it also represents a gulf in which the Chinese can reiterate its relevance and commitment to bilateral relations between both countries. A prolonged insecurity crisis portends far-reaching deleterious consequences both for investments and for regional security. As such, the Chinese government can play instrumental roles in the deployment of its more advanced technology, and the provision of military hardware to support the Nigerian government stem the tide of insecurity.

**- Economy**

The current state of the economy is another national priority. At this critical time, it has become exigent for all hands to be on deck to rescue the Nigerian economy. In this connection, China can play a significant role. Going into the next decade, it is pertinent for the Nigerian government to negotiate the conditions of trade and investment between the two countries with a new strategic proposition for increased Chinese investment in productive sectors of the Nigerian economy including manufacturing, agriculture and the service industry. This arrangement should be on the basis of extending the trade and investment interests of both countries.

**- Technology**

The importance of technology in the 21st century cannot be overemphasised. The global dynamics have since changed from when crude oil was king. Now technology is king, and this reality is further proven by the current situation in which some of the biggest companies in the world such as Google, Apple, Microsoft and Facebook all play in the technology space. It may be safe to conclude that the countries that would be classified as 'less developed' would be the ones that are far behind in the areas of innovation and technology. China also plays a dominant role in these areas. Into the next decade, it should be the priorities of the governments of Nigeria and China, to institutional frameworks for an effective transfer of technology. There has to be a major paradigm shift in the disposition of both countries to this end. It is a major national priority that cannot be overlooked, bearing the immense advantages for both countries including combating cybercrime, and creating technological solutions that can tactically address the myriad of operational and strategic bottlenecks in the private and public sectors.

**6. Conclusion and Recommendation**

Nigeria and China have come a long way. 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries have ably demonstrated that diplomatic relations work when countries involved pursue their national interests under a mutually-beneficial arrangement. In spite of the successes and controversies, it is important to stress that the deed is not done. It is imperative to consider a reevaluation of the conditions of the bilateral relations particularly in the face of fast-changing global dynamics. The priorities going forward, with particularly the next decade of bilateral relations between the two countries, must shift from the current national infrastructure drive - embodied in Nigeria's rail revolution, to other national priorities some of which have been examined in the paper.

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