

DYNAMICS AND IMPLICATIONS OF NIGERIA-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONS ON INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA (2015 -2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the dynamics and implications of Nigeria–China bilateral relations on infrastructural development in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024. The research was motivated by the need to address existing gaps in the literature, which tend to emphasize economic benefits while overlooking the structural imbalances, governance challenges, and socio-economic costs associated with Chinese-financed infrastructural projects. Guided by the Liberal Institutionalism theory, the study employed an explanatory research design to analyze texts, documents, and reports using content analysis. The findings revealed that while Chinese investments and technical expertise contributed significantly to Nigeria’s infrastructural growth, they also heightened Nigeria’s dependency risks, deepened external debt exposure, and reinforced reliance on foreign technical capacity. The study further emphasized the importance of strong institutional frameworks in ensuring sustainable engagement and mutual benefit. Consequently, the study recommended that Nigeria should strengthen governance frameworks, improve quality control mechanisms in project execution, and promote institutional accountability to mitigate dependency risks while optimizing the developmental benefits of cooperation with China.

Keywords: Bilateral Relations, Infrastructural Development, Nigeria-China Relations, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Economic Cooperation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the evolving dynamics of global politics and economics, the bilateral relation between Nigeria and China has emerged as a subject of significant scholarly and policy interest, particularly within the context of Africa's infrastructural development. Since the advent of democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999, the country's external relations have been recalibrated toward deepening economic partnerships with emerging global powers such as China. However, it was under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari from 2015 that Nigeria-China relations gained unprecedented momentum, particularly in the areas of infrastructural development (Umejei, 2020). The growing importance of this relationship is accentuated by China's strategic focus on Africa as a market for its manufactured goods, a destination for investment, and a source of natural resources, all embedded within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which Nigeria formally joined in 2018 (Nwankwo, 2021). Generally, Nigeria-China relation spans a wide spectrum of areas: politics, trade, investment, aid, technology, science, culture, education, health and military (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022).

The period between 2015 and 2024 represents a critical phase in Nigeria's infrastructural development trajectory, where chronic deficits in transport, energy, and telecommunication infrastructure have been identified as core obstacles to economic growth and social development (African Development Bank, 2018). Nigeria requires an annual investment of at least \$100 billion over the next thirty years to bridge its infrastructural gap, a figure which is far beyond the budgetary capacity of the state. Against this backdrop, the Nigerian government, under both

President Buhari and later President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, increasingly turned to China for concessional loans, engineering expertise, and technology transfer to fast-track key infrastructural projects, particularly in the railway, road, and energy sectors (Ogunkola & Eze, 2023).

One of the emblematic outcomes of Nigeria-China relations during this period was the completion and commissioning of the Abuja-Kaduna railway project in 2016, a \$1.5 billion investment financed largely through a loan agreement with the Export-Import Bank of China (Akinola, 2022). This milestone was subsequently followed by the Lagos-Ibadan railway project, inaugurated in 2021, which added 157 kilometers of standard gauge rail to Nigeria's fledgling rail infrastructure (Nwachukwu, 2021). Similarly, the Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Project, expected to generate 700 megawatts of electricity, was initiated with Chinese financing and contractors, underscoring China's pivotal role in augmenting Nigeria's energy infrastructure (Adeoye, 2023). These projects are not only seen as catalysts for Nigeria's economic diversification agenda but also as vital enablers of regional integration and trade facilitation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) framework (Ezirim, 2022).

Despite these developments, the Nigeria-China bilateral engagement has not been devoid of contestations, particularly regarding the sustainability of China's loans, the transparency of contract agreements, and the long-term developmental impacts on Nigeria's economy (Ovigwe, 2020). Nigeria's increasing debt exposure to China, which stood at \$4.29 billion as of December 2023 according to the Debt Management Office (DMO, 2024), raises concerns about debt distress and the potential for neo-colonial dependencies masked as development cooperation (Omoruyi & Isikhuemen, 2024). This concern is further fueled by the lack of domestic capacity development clauses in several infrastructure contracts awarded to Chinese firms, which limits technology transfer and the growth of indigenous industries (Umejei, 2020).

One of the most pressing concerns is Nigeria's rising indebtedness to China, which as of December 2023, stood at \$4.29 billion, accounting for over 80% of Nigeria's bilateral debt stock (Debt Management Office, 2024). The reliance on Chinese loans, often contracted under opaque terms and conditions, has raised alarm over the sustainability of Nigeria's debt profile and the possibility of debt traps that could compromise national sovereignty and economic stability (Omoruyi & Isikhuemen, 2024). The absence of competitive bidding in the award of major infrastructure projects to Chinese firms has also sparked fears of monopolistic practices and limited value for money (Ovigwe, 2020). These fears are further compounded by China's model of infrastructure-for-loan arrangements, which has been criticized for prioritizing the interests of Chinese companies and lenders at the expense of local capacity development and technology transfer (Umejei, 2020).

There is growing concern that Nigeria's infrastructural development under the Nigeria-China cooperation framework has remained largely disconnected from broader national development goals, particularly regarding local content promotion, employment creation, and the stimulation of indigenous industries (Ibrahim & Odukoya, 2022). The overreliance on foreign contractors and imported materials has undermined domestic manufacturing capacity, thereby exacerbating unemployment and perpetuating dependency (Nwachukwu, 2021). The strategic positioning of China as both financier and executor of projects has also limited Nigeria's negotiating leverage, creating asymmetrical relations that favor China's geopolitical and economic interests in Africa (Ezirim, 2022). These concerns necessitated this study.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations have been a central theme in the study of international relations, diplomacy, and foreign policy, serving as a fundamental mechanism through which states interact, pursue mutual interests, and engage in cooperative or adversarial engagements. At its core, bilateral relations are defined as the formal interactions and engagements between two sovereign states, characterized by diplomatic exchanges, trade agreements, development partnerships, security alliances, or conflictual encounters (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2014). According to Morgenthau (1948), bilateral diplomacy forms the bedrock of classical diplomacy where state actors pursue their national interests through direct negotiations and formal diplomatic channels. In his realist perspective, such relations are driven primarily by power considerations, national interest, and the anarchic structure of the international system.

From the Western perspective, bilateral relations have been theorized largely within the frameworks of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realist scholars such as Waltz (1979) argue that bilateral relations are shaped by the distribution of power within the international system, where states seek to maximize their security and survival through alliances, treaties, and bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, liberal theorists like Keohane and Nye (2001) posit that bilateral relations can be driven by complex interdependence, where states cooperate not just for

power maximization but also for mutual economic gains, institutional collaboration, and the pursuit of global public goods. Constructivists such as Wendt (1999) add a social dimension by emphasizing that the identities, norms, and discourses that states construct about one another significantly influence the nature and content of their bilateral relations, challenging the materialist reductionism of realist and liberal paradigms.

In African scholarship, bilateral relations have historically been framed within the context of postcolonialism, dependency theory, and Pan-Africanism. African scholars such as Nkrumah (1965) viewed bilateral relations between African states and external powers, particularly Western countries, as instruments of neocolonial control, where economic cooperation, aid, and development assistance were used as tools of subjugation and dependency. Rodney (1972) advanced this critique by arguing that bilateral engagements between African countries and their former colonial masters perpetuated economic exploitation under the guise of cooperation and development. This critical lens persisted into the post-independence era, where African leaders began to diversify their diplomatic partnerships, seeking alternatives in the Global South, including China, as a way of breaking the dependency trap. Contemporary African perspectives, however, have taken a more pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, recognizing the complexities of globalization, economic interdependence, and the shifting balance of power in the international system. According to Adebajo (2021), African states have increasingly adopted multi-vector foreign policies, engaging in bilateral relations not only with traditional Western powers but also with emerging powers such as China, India, Brazil, and Russia. This shift has been informed by the need to attract foreign direct investment, develop critical infrastructure, and diversify development financing options in an era where traditional donors have become increasingly conditional in their aid policies (Obi, 2020). Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy, has epitomized this trend by aggressively pursuing bilateral relations with China, particularly in the area of infrastructural development, energy, and trade (Okonkwo, 2023).

In the context of Nigeria-China bilateral relations, contemporary literature reflects divergent perspectives. Some scholars argue that the relationship is mutually beneficial, offering Nigeria access to critical infrastructure financing, technology transfer, and trade opportunities, while providing China with access to markets, energy resources, and geopolitical influence in West Africa (Osondu-Oti, 2017). However, others maintain that the asymmetrical nature of the bilateral relationship, characterized by unequal bargaining power, opacity in contractual agreements, and Nigeria's rising debt exposure to China, raises concerns about a new form of dependency and the erosion of Nigeria's economic sovereignty (Onuoha, 2019). Furthermore, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has served as a platform for deepening Nigeria-China bilateral engagements, with Nigeria becoming a critical node in China's infrastructural expansion strategy in Africa (Yun, 2020).

Moreover, emerging literature on South-South cooperation has added nuance to the understanding of bilateral relations between developing countries like Nigeria and China. Scholars such as Lumumba-Kasongo (2020) argue that while China positions itself as a partner of the Global South, emphasizing non-interference and mutual benefit, the structural inequalities in trade, finance, and technology transfer still mirror some of the exploitative patterns of the North-South relations, albeit in different forms. This has raised debates among African scholars on how to balance the opportunities of bilateral relations with emerging powers like China with the need to protect national interests, ensure sustainability, and prevent the perpetuation of neocolonial tendencies in new guises (Umejei, 2020).

Contemporary literature continues to build on the foundations of bilateralism by exploring its flexibility and adaptability in the face of global challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and economic disruptions. Scholars such as Keohane (2005) and Nye (2011) argue that although multilateral institutions offer platforms for broader cooperation, bilateral arrangements remain essential because they allow countries to act decisively and rapidly without the constraints of multilateral bureaucracies. This is especially evident in times of crisis, where states resort to bilateral diplomacy to secure urgent needs such as medical supplies, security cooperation, and infrastructure financing, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alden & Hiron, 2021).

2.1.1 Infrastructural Development

Infrastructural development remains a fundamental pillar of economic growth, social progress, and national development across the world. It broadly refers to the construction, expansion, and maintenance of foundational physical systems and facilities that enable economic activities and improve the quality of life for citizens. These include transportation networks, energy supply systems, water and sanitation facilities, telecommunications, and social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. The importance of infrastructure is deeply embedded in development discourse because it directly influences productivity, competitiveness, poverty reduction, and social inclusion (Calderón & Servén, 2010).

Scholars generally agree that infrastructural development acts as a catalyst for broader economic transformation by reducing transaction costs, facilitating trade, and enabling market integration. For instance, Calderón and Servén (2010) emphasize that infrastructure investments contribute significantly to productivity growth in developing countries, suggesting that countries with better infrastructure attract more foreign direct investment and enjoy higher growth trajectories. Similarly, Aschauer (1989), in his pioneering study, established a positive correlation between public infrastructure spending and productivity in the United States, setting the stage for subsequent empirical research across various contexts. However, the concept of infrastructural development is not without complexity. Beyond mere construction of physical assets, it encompasses quality, accessibility, efficiency, sustainability, and institutional governance. The poor infrastructure, characterized by unreliability, inadequate coverage, and inefficiency, can undermine economic development by constraining firms' capabilities and limiting access to essential services, especially among vulnerable populations. This multifaceted view suggests that infrastructure must be assessed in terms of both quantity and quality to truly impact development outcomes.

From a developmental economics perspective, infrastructure is often viewed through the lens of public goods theory and externalities. Because infrastructure typically involves high fixed costs, long gestation periods, and substantial spillover effects, its provision often falls short in purely market-driven environments (Estache & Wren-Lewis, 2009). This underscores the role of the state and international organizations in financing and regulating infrastructure projects, as private investment alone may be insufficient or inefficient due to risks and externalities involved. The complexity of financing infrastructural projects has also led to debates about the best modalities for investment, including public-private partnerships (PPPs), foreign direct investment, and multilateral funding, each with its own advantages and pitfalls (Flyvbjerg, 2005).

2.1.2 Strategic Importance of Infrastructure Development for Developing Economies

In recent years, sustainability has become a critical dimension of infrastructural development. Climate change, environmental degradation, and resource constraints have prompted a re-evaluation of traditional infrastructure models. Scholars like Hodge and Greve (2017) argue that infrastructural development must align with sustainable development goals (SDGs) by integrating green technologies, promoting energy efficiency, and minimizing environmental impacts. This approach not only addresses ecological concerns but also enhances the resilience of infrastructure systems against natural disasters and climate variability, which are increasingly frequent in many parts of the world.

In the context of developing countries, infrastructural development presents both unique challenges and opportunities. Many developing nations face significant deficits in infrastructure, which limit economic growth and exacerbate inequalities (Calderón & Servén, 2010). The provision of basic infrastructure such as electricity, clean water, roads, and health facilities is crucial for improving human development indices. Yet, challenges such as limited financial resources, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and political instability often hinder effective infrastructure development (Estache & Wren-Lewis, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2005). For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, infrastructure gaps are estimated to reduce economic growth by up to 2% annually (World Bank, 2017), highlighting the urgency of addressing these deficits.

Institutional and governance factors are pivotal in shaping infrastructural development outcomes. Poor governance can lead to misallocation of resources, cost overruns, and substandard projects that fail to deliver intended benefits. Conversely, transparent and accountable institutions foster better planning, implementation, and maintenance of infrastructure, thus ensuring sustainability and inclusiveness (Akinkugbe, 2020). In Nigeria, for instance, the interplay between federal, state, and local government responsibilities complicates infrastructural planning and delivery, often resulting in fragmented efforts and inefficiencies (Eze, 2023).

Technological advancements have also transformed infrastructural development, especially in the realm of digital infrastructure. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in infrastructure projects has facilitated smarter, more efficient systems. Melissen (2021) notes that digital infrastructure underpins modern economies by enabling e-governance, digital banking, telemedicine, and remote education, thereby contributing to socio-economic inclusion. Moreover, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data analytics are increasingly applied in infrastructure management to optimize operations and predict maintenance needs, thus extending the lifecycle of infrastructure assets.

The theoretical foundations of infrastructural development intersect with broader development theories, including modernization theory, dependency theory, and more recently, sustainable development theory. Modernization theorists perceive infrastructure as a symbol and driver of progress, linking physical modernization with social and economic transformation. Dependency theorists, however, caution that infrastructure financed or controlled

by external actors may entrench dependency and limit the autonomy of developing nations (Rodney, 1972). Sustainable development theory integrates these perspectives by advocating for infrastructure that meets current needs without compromising future generations, emphasizing equity, environment, and long-term viability.

2.1.3 Challenges of Infrastructure Development in Third Worlds

Financing of infrastructural development remains a pivotal concern in development economies. Traditional reliance on government budgets and international aid has proven insufficient to meet growing infrastructure needs, leading to an emphasis on innovative financing mechanisms. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a key model, bringing together public sector oversight and private sector efficiency (Hodge & Greve, 2017). Nonetheless, critics caution that PPPs can lead to increased costs, limited public accountability, and risk transfer to governments if poorly designed (Yescombe, 2017). In the African context, particularly Nigeria, the lack of enabling legal and regulatory frameworks has hampered the effective implementation of PPPs (Ogunleye, 2019). Thus, reforming institutional frameworks is essential for leveraging private investment in infrastructure.

Technological innovation has also introduced new dimensions to infrastructural development. Digital infrastructure, such as broadband internet and mobile networks, has been recognized as a vital component of modern development, enabling digital economies and enhancing service delivery (Melissen, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the critical role of robust digital infrastructure in maintaining economic and social activities under mobility restrictions (UNCTAD, 2020). As such, infrastructure development strategies increasingly incorporate 'smart infrastructure' concepts, which use ICT to optimize resource use, monitor performance, and provide real-time information (Hashem et al., 2016). These advances have the potential to leapfrog traditional development challenges, especially in countries with limited physical infrastructure.

Environmental sustainability has become a pressing concern in infrastructural development discourse. Infrastructure projects can have significant environmental footprints, including habitat destruction, pollution, and increased greenhouse gas emissions (Hodge & Greve, 2017). The literature emphasizes the integration of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and adherence to sustainable construction practices as critical for minimizing negative effects (Hwang & Ng, 2013). In Nigeria, environmental concerns associated with infrastructure projects, especially in oil and gas sectors and road construction, have raised community resistance and highlighted the need for participatory planning and adherence to international environmental standards (Akinbami et al., 2018). This shift reflects a growing recognition that long-term infrastructure viability depends on balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship.

2.1.4 Nexus between Bilateral Cooperation and Infrastructure Development

The literature on development cooperation emphasizes its transformative potential to address poverty, inequality, and infrastructural deficits, thus contributing to the attainment of global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD, 2011). Traditional models of development cooperation, historically dominated by Western donor countries and multilateral institutions like the World Bank and IMF, have focused on conditional financial assistance designed to promote good governance, market reforms, and institutional capacity (Moyo, 2009). However, these approaches have been criticized for imposing externally driven agendas that may not align with the priorities or contexts of recipient countries, sometimes perpetuating dependency rather than autonomy (Escobar, 2011).

In recent decades, the emergence of new development actors, notably China, has reshaped the landscape of development cooperation. China's approach, often referred to as South-South cooperation, highlights principles of mutual benefit, non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for sovereignty (Zhou & Esteban, 2019). This model contrasts with the traditional Western aid paradigm by emphasizing infrastructure investments, trade facilitation, and technical assistance without stringent political conditions (Bräutigam, 2011). Scholars such as Chin and Gallagher (2019) note that China's development cooperation has been particularly attractive to African countries due to its emphasis on infrastructure—roads, railways, power plants—that directly addresses tangible development needs often neglected by traditional donors.

Development cooperation today operates within a highly politicized global environment where geopolitical rivalry influences aid and lending strategies. The literature documents how development cooperation has increasingly become a tool of diplomacy, with major powers leveraging assistance to build alliances, access resources, or expand strategic influence (Mawdsley, 2012). In this regard, debt diplomacy is an extension of this geopolitical calculus, with debt instruments used to create dependencies that may translate into diplomatic support or economic concessions in international forums (Callahan, 2016). This dynamic adds complexity to understanding development cooperation, requiring analyses that go beyond economic metrics to include political and strategic dimensions.

Additionally, the literature examines the governance frameworks and transparency mechanisms that shape development cooperation and debt diplomacy outcomes. Good governance, accountability, and participatory decision-making are critical for ensuring that external assistance translates into sustainable development rather than fostering corruption or rent-seeking (Kenny, 2011). Civil society and media engagement play important roles in monitoring development projects and debt management, advocating for transparency and fair terms in international agreements (Knoll, 2019). International initiatives such as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and the Debt Sustainability Framework by the IMF and World Bank reflect attempts to mitigate the risks of debt distress while promoting responsible lending and borrowing practices (IMF & World Bank, 2015).

Contrasting perspectives in the literature emphasize the agency of developing countries in negotiating the terms of cooperation and managing debt portfolios. According to Brautigam (2015), African states have increasingly diversified their sources of development finance, leveraging competition among donors to secure better terms and more relevant infrastructure projects. This negotiation dynamic challenges simplistic portrayals of debt diplomacy as one-sided coercion, suggesting a more nuanced interplay where recipient countries also exercise strategic choice (Foster & Briceño-Garmendia, 2010). However, this agency is often constrained by structural factors such as limited administrative capacity, corruption, and volatile external economic conditions that exacerbate debt vulnerabilities (Ajakaiye et al., 2016).

2.1.5 Development Cooperation and Debt Diplomacy

The environmental and social implications of development cooperation and debt diplomacy also feature prominently in recent scholarship. Large-scale infrastructure projects funded through international loans can produce significant socio-economic benefits but may also lead to environmental degradation, displacement of communities, and exacerbation of inequalities if not carefully managed (Davis & Ramlogan, 2015). Scholars like Pforr and Goodwin (2018) argue that integrating sustainable development principles into cooperation frameworks is essential to ensure long-term positive outcomes. This aligns with emerging global commitments to inclusive and environmentally sound development financing, as highlighted in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (UN, 2015). The role of multilateral institutions and international norms in mediating the risks of debt diplomacy has been the subject of extensive analysis. Initiatives such as the Paris Club and the IMF's Debt Sustainability Framework aim to promote responsible lending and borrowing, providing mechanisms for debt restructuring and relief to prevent crises (IMF, 2013). However, critiques of these institutions point to their Western-dominated governance structures and conditionalities that may perpetuate neo-colonial dependencies rather than empower sovereign development pathways (Bond, 2014). This tension reflects broader debates about the need to reform global financial governance to better accommodate the interests of developing countries in the evolving development cooperation landscape.

In the Nigerian context, development cooperation and debt diplomacy take on particular significance given the country's infrastructure deficit and growing debt profile. Between 2015 and 2024, Nigeria has engaged in substantial infrastructural projects financed through foreign loans, including partnerships with China under the BRI framework (Okonjo-Iweala, 2020). While these investments have enhanced critical sectors such as transportation, power, and telecommunications, concerns about Nigeria's rising external debt—estimated to exceed 35% of GDP by 2023—have intensified calls for prudent debt management and transparent cooperation agreements (CBN, 2023). The literature emphasizes that Nigeria's experience underscores the dual-edged nature of development cooperation, where the imperative for infrastructural development must be balanced against the risks of debt distress and loss of economic sovereignty (Adewuyi & Odusola, 2021).

2.2 Empirical Review

Various scholars have examined how bilateral relations are not only avenues for political engagement but also mechanisms through which African states negotiate their developmental trajectories in a globalized economy. Adebajo (2016) posits that African states have historically navigated the complexities of the global system by engaging in strategic bilateral partnerships with both Western and emerging powers to secure economic aid, trade agreements, and infrastructural development. Similarly, Onuoha and Okeke-Uzodike (2018) emphasized that the changing dynamics of global power have seen African countries diversify their bilateral engagements, moving away from overdependence on former colonial powers towards new relationships with countries like China, India, and Brazil.

Critical African scholarship raises concerns about the asymmetrical nature of many of these bilateral relations, especially those with major powers. Odoom (2017) contends that while bilateral agreements may appear mutually beneficial, the structural inequalities inherent in the global political economy often place African countries at a disadvantage, leading to scenarios where African states become over-reliant on foreign capital and technology,

thereby undermining their autonomy and sustainable development. This argument aligns with Rodney's (1972) broader critique of external relations, where he observed that historical patterns of dependency continue to shape Africa's external engagements even within seemingly cooperative bilateral arrangements.

Furthermore, contemporary African scholars like Akinkugbe (2020) have focused on the legal and institutional frameworks governing bilateral relations, noting that many African countries lack the necessary domestic institutional capacity to effectively negotiate, monitor, and enforce bilateral agreements, particularly in sectors like infrastructure, mining, and energy. This institutional weakness, according to Akinkugbe (2020), creates loopholes that foreign partners often exploit, leading to unfavorable terms of engagement for African countries. In the same vein, recent studies by Adetoye and Omilusi (2022) analyzed Nigeria's bilateral relations with China, revealing that while such relations have led to significant infrastructure development through initiatives like railway construction and power projects, they have also sparked debates about transparency, debt sustainability, and national sovereignty. The authors argue that Nigeria's overreliance on Chinese funding for infrastructure, without adequate domestic resource mobilization and institutional safeguards, risks entrenching patterns of dependency and undermining local ownership of development processes.

The growing body of literature also highlights the evolving nature of bilateral relations in the digital age. Scholars such as Melissen (2021) emphasize that the emergence of digital diplomacy and the increasing relevance of non-state actors, including multinational corporations and civil society organizations, have transformed traditional bilateral diplomacy, making it more complex, multi-layered, and dynamic. These developments suggest that bilateral relations are no longer confined to formal state-to-state interactions but encompass a wider array of stakeholders and issues, ranging from cybersecurity to cultural diplomacy (Cooper & Cornut, 2019). Moreover, the literature underscores that bilateral relations are increasingly instrumentalized as tools for economic statecraft. Sanusi (2021) observed that China's use of bilateral engagements, particularly in Africa, is strategically deployed to advance its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has significant implications for infrastructural development, trade facilitation, and geopolitical influence. Similarly, Nigeria's engagement with China is framed within the broader context of economic diplomacy, where bilateral relations are utilized to attract foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and infrastructural financing (Eze, 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Liberal Institutionalism is adopted as framework of analysis in this study. It is a significant theoretical framework within international relations that emphasizes the capacity of states to cooperate through institutions and norms, despite the anarchic nature of the international system. Unlike Realism, which views states primarily as self-interested actors pursuing power in a zero-sum game, Liberal Institutionalism argues that cooperation is both possible and beneficial when supported by international regimes and organizations that reduce uncertainty and facilitate dialogue (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). This theory emerged prominently in the late 20th century, particularly through the work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, who challenged realist orthodoxy by demonstrating that economic interdependence and institutional arrangements could lead to more stable and peaceful international relations (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 1977).

The origins of Liberal Institutionalism are rooted in classical liberal thought, but it gained modern expression in response to the limitations of Realism, particularly in explaining increasing economic and diplomatic cooperation after World War II. Scholars like Keohane (1984) and Jönsson and Tallberg (2010) stressed that while the international system lacks a central authority, states willingly create and abide by institutions to lower transaction costs and foster trust. These institutions, which include international organizations, treaties, and norms, serve to mitigate collective action problems and facilitate compliance by providing information, reducing uncertainties, and enabling dispute resolution (Keohane & Martin, 1995). Thus, Liberal Institutionalism offers a framework for understanding how states can achieve absolute gains through cooperation rather than focusing solely on relative gains or power struggles.

2.3.1 Theory Application

Applying Liberal Institutionalism to Nigeria-China bilateral relations, particularly in infrastructural development between 2015 and 2024, reveals the practical significance of institutional cooperation in fostering sustained partnership. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has served as a multilateral institutional framework facilitating China's global infrastructural investments, with Nigeria as a key participant. Through bilateral agreements and institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, Nigeria has been able to attract significant Chinese financing and technical expertise for infrastructural projects including roads, railways, ports, and power generation facilities. These institutional arrangements provide stability and predictability in Nigeria-China relations, which are otherwise susceptible to challenges arising from divergent national interests, governance styles, and economic conditions.

The institutional mechanisms embedded within Nigeria-China relations extend beyond formal agreements; they encompass joint committees, intergovernmental dialogue platforms, and the involvement of multilateral financial institutions that monitor project implementation and foster transparency. These arrangements help resolve disputes, coordinate development priorities, and ensure mutual accountability, illustrating the institutionalist claim that cooperation is more effective when embedded in rules and shared norms. Furthermore, Nigeria's participation in international forums like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) strengthens multilateral institutional ties that promote infrastructural cooperation within broader regional and global governance frameworks.

In essence, Liberal Institutionalism offers a compelling lens through which to analyze Nigeria-China bilateral relations and infrastructural development. It highlights the centrality of institutions, rules, and cooperation in overcoming the anarchic and competitive nature of international politics. Through institutionalized mechanisms, Nigeria and China have cultivated a partnership that not only serves their immediate interests but also aligns with broader trends in global governance and international cooperation, promoting infrastructural development that is sustainable, mutually beneficial, and anchored in shared norms and agreements. This framework, therefore, enriches the understanding of how developing countries like Nigeria can harness institutional cooperation with global powers like China to advance critical national development agendas.

3. 0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized an explanatory research design to explore the topic. It adopted the content analysis method to systematically identify and interpret specified characteristics of messages within documents.

4.0 RESULT PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Nigeria-China Bilateral Relations and Nigeria's Infrastructural Development (2015–2024)

In the Nigerian context, China's significant financial and technical investments in infrastructure in Nigeria, including roads, railways, ports, and power projects, have sparked debates about whether such partnerships foster genuine development or deepen structural dependence (Akinola, 2020). For instance, China's loans to Nigeria for large-scale projects such as the Lagos-Ibadan railway, which opened in 2021 after years of delays and costs exceeding \$1.5 billion, have raised concerns about debt sustainability and the political leverage that may accrue to China (Onyeji, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

The liberal institutionalist perspective highlights the ways in which institutional arrangements and cooperation frameworks enable Nigeria to navigate the asymmetries of power and engage with China in a manner that promotes mutual benefit and stability. This view underscores the importance of bilateral agreements, intergovernmental committees, and multilateral forums like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which provide mechanisms for dialogue, dispute resolution, and joint planning. These institutions help mitigate the anarchic tendencies of international politics and allow for more predictable and sustained cooperation (Jönsson & Tallberg, 2010). Nigeria's active participation in these platforms has helped attract Chinese investment aligned with Nigeria's infrastructural priorities and development goals, such as the revitalization of the railway sector and expansion of power generation capacity, contributing to economic growth and job creation (Ezeani, 2019; Ojo & Oyedele, 2021).

Balancing these perspectives reveals a nuanced reality. On one hand, Nigeria benefits from China's provision of capital and technology, which are often unavailable through traditional Western financial institutions due to stringent conditions and geopolitical considerations (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). Between 2015 and 2024, China's official development assistance and concessional loans to Nigeria exceeded \$10 billion, making it one of the largest sources of external funding for infrastructure in the country (China-Africa Research Initiative, 2023). This influx has enabled critical projects like the Abuja-Kaduna railway and the expansion of Lagos ports, which are vital to Nigeria's economic modernization and regional integration. On the other hand, the increasing debt burden—Nigeria's external debt rose to \$95 billion by 2023, with Chinese creditors accounting for about 30%—poses risks related to sovereignty and fiscal stability (IMF, 2023). Critics argue that dependency on Chinese loans and expertise may limit Nigeria's policy autonomy and entrench a cycle of indebtedness that undercuts long-term development prospects (Okereke, 2018; Onyeji, 2022).

Institutional cooperation offers pathways to mitigate these dependency risks by establishing norms and practices that prioritize transparency, accountability, and sustainable debt management (Okocha, 2022). For example, Nigeria's engagement in the China-Africa Development Fund and bilateral debt restructuring dialogues reflects efforts to negotiate terms that are more favorable and aligned with national interests. These institutional practices exemplify the liberal institutionalist claim that international cooperation, even between unequal partners, can produce positive-sum outcomes through shared rules and mutual adjustments (Keohane & Martin, 1995). They

also reflect Nigeria's increasing agency in shaping the terms of its cooperation with China rather than remaining a passive recipient of aid and investment.

4.2 Challenges and Prospects of Chinese Investments in Nigeria's Infrastructural Development

Chinese investments have played a critical role in advancing Nigeria's infrastructural development from 2015 to 2024. Numerous large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways, roads, bridges, and energy facilities, have been financed and constructed with Chinese support. These projects have addressed significant gaps in Nigeria's transportation and energy sectors, helping to boost economic activities and regional connectivity. Examples include major projects like the Abuja-Kaduna railway and the Second Niger Bridge, which have improved transportation efficiency and reduced travel time. However, despite these achievements, challenges related to delays and concerns over construction quality persist, which sometimes limit the full potential impact of these projects.

While Chinese loans and expertise have accelerated development, they have also increased Nigeria's external debt burden, raising questions about long-term financial sustainability and economic sovereignty. The influx of debt servicing obligations has the potential to constrain Nigeria's fiscal space and economic decision-making autonomy. Nonetheless, Nigeria has made efforts to use this partnership strategically by seeking to build local capacities and technology transfer, aiming to mitigate the negative effects of dependency while maximizing developmental benefits.

Institutional cooperation has become an essential component of Nigeria-China relations, helping to formalize and regulate their infrastructural partnerships. Through bilateral agreements and participation in multilateral forums, both countries have created mechanisms for coordination, monitoring, and dispute resolution. This institutionalized cooperation fosters mutual trust, accountability, and the alignment of development priorities, which help to address some challenges linked to dependency and governance. By engaging China within these structured frameworks, Nigeria enhances the prospects for sustainable infrastructural development and improved governance standards in project execution.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The analysis of Nigeria-China bilateral relations from 2015 to 2024 reveals a dynamic partnership that has significantly shaped Nigeria's infrastructural landscape. Chinese investments and technical support have accelerated the development of critical infrastructure, thereby contributing to economic growth and regional connectivity. However, this progress is accompanied by challenges, particularly the risks of increased dependency and a growing external debt burden for Nigeria. The sustainability of the partnership hinges on Nigeria's ability to manage this dependency through diversified funding sources and enhanced domestic capacity building. Institutional cooperation remains a cornerstone for ensuring transparency, accountability, and mutual benefit in project implementation. Strengthening governance frameworks will enable Nigeria to leverage Chinese cooperation effectively while safeguarding its economic sovereignty. Overall, the Nigeria-China relationship exemplifies the complexities of modern development cooperation, where opportunities and vulnerabilities coexist.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings on Nigeria-China bilateral relations and infrastructural development in Nigeria, several strategic recommendations emerge that can enhance the benefits of this partnership while mitigating its associated risks.

1. Strengthening Project Management and Quality Control Mechanisms

Given the significant role Chinese investments have played in Nigeria's infrastructural expansion, it is imperative to improve project management and quality assurance frameworks. The government and relevant agencies should establish stricter monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure timely completion and adherence to international construction standards. This includes regular audits, independent assessments, and enforcing accountability measures for contractors and partners. Strengthening these mechanisms will not only maximize the developmental impact of infrastructure projects but also enhance public trust and sustainability. Additionally, adopting best practices in procurement and transparent contract negotiations can prevent delays and cost overruns that have sometimes plagued these projects.

2. Diversifying Funding Sources and Building Local Capacity

To address the risks related to financial dependency on Chinese loans, Nigeria should pursue a more diversified approach to funding infrastructural development. This involves mobilizing domestic resources, encouraging public-private partnerships, and exploring multilateral financial institutions as complementary sources of funding. Such diversification would reduce overreliance on any single partner and improve fiscal sustainability. Furthermore, investing in capacity building through technical training and technology transfer should be prioritized to gradually reduce dependence on foreign expertise. Developing local human capital and industrial

capacity will empower Nigeria to maintain and expand infrastructure independently in the long term, thus strengthening economic sovereignty.

3. Enhancing Institutional Cooperation and Governance Frameworks

The research highlights the importance of institutional cooperation between Nigeria and China. To deepen and sustain this cooperation, Nigeria should institutionalize comprehensive frameworks that facilitate effective coordination, transparency, and mutual accountability. This includes reinforcing bilateral agreements with clear terms on project implementation, debt management, and dispute resolution. Expanding Nigeria's engagement in multilateral platforms, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, can also promote shared learning and best practices. Strengthened governance structures within Nigeria, including anti-corruption measures and inclusive stakeholder participation, are essential to ensure that infrastructural projects translate into broad-based socio-economic development.

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