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## China-Nigeria Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative and the Prospects of Economic Development in Nigeria

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### Abstract

The paper examined China-Nigeria relations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the prospects of economic development for Nigeria. Whereas several studies highlight the China-Nigeria relations under the BRI and outline the BRI loans and infrastructural projects in Nigeria, only a few link the BRI relations with Nigeria to the prospects of attaining economic development in Nigeria. This is the gap this paper sought to fill. It adopted the ex-post facto research design, anchored on the qualitative secondary data and documentary analysis approaches. The paper adopted the theory of international development cooperation and the theory of complex interdependence as a framework of analysis to examine the prospects of the BRI to drive economic development in Nigeria. Findings show that indeed, the BRI, through its loans and investments in critical infrastructures like roads, bridges, railways, airports, and seaports requisite for economic development, has the potential to drive economic

expansion and development in Nigeria. Some potential negative consequences of the BRI, such as the potential to make Nigeria over-dependent on Chinese funding and continue to present the breeding grounds for corruption in the country, were also unravelled. The paper concludes that irrespective of the challenges and potential negative consequences of the BRI, it still holds high prospects of economic development for Nigeria.

**Keyword:** *China-Nigeria Relations, the Belt and Road Initiative, Economic Development*

## **Introduction**

The history of the China-Nigeria relationship has come a long way, as both countries have had a mutual relationship for a very long period. Although the relationship started on very cold ground from when the two countries were divided ideologically during the Cold War period, it has since developed into a strategic partnership between the two, and an enviable economic cooperation has since ensued (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023). Since then, Ezeani and Ngora (2022) aver that China has become a significant figure in Nigeria's infrastructure agenda and one of the country's largest trading partners. Nigeria's first official contact with China was in 1960, during its independence ceremony; however, diplomatic ties were not formally established until 1971 (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022). Since then, the countries have had so many mutual businesses together. While this is the case, many have, however, argued that trade relations between China and Nigeria only benefit China, while Nigeria is often at the receiving end. Be that as it may, there is no gainsaying the fact that the volume of trade that has taken place between the countries from 1971 to date is enormous.

In the most recent times, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of the areas through which China is relating and investing in Africa and Latin America in order to drive development in those areas and make profit. Nigeria is one of the biggest benefactors of the BRI in Africa, with millions of United States dollars already committed to infrastructural development across the country under the initiative. Most prominent among these infrastructural developments under the BRI in Nigeria are railway projects, road construction, bridge construction, airport and seaport expansion, etc. The expectation is that, while China is investing into developing countries through the BRI, these investments should be able to drive sustainable economic development. Therefore,

this paper examines the prospects of achieving economic development in Nigeria through the Chinese BRI.

The quest for infrastructural development in Nigeria, towards achieving economic development in the country, is not a new phenomenon. The pursuit of infrastructural development had commenced immediately after independence. Many national development plans have been put in place to achieve this feat; nonetheless, it appears that optimally functional infrastructure has continued to elude the country (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023). While many of the infrastructural projects have been abandoned, others have become obsolete for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ogochukwu, Ogochukwu, Ogorchukwu & Ebuka, 2022). In the forefront among other factors inhibiting infrastructural development in Nigeria is corruption, but inadequate funding requisite for achieving the desired infrastructural development is also a challenge (Ojo & Amasoma, 2021). According to Ajah and Onuoha (2023), Nigeria has initially relied heavily on the funding of infrastructure projects from funds provided by the Bretton Woods Institutions like the International Monetary Funds (IMF) and the World Bank, etc.; nevertheless, China's emergence on the scene has meant that it has provided an alternative route for not only Nigeria but also other developing countries as well. Therefore, China has transformed itself into a fountain of infrastructural development and funding for many developing countries across the world.

Several Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) have been entered between Nigeria and China under the forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Many of the agreements were based on the exchange of resources (crude oil) for infrastructure in Nigeria. Under this arrangement, while China helps Nigeria to build infrastructures, Nigeria was to supply China with crude oil. Albeit, the infrastructure agreement faced challenges due to insufficient funding and a lack of financial transparency (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.197). Hence, many of the projects were either abandoned or delayed, due to the aforementioned challenges, including poor policy implementation and policy inconsistency on the part of successive governments (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022).

The introduction of the BRI in 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping appears to have found a solution to the infrastructural funding in Africa and specifically Nigeria by China. The BRI is also synonymously known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Silk Economic Road

Belt (SERB). The BRI seeks to drive development in developing countries and also increase the bilateral trade ties between China and developing countries (Quadri, 2020). The initiative behind the BRI is that infrastructure, especially roads, bridges, railways, airports, and seaports, is the route to national wealth, as it paves the way for the integration of humanity for a shared future, fights poverty in nations, and enriches countries. Nigeria has since keyed into the opportunity provided by the BRI and has entered into numerous loan agreements under the BRI between 2013 and 2024. Quadri (2020) and Ibrahim and Bibi-Farouk (2020) aver that between 2013 and 2020, the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank (CDB) had approved and given infrastructural loans worth over 1.3 billion US dollars to Nigeria. Furthermore, under the BRI, over 95 percent of infrastructure construction projects have been awarded to Chinese companies like the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) and the China Civil Engineering Company (CHEC) (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Quadri, 2020).

There is no gainsaying the fact that infrastructural development drives economic development. As such, any country that has the requisite infrastructure will attract enormous economic investments and activities, thereby boosting the chances of economic development. Infrastructural development is, therefore, a major prerequisite for economic development. Despite this fact, the BRI and its infrastructural antecedents in Nigeria have often been studied without an interrogation into the prospects that such investments in infrastructure hold for economic development in Nigeria. While several studies have been done concerning China-Nigeria relations, the debate has often been centred around who benefits the most from the relationship – whether China or Nigeria. On the BRI, it has been appraised as the most prominent and influential project that history has seen, with potential to drive economic and infrastructural development (Mrdakovic & Todorovic, 2023). Albeit, this potential is yet to be proven specifically for Nigeria. Furthermore, while studies have focused on the prospects of the BRI to drive financial support, energy, and power sector development, and road infrastructural development in Nigeria (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022; Quadri, 2020; Ibrahim & Bibi-Farouk, 2020); Igbokwe (2020) avers that this has not reduced the number of generators being imported into the country. These previous studies have also focused on the BRI and infrastructural development in Nigeria without credence to how these infrastructural developments through the BRI can drive economic development. These are the gaps

this paper seeks to fill, by examining the prospects of attaining economic development in Nigeria via the implementation of the BRI.

The paper utilises the ex-post facto research design anchored on the qualitative secondary data and documentary analysis approaches. Therefore, secondary data was gathered from extant literature on the subject matter, such as textbooks, journal and magazine articles, newspaper reports, official documents, and the Internet. The content analysis approach was also used for the purpose of analysis. Following this introduction, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: section two provides a literature review on China-Africa, cum Nigeria, relations, while the next section provides a theoretical framework guiding the paper. Section four presents the discussion around the BRI and the prospects for economic development in Nigeria; section five is on the challenges of the BRI as the route to economic development in Nigeria, while the final section concludes the paper and makes some recommendations.

## **Literature Review – China-Africa, Cum Nigeria Relations – An Appraisal**

The relationship between China and Nigeria has spanned diverse aspects like economics, politics, technology, trade, education, aid, science, investment, culture, etc. China has experienced a swift transformation from a poor country to one of the world's greatest countries since the 1980s (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). According to Nwokolobia and Ikenga (2023, p.303), some of the steps that China took to attain this status include the restriction of foreign trade to only goods and services that could not be provided within China; the attraction of foreign investment through the establishment of special economic zones; subsidies to farmers; and the importation of highly driven technological goods into China, etc. More significantly, Bekele (2020) avers that the rapid increase in productivity has been largely responsible for China's rapid economic growth.

Before delving into the literature on China-Nigeria relations, it is pertinent to briefly examine China-Africa relations to provide a broader horizon on the presence of China in Nigeria and better appreciate the China-Nigeria relations. During the period of 1970-1993, China's diplomatic relations in Africa were largely driven by the search for

ideological allies which were in support of national liberation movement, and against capitalism (Kwanashie, 2015). According to Mrdakovic and Todorovic (2023), China's investment in Africa is enormous, and China's expectation is that the implementations of its projects on the continent will enhance the achievement of geopolitical and economic goals.

The relationship between China and Africa is such that whereas Africa presents China with a consumer market of 1.4 billion US dollars, including raw materials for industry such as coal, crude oil, cobalt, and copper, etc., China, on the other hand, is intervening to help build the much-needed infrastructure to drive economic growth on the continent of Africa (Mrdakovic & Todorovic, 2023). The BRI is a pathway to Africa's infrastructural development. Between 2020 and 2021 alone, China had invested enormous funds into sustainable energy projects like hydropower and wind solar energy in Africa (Wang, 2021; 2022). These projects, no doubt, have the potential to help Africa achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Also, according to Monteiro and Hancock (2022), China had written off 23 interest-free loans for Africa and redirected 10 billion US dollars of its IMF reserves to African countries in 2022 alone.

Despite the development drive of China's investment and/or relations with Africa, certain realities continue to pose significant challenges to this relationship. Piracy in East Africa; the obstruction of trade routes along the Maritime Silk Road; the threat posed by activities of terrorist groups in Africa; political and social instabilities; and the potential of the inability of many African countries to service their Chinese loans, etc., are some of the challenges (Mrdakovic & Todorovic, 2023, p.174-175). For Africa, the continent must be wary of its increasing debt to China, which, according to Boston University Global Development Centre (2022), was at 160 billion US dollars in 2022.

With specific reference to the BRI, Ma (2018) noted that the BRI goes beyond transportation benefits for Africa to broader advantages. This is also as Hu, Liu and Hu (2017) posit that the BRI has the potential to address global public health issues by improving the capabilities of handling/responding to pandemic and epidemic information sharing, the training of health professionals, and the exchange of international methods and those related to prevention. The BRI, or OBOR, is also poised for promoting promotion of regional economic development. This it does by ensuring a joint prosperity and win-win cooperation between China and any country in the agreement (Huang, 2016). The BRI and the broader China-Africa-cum-Nigeria relations also hold

prospects for the development of Nigeria and Africa at large, as revealed in the literature.

Nigeria's earliest formal relations with China began at its independence celebration in 1960, when China was invited to attend. Nevertheless, according to Ezeani and Ngoka (2022), the first diplomatic ties between the countries occurred in 1971. Nwokolobia and Ikenga (2023) assert that this 1971 diplomatic ties was emblematised through the signing of a joint communique on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the countries. This also culminated in the establishment of embassies in each other's country (Kwanashie, 2015). Significant events that sharpened the China-Nigeria relations in the 70s were the killing of the Ogoni nine in Nigeria, and the killing of protesting students in China. These events led to international condemnation and political isolation of both countries – making the countries relations closer (Ocholi & Okonkwo, 2022). Nigeria's acceptance and support for the "One China, Two Systems" policy was another significant event that helped shape and further solidify the China-Nigeria relations.

According to a press release by the Federal Ministry of Information (FMI) in 1971, China-Nigeria relations are guided by five major principles. These include: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, sovereign equality, and peaceful coexistence (FMI, 1971). Between 1971 and the present, the relationship has since grown from a rather limited one to expensive and complex business relations and engagements. Thus, trade volume between Nigeria and China increased by almost 300 per cent since 2004, reaching 7.2 billion US dollars in 2008, 7.3 billion US dollars in 2009, and 7.7 billion US Dollars in 2010 (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023, p.303-304). Nigeria has also become the largest trade partner with China, after South Africa.

Ogunkola, Bankole and Adewuyi (2008) identified a series of diplomatic and bilateral agreements between China and Nigeria, such as the 2001 agreement on trade, investment promotion and protection; the 2002 agreement on the prohibition of double taxation and prevention of tax evasion; the 2002 agreement on consular affairs; the 2002 agreement on tourism and tourist cooperation; and the 2002 agreement on the fight against narcotics, among others. China-Nigeria relations are also evidenced in the various projects depicting Chinese presence in Nigeria. Prominent examples of such projects include the Ogun Guangdong Free

Trade Zone; the Kajola Specialised Railway; China Town in Lagos; Ofada Vee Rice Limited; and the Lekki Free Trade Zone, etc. (Olugboyege, Oyeranti & Adetunji, 2010). These projects projecting China's presence in Nigeria are strategically directed towards few sectors that serve the strategic interest of China (Oyeranti & Babatunde, 2011). The relationship between China and Nigeria has also necessitated the introduction of two Chinese teaching institutes in Nigeria (Mcdowell, 2012).

Other prominent projects establishing the relationship between China and Nigeria include the 2002 creation of China Investment Development Trade Promotion Centre in Nigeria, and the Nigerian Trade Office in China (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023); the creation, in 2006, of intergovernmental Nigeria-China Investment Forum (Adigbuo, 2021). The Bosanko's strategy – oil for infrastructure, where Nigeria delivers crude oil to China, and China builds infrastructure in Nigeria in return – is another significant feature of the China-Nigeria relations. The trade returns for Nigeria have been fluctuating and imbalanced over the years. For instance, in December 2019, Nigeria recorded a trade surplus of 362.7 billion Naira, a deficit of 588.7 billion Naira in December 2020; a deficit of 7.375 billion Naira in the whole of 2020; and a deficit of 1.1 billion US Dollars in September 2021 (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023, p.305).

The 700 Megawatt (MW) Zungem hydropower plant worth 1.2 billion US Dollars loan; the Mambilla 3,050 MW hydropower plant in Taraba State worth 5.8 billion US Dollars, of which China funded 50 per cent; and the Gurara II hydroelectric project of 360 MW in Kaduna State (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022, p.250-251) are other significant projects signifying China-Nigeria relations. Despite these landmark projects, Igbokwe (2020) warned that the China-Nigeria relations is highly imperialistic, driven by the internationalisation of Chinese businesses and interests. In all, Nwosu, Ngwuta, Ibiam, Nwankwo, Ikpolo, and Iwuala (2024, p.766-768) highlight some challenges besetting China-Nigeria relations as “Chinese substandard products in Nigeria”, “unfavourable balance of trade”, “some Chinese unfair policies towards Nigeria”, etc. Table 1 below shows the volume of trade relations between China and Nigeria from 1999 to 2023.

**Table 1:** Trade Volume between China and Nigeria, 1999-2023

<b>Year</b>	<b>Trade Volume (Billions of US Dollars)</b>
1999	0.93
2000	1.1
2001	1.1
2002	1.7
2003	2.2
2004	3.3
2005	5.1
2006	6.7
2007	7.1
2008	8.3
2009	7.7
2010	10.9
2011	12.3
2012	14.3
2013	14.6
2014	14.3
2015	13.8
2016	11.1
2017	14.9
2018	18.9
2019	19.2
2020	12.8
2021	19.9
2022	22.9
2023	20.6

**Source:** *United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (2024)*

## **Theoretical Framework**

In order to provide a clear understanding of the China-Nigeria relations under the BRI, the paper adopts the theory of international development cooperation and the theory of complex interdependence as a framework of analysis. Propounded by Lauri (1990), the theory of international development cooperation avers that any international development cooperation may be multilateral, trilateral or bilateral in scope. According

to Lauri (1990), every international development cooperation typically involves two variables. The first is that during cooperation, there is usually a common goal shared by actors, and towards which interactions are directed. The second is that during assistance, there are prospects of common goals, albeit, the idea of giving aid is often driven by the quest to help other parties achieve their own goal(s). From this stance, it is evident that indeed, China and Africa, Nigeria, and the globe, in cooperation, seek to maximise mutual benefits that brought them together. On the other hand, in assistance, while American aid to the Third World has been perceived as clearly driven by American interest, Chinese aid and assistance to the Third World may be described through Lauri's (1990, p.6) assertion of "aid oriented towards helping the other part to realise his/her own goals."

Even though the relationship in international development cooperation may be perceived as asymmetric, Lauri (1990), however, avers that more important is the purpose and aim of such cooperation. Africa appreciates its relations with China, thus its willingness to sign development agreements with China, including the BRI, compared to its rather obnoxious relations with the West over the years. To get a clearer understanding of China-Africa, or more specifically, China-Nigeria relations, Lauri's (1990, p.7-8) description of international cooperation may suffice. According to him, "international cooperation designates all undertakings allowing international actors to achieve jointly fixed goals by sharing certain resources together. Less than integration, yet more than sporadic common efforts, international cooperation denotes establishing relations between sovereign actors willing to share some values together" (Lauri, 1990, p.7-8).

What the above suggests is that the China-Africa and China-Nigeria relations under the BRI do not mean any harm for any party; rather, they are a win-win situation for all parties. Beyond economic gains for China, the theory of international development also explains China's strategic objectives under the BRI. This is evident in its role in the pursuit and assistance of development among less developed countries, and especially Africa. China is poised to assert itself as a global player and to play the 'big brother' role in Africa's development using the BRI.

Propounded by Keohane and Nye (1977), the theory of complex interdependence posits that states in the international system, including their fortunes, are intrinsically intertwined in such a manner that the economies of both strong and weak states have something to benefit in their relationship, irrespective of the proportion of such benefits.

Therefore, Keohane and Nye argue that interdependence among states has transformed international politics. The theory recognises the fact that international cooperation and interdependence have increased among states and that such cooperation and interdependence produce mutual benefits for the parties (Keohane & Nye, 1998). Keohane and Nye (1977) attribute the increase in international cooperation and interdependence to the significant decline in the use of military force in international politics.

Owing to the fact that no state is an island in terms of resources – i.e., no state possess all of the resources that it requires to survive, international cooperation and interdependence has become inevitable among states. China and Nigeria rely on each other for resources to meet their development needs. While Nigeria provides energy resources, China supports infrastructure development. Therefore, whereas Nigeria depends on China for its developmental needs, such as manufactured products and infrastructure, China, on the other hand, depends on Nigeria's energy from crude oil for its development needs; hence, the interdependence of the duo.

While the theory acknowledges the need for this international interdependence, it also acknowledges the fact that such cooperation and interdependence may give rise to unequal benefits from trading between cooperating/interdependent states (Nwokolobia & Ikenga, 2023). This acknowledgement counters the criticism by the dependency theorists that the relationship between developed and less developed countries is always a winner-takes-all kind of relationship, where the less developed country is always at the receiving end (Nwosu et al. 2024). This is coupled with the fact that the theory of complex interdependence also admonishes less developed countries to improve their economies in order to match the more developed countries in their relations (Nwosu et al. 2024, p.770). In the case of China-Nigeria relations, there is no doubt that the economic relations have been asymmetric, given that Nigeria is less developed compared to China. In spite of this, Nigeria benefits significantly from this relationship, even though China may be benefitting more (Nwosu et al. 2024).

Under the arrangement of the BRI, China and Nigeria demonstrate a complex interdependence (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023). While China is investing in Nigeria's energy sector and infrastructure and providing technical assistance for projects in the country, including loans, Nigeria,

on the other hand, provides the much needed large market for Chinese products (goods and services) and also supplies oil and gas natural resources to China (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.204). It is pertinent to state that whereas the BRI has brought a series of infrastructural developments to Nigeria, it has also imposed some vulnerabilities, just as the theory of complex interdependence suggests. For example, it has created a situation of dependency on China and may expose the Nigerian economy to serious economic shocks triggered by the external economic realities of the Chinese economy. The BRI has facilitated infrastructural projects like the Abuja-Kaduna Standard Gauge Railway, the Idu-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan Standard Gauge Railways, the Lekki Deep Seaport, the Abuja Light Railway, etc. (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.205).

### **The BRI and the Prospects of Economic Development in Nigeria**

This section appraises the BRI and the prospects of achieving economic development in Nigeria through the BRI. There is no gainsaying the fact that economic development is often driven by the existence of critical infrastructures – in which road and transportation infrastructures are at the centre. Thus, BRI is committed to developing critical road and transport infrastructures to drive national development. As aptly described by Ajah and Onuoha (2023, p.199) the BRI is “designed to finance a wide range of transcontinental infrastructure connecting along economic corridors.” This implies that one primary objective of the BRI is to facilitate trading and economic activities, thereby propelling the economic development of participating states. Also, the focus of the BRI on the improvement of integration and connectivity through the funding and construction of roads, bridges, railways, energy and logistics facilities in participating states (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Ibrahim & Bibi-Farouk, 2020; Quadri, 2020), has the prospect to facilitate economic development. Furthermore, as posited by Gummi et al. (2020), the BRI is also meant to support the African Union’s Agenda 2063 development objectives. Therefore, it implies that through the building of critical infrastructure, the BRI is able to drive development.

Since its inception in 2013, Nigeria has benefitted from a host of BRI projects across the country. On the other hand, Nigeria – the largest producer of crude oil in Africa – sees China – the largest crude oil consumer in the world - as strategic partners to enable it to stabilise and diversify supply in order to achieve rapid economic development (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023). The BRI is also seen by many African states, Nigeria

inclusive, as an opportunity to improve their infrastructural development, and also attract foreign investments in order to drive economic development. The BRI has ensured that critical infrastructural projects that have been previously abandoned in Nigeria have been completed and new ones commenced. Agreements under the BRI have cut across Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), loans, and cooperation in agriculture, transportation, infrastructure and power (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023) – all of which are crucial variables towards attaining economic development.

The BRI is also expected to boost the export capacity of Nigeria, specifically in the sectors of manufacturing and agriculture. The successful implementation of the BRI also aligns significantly with the goals of the promotion of economic development and infrastructural development as outlined in Nigeria's development goals (National Planning Commission, 2009). The BRI also aligns with Nigeria's quest to address its infrastructure deficit as contained in its National Integrated Infrastructure Master Plan (NIIMP, 2014) (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.210). This aligns with Ahmed and Lambert's (2022) assertion that the BRI provides a pathway to obtaining the technical knowledge, expertise, and funding necessary for Nigeria's economic development.

Prominent examples of infrastructural projects achieved in Nigeria under the BRI include the Abuja-Kaduna railway, the Lagos-Ibadan railway, the Abuja Rail Mass Transit project, the Itakpe-Warri railway, the Lekki Deep Seaport in Lagos, and the expansion and renovation of the Abuja, Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt International Airports' terminals, among others. The introduction of technologies and automated systems in the railway, ports, and airport systems has ensured faster turnaround times and improved the productivity and efficiency of these transportation systems (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.220). Specifically, the improvements in railways and seaports have significantly improved the economic activities within and outside the shores of Nigeria. This portends a significant milestone in the quest for economic development in the country. Hence, Quadri (2020, p.68) avers that the BRI "could be a platform for 21<sup>st</sup>-century development in Nigeria... [as it] will make life comfortable for Nigerians in that there will be ease of access to 21<sup>st</sup>-century basic amenities such as standard roads, a stable electricity supply, and increased production of agricultural goods, which would be locally consumed and exported."

The BRI also has the prospect to increase international trade volumes in Nigeria through its massive transportation infrastructure investments in Nigeria. China's investment in the energy sector, especially through the Mambilla Hydroelectric Power Plant, has the potential to resolve the energy/electricity crisis in Nigeria, which has negatively impacted the economy in the past. Erratic electricity supply in Nigeria signals poor performance of several businesses that rely on electricity for operation. This, no doubt, hinders economic development. Therefore, the investment in the energy sector is a potent means of enhancing Nigeria's economic development prospects.

The focus of the BRI on agricultural and trade expansion also offers a good prospect for economic development in Nigeria. Through the BRI's initiative to train farmers in Nigeria and provide funds/loans to boost agricultural production in the country (Quadri, 2020), it provides the opportunity to diversify the Nigerian economy away from crude oil and further enhance the prospects of economic development. On road infrastructure, the BRI has also enhanced the connectivity of Nigerian cities, including the ease of the movement of goods from points of production (often farms and rural areas) to points of consumption in cities, thereby, boosting economic activities. Prominent examples of such road projects under the BRI include the Abuja-Keffi expressway, the dualisation of the Keffi-Akwanga-Lafia-Makurdi road (Onunaiju, 2020), and the A121 East-West highway (World Highways, 2021). Ezeani and Ngoka (2022, p. 262) also noted that the trans-Sahara highway project under the BRI is meant to connect Nigeria with five other African states (Chad, Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Tunisia). This move will also enhance the exchange of goods and services among the states (Xinhua, 2019), and promote regional integration. This project is a catalyst for economic development not only in Nigeria but also for the other five connected states.

The BRI is significantly opening up Nigeria economically through the development of roads and critical infrastructure requisite for economic development, thereby increasing investment opportunities, empowering the country in terms of infrastructure, creating the room for economic cooperation, and providing the opportunity to market its economic products to the world. This is also as Agullah (2019, p.514) posits that the opportunities which the BRI presents "give rise to the tantalising possibility of an economic revolution in Nigeria that could lift hundreds of millions out of poverty." Agullah (2019) also submits that, through the BRI, Nigeria holds the potential to attain the same economic growth

status as China. Beyond infrastructure and road investments in Nigeria, Chinese expertise and technological management in Nigeria have given a significant boost to the development and diversification of the Nigerian economy (Agullah, 2019) – a step in the right direction for economic development.

Table 2 below presents some prominent BRI-funded infrastructure projects in Nigeria.

**Table 2: Some Prominent BRI-Funded Infrastructure Projects in Nigeria**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>BRI Funded Project</b>	<b>Location</b>
1.	Abuja–Kaduna Railway	
2.	Lagos–Ibadan Railway	
3.	Ibadan–Kano Railway	
4.	Warri–Itakpe Railway	
5.	Abuja–Warri Railway	
6.	Port Harcourt–Maiduguri Railway	
7.	Abuja Light Rail Railway	
8.	Abuja Mass Transit Light Rail	Lagos State
9.	Lekki Deep Seaport	Lagos State
10.	Lagos Port Complex	Lagos State
11.	Onne Port Complex	Rivers State
12.	Warri Port	Delta State
13.	Calabar Port	Cross River State
14.	Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport (Abuja) Terminal Expansion	Abuja
15.	Port Harcourt International Airport Terminal Expansion	Rivers State
16.	Murtala Muhammed International (Lagos) Airport Terminal Expansion	Lagos State
17.	Mallam Aminu Kano International (Kano) Airport Terminal Expansion	Kano State
18.	25.8 km Road Project	Benue State
19.	24 km Road Project	Benue State
20.	58.59 km Road Project	Kogi State
21.	93.6 km Road Project	Kwara State
22.	113.6 km Road Project	Kwara State
23.	100 km Road Project	Niger State
24.	51 km Road Project	Borno State
25.	36.28 km Road Project	Borno State
26.	145.109 km Road Project	Borno State
27.	73 km Road Project	Borno State
28.	96.24 km Road Project	Yobe State
29.	74.1 km Road Project	Kano State
30.	26 km Road Project	Ebonyi State

31.	82.8 km Road Project	Enugu State
32.	6.049 km Road Project	Enugu State
33.	41.9 km Road Project	Bayelsa State
34.	30 km Road Project	Cross River
35.	110.63 km Road Project	Delta State
36.	41.4 km Road Project	Rivers State
37.	37 km Road Project	Ogun State

*Source:* Compiled by the author from Ajah and Onuoha (2023, p. 212, 215, 221-222); Ezeani and Ngoka (2022, p. 264-269)

## **Challenges of the BRI as an Economic Development Route for Nigeria**

In spite of the economic development prospects that the BRI holds for Nigeria, it has been averred that it also has many negative effects on any participating state, including Nigeria. The BRI, through its infrastructure projects, is capable of inflicting Nigeria with environmental degradation, a lack of strict adherence to social safeguards, and displacement of local communities (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p. 202). Also, the likes of Ibrahim and Bibi-Farouk (2020); Quadri (2020); and Ahmed and Lambert (2022) aver that the loan packages under the BRI have the potential to undermine good governance and enable further corruption due to the fact that they lack the conditions for anti-corruption, strict governance, accountability, and transparency. The BRI has also been seen by many as “debt trap diplomacy” for Africa, which is strategically positioned to favour the Chinese economy in the long run, to the detriment of recipient countries’ economies (Ajah & Onuoha, 2023, p.202-203).

The fact that the BRI loans usually come with strict conditions, especially in terms of monopolising the execution of the BRI projects to Chinese companies, is a testament to the imbalance embedded in the BRI. Furthermore, Chiyemura, Gambino and Zajontz (2023); Carmody, Taylor and Zajontz (2022); and Gelpfern et al. (2021) are of the view that the BRI loans have the potential to make Nigeria and other participating states over-dependent on Chinese funding, which may result in a debt burden that is not sustainable.

Finally, Quadri (2020, p.72-73) highlights the negative consequences of the BRI for Nigeria as follows: China uses Nigeria as a quick fix to its own economy, “promotion of dependent development in Nigeria”; it undermines the labour of host communities and manipulates deals (Quadri, 2020, p. 72-73). It is pertinent to state nonetheless that, irrespective of these critiques and challenges of the BRI in Africa and

specifically Nigeria, the BRI portends high prospects for economic development in Nigeria.

The challenges of the BRI as a development route are not peculiar to Nigeria, as they also concern other African countries. For instance, the BRI enforces unsustainable debt among African countries. The debt-for-equity swap in the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka (Riseberg, 2019); the rising debts of Djibouti, Congo-Brazzaville, and Zambia (Riseberg, 2019), Angola, South Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Ghana, etc. (Okafor, 2024) under the BRI are prominent examples of this challenge. Also, as Stein and Uddhammar (2021) posit, a lack of transparency in many of these African debts to China makes them unsustainable to drive the BRI and development. Furthermore, there is an increased trade deficit on the domestic market among other African states. Adeshokan (2021) avers that the trade deficit between China and Africa was over 17 billion US dollars. Other challenges besetting the BRI in Africa include cross-border crises, administrative bottlenecks, and corruption (Hazzan et al. 2023). Table 3 below shows a comparative analysis of Nigeria's debt to China with other top-ranking African countries indebted to China.

**Table 3: Top Ten African Countries Indebted to China, 2020-2021**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Total debt to China 2000-2021</b>
1.	Angola	\$64.8 billion
2.	South Africa	\$21.3 billion
3.	Ethiopia	\$20.4 billion
4.	Sudan	\$18 billion
5.	Egypt	\$15 billion
6.	Nigeria	\$14.5 billion
7.	Zambia	\$13.5 billion
8.	Democratic Republic of Congo	\$13.1 billion
9.	Kenya	\$12.7 billion
10.	Ghana	\$9.8 billion

*Source: Okafor (2024)*

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The paper examined the China-Nigeria relations under the BRI arrangement and the prospects of achieving economic development in Nigeria. Using the theories of international development cooperation, and complex interdependence, the paper found that the BRI is accelerating economic growth in Nigeria, through China's investments in building critical infrastructures requisite for economic development in the country. Infrastructures such as roads, bridges, railways, airports, and seaports—which China is currently investing in through the BRI – are important prerequisites for economic expansion and development. Just

as the theory of international development cooperation argues, China is cooperating with Nigeria through the BRI to drive economic development in the country. Also, in line with the theory of complex interdependence, while China is assisting Nigeria with the building of critical infrastructures it needs to propel economic development, Nigeria is also supplying China with energy, in its supply of crude oil, which it has in abundance. Therefore, this implies that the two countries are dependent on each other in pursuit of development.

The paper also found that the BRI faces some challenges as an economic development route for Nigeria. Some of the negative consequences and challenges of the BRI include that it may encourage further corruption; it could lead to over-dependence of Nigeria; it may further push Nigeria into a debt burden; and the infrastructure projects have the potential to drive environmental degradation and displacement of local communities. Despite these negative aspects and challenges, the BRI undeniably holds great potential for Nigeria's economic development.

Following the findings, the following policy recommendations are made for Nigeria to manage its BRI engagements with China in order to maximise the gains and mitigate the risks:

- There is the need for Nigeria to engage in collective bargaining through the instrumentality of the African Union and/or ECOWAS;
- Mechanisms should be put in place to avoid or limit possible backlashes/negative consequences in the BRI cooperation; and
- Nigerian leaders must ensure that under the BRI, China complies with ethical principles like transparency, responsibility, and accountability if the aim of sustainable development is to be achieved under the BRI

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