Assessing Nigeria's Agency Utilization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Advance Its Infrastructural Development

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ABSTRACT

This study employs an ex post facto design to examine how Nigeria agencies have engaged with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in pursuit of its infrastructure goals. Drawing on complex interdependence theory, it analyzes multiple channels of Nigeria–China interaction, including formal state agreements, institutional partnerships, and non-state economic linkages. The research compiles and critically reviews secondary and primary data; official reports, academic studies, policy documents on BRI infrastructure projects in Nigeria. It explores Nigeria's agency by assessing the choices made by Nigerian authorities within the asymmetrical but interdependent relationship. The analysis shows that while Nigeria has leveraged BRI financing to address infrastructure deficits, its actual influence over project design and terms is shaped by bargaining dynamics and domestic constraints. Findings suggest that Nigeria's agency is enhanced when it sets clear infrastructure priorities, ensures transparency in negotiations, and diversifies funding sources. The study concludes that under complex interdependence, Nigeria and China have mutual interests in infrastructure investment and trade but also competing goals.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has an extensive road network but chronic under-development has left many highways potholed and unsafe. According to 2025 SBM Intelligence report emphasizes that "poor road infrastructure" causes severe traffic delays, accidents, high vehicle maintenance costs, and lost productivity (SBM, 2025). Despite large fiscal budgets, Nigeria lacks reliable assessments of infrastructural quality. SBM Intelligence (2025) argues that improving roads is an "economic imperative" for commerce. Agwaibor (2024) similarly observes that even Nigeria's largest city, Lagos remains the only global megacity without adequate metro or conventional rail, reflecting broader transport gaps.

The inherited rail system is mostly obsolete. According to Ajah & Onuoha (2023), "most of the 3,500 km Nigerian railway network is obsolete", consisting largely of old narrow-gauge lines built

for colonial exports. Little of the network is operational apart from a few commuter lines, so rail plays an almost negligible role in moving freight or passengers.

Historically, attempts to modernize the infrastructural development have stalled repeatedly due to financing shortfalls and policy inconsistency. In practice, Nigeria's railways carry only a tiny fraction of national freight, forcing even long-distance cargo to rely on congested roads and raising transport costs (Andrea, 2018). Major seaports like Apapa, Tin Can Island in Lagos, Port Harcourt etc are chronically congested and ageing. For example, one Nigerian importer reports that cargo offloading at Apapa can take up to a month due to bottlenecks. Nigeria lacks modern deep-water berths; until recently, virtually all international trade passed through these older, overstretched terminals (AskNigeria, 2020). The delays and inefficiencies at ports increase trade costs and undermine competitiveness.
On the other hand, Air transport is limited to a few international airports but domestic air links are underdeveloped. Inland waterways are also underused. Overall, Nigeria's transport infrastructure is characterized by critical gaps in every mode, severely constraining domestic connectivity and economic integration (Somoye, 2023).

The Belt and Road Initiative, known in China as the One Belt One Road and sometimes referred to as the New Silk Road, is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the government of China in 2013 to invest in more than 150 countries and international organizations (Bassey, 2010). China's BRI has financed major Nigerian rail lines. In early 2024, Nigeria signed finance agreements for the 186 km Kaduna–Kano standard-gauge railway. President Xi Jinping has also pledged Chinese financing for the 212 km Abuja–Kaduna and the 615 km Port Harcourt–Maiduguri lines. These projects are being built by Chinese firms (CCECC) under concession loans. Overall, Chinese development banks disbursed over $3.1 billion to Nigeria (2013–2022) specifically for port and rail infrastructure. Chinese state contractors (CCECC, China Harbour) have been awarded more than 95% of Nigerian rail and port contracts under the BRI framework.
Figure: Chinese diplomat Wu Peng at Kaduna station in 2024 – part of high-level Chinese commitment to Nigeria's railways.
The most prominent BRI port project is the Lekki Deep Seaport (Lagos), built by China Harbour Engineering. Completed in 2022, Lekki can handle ~1.2 million TEUs per year, increasing Nigeria's container capacity by ~80%. It has already eased congestion at Apapa: one exporter reported clearing ten containers through Lekki in 7 days (vs. weeks at Apapa). Lekki is explicitly cited as a "Belt and Road project". Beyond Lekki, Chinese companies have also begun dredging and modernizing other ports (e.g. phase-one expansion of Onne port was China-funded). These investments address the historical bottleneck in Nigeria's maritime trade.
Chinese financing has supported large Nigerian power projects. The 700 MW Zungeru hydropower plant (in Niger State) opened in 2023 under a $1.3 billion loan from China. Mainstream Energy (Nigerian) now operates this plant under concession. China has also agreed to fund the massive Mambilla Hydro project (3,050 MW) with ~85% of costs as an Exim Bank loan. In addition, smaller gas and solar projects have received Chinese backing. Overall, Reuters notes

that "over the last decade, China has been active in Nigeria, providing finance through its development bank to build infrastructure including rail, airports, and power generation plants". These energy investments increase Nigeria's generation potential and diversify its power mix.

China's Belt and Road Initiative and Transport Infrastructure Development in Nigeria

Nigeria officially entered into the BRI through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by President Muhammadu Buhari at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in September, 2018. Chinese leaders have made railway and highway projects an important element of the BRI. In China, Nigeria has found a partner and financier to its Infrastructure Development Plans (IDPs) by signing pacts, memoranda of understandings through its bilateral ties.

Post independence there were no modernization works and Nigeria's railway facilities fell into disparage. The reason against modernization and proper maintenance was financial. The tracks and trains were becoming less efficient and the proper funds were never coming. From history, in 2006 president Obasanjo inaugurated a project for Nigerian railway modernization. Since the beginning, the plan was interlocked with China (Katarzyna, 2020) . The $8.3bn contract awarded to China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) was to be funded from China Exim Bank. The plan assumed revitalization of the existing lines and creation of new ones. Also, during the Goodluck Jonathan Administration, Nigeria signed three loan agreements with China's Exim Bank. The agreements are; the $500 million for Abuja Light Rail Project, $500 million contract for the construction of 4 airports terminals in the country, and $100 million contract for galaxy backbone expansion of connectivity among government ministries in Nigeria (Raji & Ogunrinu, 2013). China has also offered a $6 billion loan to Nigeria for infrastructural development projects in the administration of Muhammadu Buhari and a loan of $1.5 billion for the development of infrastructure in Nigeria, including the expansion of four airports at Lagos, Kano, Abuja and Port Harcourt.

The consequent effect of the implementation of Rail infrastructural development projects is to guarantee mass employment opportunities for Nigerians and to ensure wealth creation, more revenue generation and less pressure on the Nigerian roads. Therefore, connecting Nigeria with neighboring countries with standard gauge rails would be one of the steps in the project of connecting Africa by transportation infrastructure.

In the railway sector of Nigeria, Chinese finance is backing two major standard-gauge rail (SGR)

projects. The Abuja-Kaduna Railway section is the first section of the Nigerian Railway Modernization Project, using China railway technical standards and connecting the capital city of Abuja, the state of Niger and the state of Kaduna, with a total length of 186.5 km and a maximum speed of 150km/h (Bukola, 2019). On July 26th 2016, Abuja-Kaduna Railway Project officially started commercial operation, becoming the first modern railway in operation using China standard in Africa. Nigerian Railway Corporation is in Charge of Operations while the CCECC offers technical support, training service and assistance to the commercial operation (Bukola, 2019). Currently NRC has 534 staff working on the Abuja-Kaduna Railway Project. CCECC has a technical team of 17 specialists providing technical support. The second Train Service has been put into operation since January 5th, 2018.

Below in table 4 is data showing some railway projects in Nigeria, their funding model and description in partnership with China.

Table 4: Railway Projects in Nigeria, Funding Model and Description in Partnership With China.

Rail Line	Cost (US$)	Funding Model	Description
Abuja – Kaduna	$876million	500 million in loans from the Exim Bank of China; balance funded by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN).	187km from Abuja to Kaduna (part of the 2,700km Lagos – Kano line).
Lagos – Ibadan	$2.53 billion	Loan from the Export-Import (Exim) Bank of China.	156 km from Lagos to Ibadan (part of the 2,700km Lagos – Kano line).
Ibadan – Kano	$5.3 billion	FGN provides an equity stake of 15% with the remaining 75% funded by China's Exim Bank.	It Comprises 4 sections - the 200km Ibadan-Ilorin section, the Ilorin-Minna section a distance of 270km and then the Abuja, Kaduna and finally Kano a distance of 300km. (part of the 2,700km Lagos – Kano line).
Abuja – Warri	$3.9billion	FGN to provide an equity stake of 15%, China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (CRCC), an equity stake of 10%, and the remaining 75%	Originally commenced as the Itakpe – Ajaokuta cargo line in 1987, it was extended to link the capital Abuja to the port city of Warri, a distance by air of

		borrowed from China's Exim Bank. The CRCC will operate the railway and the port to recover its investment.	approximately 440km.
Kano-Maradi	$1.959 billion	To be financed by bilateral loan arrangements.	To link Kano–Danbatta–Kazaure– Daura–Mashi–Katsina–Jibiya– Maradi (Niger Republic) with a branch line from Kano to Dutse.
Lagos-Calabar	The project is valued at $11bn	Originally intended to be funded from loans from China's Exim Bank; however following indications that the funding is not available and continuous delays to the commencement of the project (which was expected to be completed in 2018), the FGN is currently exploring other funding options.	1402 km (871 mi) to be developed in two phases. The first phase will run between Calabar and Port Harcourt; while the second phase will run between Port Harcourt and Lagos via Onitsha.
Port Harcourt-Maiduguri	$3 billion	FGN to provide about 15% of the $3 billion rehabilitation and reconstruction cost, while the balance will be provided by a syndicate of Chinese financiers.	Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the 1,443-kilometer (897-mile) Eastern Railway line that starts from the southeastern oil hub of Port Harcourt and terminates at the northeastern city of Maiduguri.

Source: Ighodalo and Adeyemi-Faboya (2021)

Taking an in-depth look into railway projects in Nigeria, the Abuja Rail Mass Transit Project is situated in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, the completed phase 1 is composed of two lines as Lot 1 A and Lot 3, Lot 1A is 18km from Idu industrial area to satellite town Kunwa and Lot 3 is 27.245km from Abuja central area to the international airport of the capital, the total length of phase1 is 45.245km. There are 12 stations set along the route of Abuja Rail Mass Transit Project Phase 1, 8 stations for Lot3 and 4 stations for Lot 1A. Apart from the main line project, a rail depot with an area of 24 hectares was also constructed close to Idu station to serve the Abuja Rail system. Abuja Rail Mass Transit Project (Phase 1) was signed by CCECC and the Federal Capital Territory

Administration (FCTA) and began commercial operations on July 13th 2018. It is known as the first light rail in West Africa (Bukola, 2019). The railway, stretching about 157 kilometers (km) with a speed of 150 km/h, marks a landmark cooperation project between China and Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has significantly improved Nigeria's rail transport infrastructure and boosted its economic development.

The Abuja-Kaduna extension is important in many ways; the first segment of the Standard Gauge Railway Modernization Projects connected the capital Abuja with Kaduna. The Abuja- Kaduna line also connects the capital with the Lagos-Kano line by a modern, standard gauge track. Also, together with the development of the ports and coastal connections, the complete modernization of Lagos-Kano line could consolidate Nigeria's position in the region, as a trade and communication hub, especially for the landlocked neighbors. The Lagos-Kano works have been divided into six sections determined by stations, each around 150 km. The entire route would have at least 1124 km, with possible further extensions and connections with the Eastern Line (Port Harcourt-Maiduguri) and various connections with the capital. In 2017, construction of the second section which is Lagos-Ibadan began and on 10th June 2021 the Nigerian government officially started its full commercial operation to ease public transportation and fuel goods movement (Xinhua, 2021).

The project of connecting Abuja with the Itakpe-Warri line has been achieved. Originally, in 1987, it was planned to transport iron from Itakpe to the Warri port. The Itakpe-Warri section was finished in 2021 by a Chinese company that had been working on it since 2017. Another large segment of railway modernization is supposed to take place at the coast, which is the Lagos-Calabar line planned to be built in phases, just like the Lagos-Kano line. The first phase, which is currently said to be Warri-Port Harcourt, will connect the two primary lines in the country, the Lagos-Kano and Port Harcourt-Maiduguri. After the entire line is finished, the Nigerian coast will gain a modern, high-speed connection between all its ports and possibly with the coastal neighbors. The construction of the line has been commissioned to a Chinese company and the aid for the first phase negotiated at China Exim Bank was $11bn (Katarzyna, 2020).

The projects to revitalize the Eastern line Port Harcourt-Maiduguri is only in the draft phase. A

slight revitalization of the narrow gauge without replacing it with a standard gauge has been proposed due to lack of funds. However, with the majority of tracks becoming a standard gauge, it could be reasonable to wait with the works on the Eastern line and modernize it the same way as the other lines. During construction of the rail an estimate of 20,000 local staff were employed. Since commencement of operations, this project has directly provided about 1000 jobs. During construction and operation, the project indirectly established an estimate of 200,000 jobs mostly in areas of material production, subcontracting works, equipment manufacturing and related services (Bukola, 2019).

The government of Nigeria has also begun three rail and port projects worth $3.2billion after a syndicate of Chinese financiers agreed to put up $2.7billion for them, 85% of the funding required. The projects are the rehabilitation of a narrow gauge railway between Port Harcourt and Maiduguri, near Nigeria's border with Chad Lagos – Jebba 480 km line ,Jebba – Kano 624 km line, Kuru – Bauchi – Gombe – Maiduguri 640 km line, Makurdi – Kafanchan – Kaduna Junction – Kuru line; the Bonny Deep Sea Port on Bonny Island; and the Railway Industrial Park in Port Harcourt. The projects, which are intended to complement each other, are being carried out by the Nigerian arm of the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) (Global Construction Review, 2021). Ambitious new railway projects undoubtedly carry benefits: the completed Abuja-Kaduna line is a small demonstration of the employment and commercial opportunities that railway infrastructure can bring. Chinese railway investments bring connectivity advantages, benefiting local industries and potentially attracting greater investment. This can encourage greater industrial agglomeration along Nigeria's main corridors and coastline, which in turn can help catalyze structural transformation and economic development, as well as boost local employment. The belt and road initiative has led to the development of railway transport infrastructure in Nigeria and completion of projects has translated into operational reality. The ongoing development of rail infrastructure in Nigeria will make it a viable freight and passenger transport option (Yunnan, 2018).

Nigeria-China Road Construction Deals and Road Development in Nigeria

The major road transport infrastructure in Nigeria consists of 32,000km of Federal highways including seven major bridges across the Niger and Benue rivers, the Lagos ring 3 road, the third mainland axial bridge, 30,500km of state roads; and 130,000km of local roads (Project Reserve,

2020). The development of transport sector, such as road transport reduces friction of distance; facilitate trade; allows an improved movement of people and goods; promotes overall better standard of living and ease of social cohesion and integration; finances other public spending which can be of importance for a society, such as the social security system and the education system, among others. It is of importance to highlight that Nigerian roads have often been characterized with long cracks, potholes and other pavement defects. These have posed a serious challenge and disaster such that in Nigeria one can hardly travel a kilometer without coming across long cracks and potholes. All these have resulted in a spike in the number of road accidents and a clog in the wheel of the nation's economic development Nigeria (Obido etal., 2021).

China Harbour Engineering Company has brought both experience of its parent company and its international exposure in delivering high-quality projects on schedule to bear on its craftsmanship in delivering world-class infrastructure service in Nigeria. Currently, the company is a major contractor, delivering the expansion of the 5.4Km Abuja-Keffi expressway and dualization of Keff-Akwanga-Lafia-Makurdi road, a key project of the larger continental trans-Sahara highway (Onunaiju, 2020). In 2013, the Ministry of Delta Affairs of Nigeria awarded the package of works for Section V of the A121 East-West highway to China Civil Engineering Construction, a division of China Railway Construction. The work was expected to take five years to complete and including design as well as construction. When it is complete, the A121 will connect Nigeria's two main North-South highways. Its route runs from the A1 highway at Shagamu in Ogun State to the A2 highway at Benin City in Edo State (World Highways, 2021).

The trans-Sahara highway project is a continental-scale infrastructure that passes through six African countries namely, Algeria, Chad, Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Tunisia and has the objective to make enormous contribution to the development of commercial exchanges through roads connectivity and promote regional integration. As key artery of a regional highway network, it would seamlessly integrate in the framework of the Belt and Road framework of international cooperation, initiated by China as a global massive infrastructure connectivity scheme, which facilitates trade and enhances people-to-people contacts among other things (Xinhua, 2019). The Keffi-Markurdi road project starts from the southwest of Abuja, crosses Federal Capital Territory and the states of Nasarawa and Benue. The contract amount is
$542.14 million, 15percent of which is funded by the Federal Government of Nigeria and

85percent is by China EXIM Bank in the form of Preferential Export Buyer's Credit. The expansion and dualisation of the existing carriageway promises to ease the long suffering of commuters and motorists on the Keffi-Akwanga-Lafia-Makurdi road. The duration of the project is 36 months, and construction officially commenced on April 1st, 2019, and the road is expected to be completed by 2022. The design adopted is the new expansion and dualisation on both sides of the road, thus compared to the existing carriageway, there is expected to be a smoother transportation (Odoh, 2019).

A Chinese construction firm Eighteenth Engineering Company Nigeria Limited, a subsidiary of the China Railway Construction Corporation in 2019 also commenced the construction of roads in Gombe to open up rural areas in this northeastern state, aiming to boost the local economy. The road construction is said to open up at least three communities in Yamaltu/Deba local government area of Nigeria when completed. In 2015, The Mile 12-Ikorodu road widening and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) projects were constructed by CCECC in Lagos, Nigeria's economic hub, bringing benefit to millions of residents and motorists of the state. Over 400,000 passengers are carried daily by over 400 high-capacity air-conditioned China's Yutong buses that run the corridor from Ikorodu - CMS via Mile 12. The project included widening of the road with two additional lanes and the placing of BRT lanes in the middle of the road. The width of the existing road is a 7.5 meters, with central median of 2m width (Xinhua Finance Agency, 2015).

The China Geo-Engineering Corporation (CGC) has also completed the Ilorin-Jebba road which was abandoned for about 10 years due to its deplorable condition. The road was well constructed, with a lifespan of at least 20 years. It currently records daily traffic of about 7,500 vehicles, including heavy duty trucks. Rebuilding the Ilorin-Jebba road has boosted social and economic activities (AskNigeria, 2020). Table 5 below shows some road projects in Nigeria by China.

Table 2: Road projects in Nigeria by China

Zone	Project Title	Contract No.	Location	Contractor	Consultant	Length (km)	Original Contract Sum (₦)	Revised Contract Sum (₦)	Date of Award	Commencement Date	Completion Date	Extended Completion Date
North Central	Vandeikya-Obudu Cattle Ranch Road, Phase I	6156	Benue	CCECC Nig. Ltd	Ladiom Associates	25.8	3,296,177,230.50	6,686,554,420.40	13-Dec-12	13-Dec-12	12-Dec-13	30-Apr-18
North Central	Oshegbudu-Oweto Road	6265	Benue	CGC Nig. Ltd	—	24	7,962,031,030.80	7,962,031,030.80	14-Jan-15	17-Feb-15	16-Aug-16	17-Aug-17
North Central	Lokoja-Benin Rd (Obajana–Okene Sec.)	6135	Kogi	CGC Nig. Ltd	Hancock, Ogundiya & Partners	58.59	11,663,957,682.30	30,569,460,059.99	21-Nov-12	24-Dec-12	23-Dec-14	22-Oct-17
North Central	Ilorin–Jebba–Mokwa–Birnin Gwari–Kaduna Rd	6210	Kwara	CGC Nig. Ltd	Rindex Associates	93.6	14,587,233,292.17	14,587,233,292.17	5-Dec-13	30-Jan-14	29-Jan-16	28-Dec-17

North Central	Ilorin–Kabba–Obajana Rd	6212	Kwara/Kogi	CGC Nig. Ltd	Iyiola Omisore & Associates	113.6	8,217,373,106.77	8,217,373,106.77	27-Nov-13	30-Jan-14	29-Jan-17	—
North Central	Sokoto–Tambuwal–Jega–Kontagora–Makera Rd (Sec. I)	6162	Niger	CRCC Ltd	Watech Services Ltd/Elen Konsult	100	8,968,809,507.63	19,566,758,401.95	13-Dec-12	10-Apr-13	9-Apr-15	17-Aug-17
North East	Cham–Numan Section of Gombe–Yola Rd	6300	Adamawa/Gombe	CGC Nig. Ltd	—	—	9,253,571,065.05	9,253,571,065.05	15-Mar-17	—	—	—
North East	Maiduguri–Dikwa–Gamboru Rd (Sec. II)	6069	Borno	CGC Nig. Ltd	Sahel Associates	51	16,683,596,891.08	16,683,596,891.08	25-Aug-10	20-Sep-10	19-Sep-12	—
North East	Damasak–Dutse–Diffa (Niger Rep.) Rd	6071	Borno	CGC Nig. Ltd	Ove Arup & Partners	36.28	9,880,524,657.27	9,880,524,657.27	25-Aug-10	20-Sep-10	19-Sep-12	19-Sep-14

North East	Kano–Maiduguri Rd (Sec. V: Damaturu – Maiduguri)	5869	Borno	CCECC Nig. Ltd	Yaroson Partnership Ltd	145.109	39,998,728,481.25	67,795,690,880.01	18-Jul-06	3-Aug-06	2-Dec-09	10-Jan-16
North East	Maiduguri–Bama–Gwoza Rd (Sec. II)	5975	Borno	CGC Nig. Ltd	Sani Mustapha & Associates	73	5,019,848,813.60	5,019,848,813.60	14-May-09	28-May-09	27-Nov-10	27-Feb-12
North East	Kano–Maiduguri Rd (Sec. IV: Potiskum–Damaturu)	5881	Yobe	CGC Nig. Ltd	Pentagon Engineering Consultant	96.24	30,250,000,000.00	51,903,173,630.22	28-Sep-06	1-Feb-07	30-Nov-09	18-Dec-18

Source: Federal Ministry of Works (2017)

In the table 2 above, the road project data reveals a strong geographical concentration in Benue, Borno, and Kwara/Kogi states, highlighting these areas as key zones for infrastructure intervention. A notable pattern across these projects is the prevalence of cost overruns, with several contracts experiencing significant increases, some more than doubling their original values. In terms of execution, Chinese contractors, particularly CGC Nigeria Ltd, dominate the implementation of these projects, reinforcing China's leading role in Nigeria's road infrastructure development under bilateral arrangements. Additionally, delays in project completion are widespread, with many projects extending well beyond their initially scheduled timelines. These delays point to persistent execution challenges, which may stem from terrain difficulties, inadequate funding flows, or coordination inefficiencies between stakeholders.

Infrastructure provides the necessary springboard to launch a country into the class of developed nations and it is an established fact that Chinese state-owned firm, CCECC is playing an active role in Nigeria's transportation sector in line with the Belt and Road Initiative towards the development of the transportation infrastructure with focus on railway and roads development.

Nigeria Agencies Utilization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The importance of agency by Nigeria in BRI investment towards relevant areas of need has been emphasized by Amusan (2022). In line with this, results based on the insight derived in relation to the extent to which Nigeria actively participates in and influences the BRI project within its borders in respect to the asymmetric nature of its relationship with China. Participants of this study were required to elaborate on Nigeria's involvement and influence in shaping BRI projects within its border, given its perceived power dynamics with China. Insight was also sought into whether China allowed Nigeria to be involved in the decision-making aspects of the project implementation.

Based on the response gathered, the extent and nature of influence possessed by the Nigerian Government was expressed. Here, responses indicated a strong influence by the Nigerian government in deciding projects which must be undertaken as well as the supervision of these projects. In line with this, P1 stated that:

> The Chinese government did not bully Nigeria into agreeing to the loans and the method of implementation. Nigeria was deeply involved in deciding which project they wanted to fund and the supervision of the project was also up to Nigeria. In our case we hired TEAM (Technical Engineering Architecture Marketing) to manage and supervise the Chinese projects in Nigeria. TEAM is a Nigerian/Italian company that carries out technical, engineering, architectural, planning and management consultancy services. So, TEAM acted as the project managers and adhered to the European and global standard not the Chinese standard (P1) (KII, 2024)

In line with the response provided by P1, P3 further stressed the influence of the Nigeria government in deciding which projects or areas require Chinese investment through the BRI. Here P3 stated that:

> I believe it is incorrect to say that Nigeria is not given a chance to participate in the decision-making process of BRI project implementation within its borders, because Nigeria willingly became a signatory and was not coerced into signing the agreement. No country can force Nigeria to do something against its own will. Nigeria was one of the last countries to join the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), but it chose to do so upon realizing that the treaty would be of great significance to its survival and long-term development. Secondly, China does not compel Nigeria to undertake the construction of railways, dams, or airports. Rather, Nigeria identifies areas of infrastructural deficit and informs China of its needs accordingly." (P3) (KII, 2024)

Also, a number of participants compared the amount of agency exerted by Nigeria in comparison to other forms of intervention offered by countries in the West such as America as well as other European Countries. Indications offered by participants highlight that Nigeria is able to exert more agency in the case of the BRI than with other forms of investments offered, highlighting the comparative advantage offered by the BRI measured against other intervention programs by these other countries. In line with this, P2 indicated that:

> To be fair, what we witnessed with the Chinese is too good to be true in comparison to the development credit facilities gotten from America and European countries. The conditions were fair and favorable and Nigeria was allowed to decide the railway corridors based on our own development plan, the Chinese did not decide what cities they wanted to carry out the projects. (P2) (KII, 2024)

Moving further, this study also sought to investigate measures taken by Nigeria in ensuring that the BRI projects undertaken contributes positively to its infrastructural development whilst mitigating potential risks and negative impacts. Several concerns had been raised in literature concerning the risk and negative impacts of the BRI on host countries in numerous areas including the social, physical, environmental and economic environment. However, the response offered by the participants of this study offered a positive outlook on the general impacts of the BRI in Nigeria

with particular emphasis on the protection of local communities as well as measures ensuring the completion of projects undertaken. For example, P1 indicated that:

> I cannot point at any negative impact of the project. They needed projects that were carried out and in cases where the projects ran through areas where citizens were habiting, we gave compensations to those displaced. Most of the projects ran behind the communities. And the government during my time in office as the transport minister was very particular about completing projects because that is the only way the projects can be useful as well as address the major needs. (P1) (KII, 2024)

Alleviating concerns especially in relation to the environmental impacts of these projects, Participant One further highlighted measures undertaken towards the mitigation of negative impacts of BRI projects on the environment. With respect to this assertion, it was stated that:

> Firstly, there was an environmental impact assessment (EIA), in fact it was Environment and Economic Social Impact Assessment. The Chinese asked for it and TEAM made sure they were no negative impacts on our environment. (P1) (KII, 2024)

In the same vein, another participant offered additional insight into the contribution of the BRI to infrastructural development of Nigeria. P7 indicated that:

> As I mentioned earlier, Nigeria carefully and strategically identified and chose the projects it wanted to fund at each point in time. This suggests that Nigeria has been positioning itself in a way that allows it to gainfully benefit from the initiative, and the evidence of the projects' impact is visible. I always tell critics of the BRI project to compare Nigeria's past infrastructure with its current state." (P7) (KII, 2024)

Highlighting the relevance of finance towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goal, as well as the diverse areas requiring financing outside infrastructures, P2 indicated that:

> We need to first admit that the level of resources brought in by the Chinese through the BRI could not have been made available by the Nigerian government to fund infrastructure projects of that magnitude. I am not saying Nigeria does not have that amount of money, but we cannot put all our resources on infrastructural development only because we have other sectors that are in high need as well. So, the coming of China has made a huge difference in our infrastructural development which is a blessing in disguise for the Sustainable Development Goals ministry and the Nigeria government as a whole. The projects have created significant impacts

> which puts Nigeria on the map of the countries complying with the United Nations demands. (P2) (KII, 2024)

Nigerians' Perceptions of the Impacts of the BRI on Sustainable Infrastructural Development

The perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders regarding the impact of the BRI on Nigeria's infrastructural development were investigated, with particular focus on the levels of transparency and accountability in the implementation of BRI projects. This included an assessment of the transparency demonstrated by both the Chinese and Nigerian governments in their dealings under the BRI framework.

The responses gathered indicated a generally positive view of the fairness and transparency of transactions carried out under the initiative. Participants highlighted key procedural differences between BRI arrangements and developmental loans obtained from Western countries, particularly emphasizing the reduced risk of misappropriation in the Chinese model.

A notable aspect of the BRI procedure involves local communities identifying their infrastructure needs, after which funds are released directly to contractors for project execution. This approach is seen as having largely eliminated the risk of embezzlement and fund diversion—a persistent issue in Nigeria's public sector. As P1 explained:

> "In my candid opinion, the Chinese transactions under the BRI have been very fair and transparent. Unlike during the time of the USA, when loans were given directly to Nigeria and a certain group of individuals would misappropriate or divert the funds into their personal accounts—leading to continued infrastructural deficits—in the case of China, the Nigerian government identifies the projects that need to be funded, and then China pays the Chinese contractors executing the work. Instead of giving funds directly to Nigeria, China applies them to the identified projects. Nigeria also selects the Chinese contractors it is comfortable working with, and once a project is confirmed as completed, China proceeds to pay the contractors. This method has drastically curbed corruption." (P1) (KII, 2024)

This sentiment was reinforced by P4, who emphasized the procedural clarity and corruption safeguards involved in counterpart funding arrangements:

> "The Chinese never gave us any money; they only brought in their experts—that is, the contractors—to carry out the work. The process works like this: if we say we want to construct a railway line from Abuja to Kaduna, they estimate the full project cost so it can be documented in the agreement. Then, they deploy their contractors to execute the construction." (P4) (KII, 2024)

P3 added further insight, underscoring the transparency and Nigerian ownership of project planning:

> "To the best of my knowledge, the agreement is quite transparent. Also, it is important to note that the Chinese do not design the rail lines, roads, or airports. The Nigerian government provides the design and selects the corridors it wants. The Chinese then

> cost the project, but Nigeria also hires its own quantity surveyors to verify the estimates. No funds exchange hands between Nigeria and China, which limits the opportunity for corruption in this initiative." (P3) (KII, 2024)

Nonetheless, some participants acknowledged that corruption cannot be entirely eliminated within Nigeria's governance context. In certain instances, non-governmental organizations attempting to implement projects in Nigeria have faced demands for bribes before being permitted to proceed. P7 expressed concern about this ongoing issue:

> "There may be corruption on the Nigerian side because of our habits and nature. Based on past experiences, there are cases where a major stakeholder might refuse to allow a project to commence unless they are paid a certain amount of money. Some government officials expect kickbacks, which is not supposed to be the case." (P7) (KII, 2024)

Challenges of the BRI in Nigeria

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has facilitated significant infrastructure development in Nigeria, several challenges continue to hamper the long-term success of these projects. One major concern is the country's growing dependence on Chinese loans. According to Ahmed and Agbontaen (2025), China has become one of Nigeria's most prominent bilateral lenders, particularly for large-scale infrastructure. Although these loans help bridge critical funding gaps, they also contribute substantially to Nigeria's external debt, raising concerns about fiscal sustainability. The SB International Nigeria, World Bank Index (2023) estimates that Nigeria will require approximately $3 trillion in infrastructure investments by 2050, sparking debates over whether continued external borrowing is economically viable. Ahmed and Agbontaen (2025) caution that mounting debt service obligations and a lack of clarity around loan terms could pose serious risks to Nigeria's financial stability and limit future budget flexibility.

Transparency is another persistent issue. Previous cooperation agreements between Nigeria and China particularly during the early 2000s often operated on a "resources-for-infrastructure" basis, but many of these arrangements struggled due to limited transparency and financial bottlenecks.

Even now, many current BRI contracts lack publicly accessible information, especially regarding interest rates, repayment conditions, and the full scope of Nigeria's financial commitments. This opacity has raised alarms within civil society, where concerns about corruption and governance continue to grow. Ahmed and Agbontaen (2025) argue that the non-disclosure of contract terms and loan structures contributes to fears of dependency and undermines public accountability. Parliamentary oversight of BRI engagements is also widely regarded as insufficient.

The deep involvement of Chinese stakeholders in Nigerian infrastructure projects has raised broader questions about national sovereignty. Critics warn of a possible "debt-trap" scenario in which an inability to meet debt obligations might compel Nigeria to surrender control over strategic assets or policy autonomy—similar to outcomes observed in smaller developing nations. Although Nigerian officials have rejected such possibilities, sensitive issues such as collateral agreements and long-term land leases remain contentious. As Ahmed and Agbontaen point out, the challenge lies in balancing the benefits of external financing with the need to maintain full economic sovereignty.

Labor practices on BRI projects have also drawn criticism. Despite Nigeria's local content regulations designed to prioritize domestic labor and materials, many Chinese contractors reportedly rely heavily on imported workforce and equipment. This practice has sparked concern over missed opportunities for employment, skills development, and technology transfer to Nigerian workers. Reports suggest that local participation in these projects particularly in skilled roles remains limited. Ensuring compliance with local content policies is critical to maximizing economic spillovers and preventing social discontent over foreign-dominated infrastructure projects.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The engagement of Nigeria with China under the BRI offers a reflection of a diverse interplay of agency, external influences and strategic interests. Despite the perceived asymmetric nature of the relationship between both countries, this study shed light on the considerable agency exercised by Nigeria in the determination of which project gets funded under the BRI as well as overseeing their implementation. Local actor involvement as well as adherence to national standards offer indication of a degree of control which challenges the narrative of a one-sided relationship. Issues related to corruption, absence of transparency, and the potential for projects which do not meet the needs of the public complicate the benefits. The BRI offers significant opportunities for infrastructural development, however, its success in Nigeria is heavily reliant on effective governance, transparency and making sure that the public interests determine which projects are undertaken. Ultimately, whilst strides have been made by Nigeria in fully exploiting the benefits of the BRI for its infrastructural development, the long-term impact of the initiative is dependent on the ability of Nigeria to manage consequent risks and fully exploit the benefits through robust institutional frameworks and strategic oversight.

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