SINO-DIPLOMATIC RELATIONSHIP: EFFECT OF THE ROAD AND BELT INITIATIVE ON INFRASTRUCTUAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Infrastructure plays a vital role in national growth, prompting increased investment in ports and railways to support trade and exports. However, Nigeria and much of Africa still fall below the global average, with a low infrastructure score of 28, leading to reliance on external funding such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the BRI has promoted global trade and poverty reduction, it faces criticism over debt risks, high costs, and security concerns. Against this background, this study examined China–Nigeria relations and the impact of the BRI, stressing port and railway development using secondary data and key informant interviews. Findings from content analysis showed that the BRI has eased port congestion, created jobs, and increased revenue. Yet, challenges remain, including sovereignty concerns, debt dependence, and uneven infrastructure distribution, calling for greater accountability, stronger cooperation between Chinese and Nigerian firms, and more focus on manufacturing to support sustainable development.

Keywords: BRI, Debt Dependence, Infrastructural Development, Neocolonialism, Sovereignty

Introduction

Infrastructures are physical elements such as roads, bridges, electricity, telephone equipment, water systems, and ports, among others, that create linkages to promote development (Palei, 2015). Because of this relevance, nations have leveraged infrastructural funding to bridge infrastructural expectation gap and poor living standards. One frequently cited foreign policy that has deepened infrastructural funding is the ambitious Road and Belt Initiative (BRI), illustrated in the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy since 2013 (McBride, Berman & Chatzky, 2023), with global reach and increasing presence in Nigeria. Although BRI, through its global reach, has created positive externalities through 3,000 cooperation projects near US$1 trillion, a reduction in global cost of trade by 1.1, while lifting 40 million people out of poverty (Cui Jianchun, 2023; World Bank, 2022; Tekdal, 2018), its infrastructural footprints are most visible in Nigeria.

Since 2015, when Nigeria subscribed to BRI, the Sino-Nigerian bilateral relationship has resulted in several Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) structured to enhance infrastructural development in Nigeria. Agbor and Garba (2025) in an assessment of Nigeria's agency utilization of the BRI in advancing infrastructural development revealed that the Chinese Development Bank has spent over $3.1 billion between 2013 to 2022 to enhance rail and port development of which the Lekki Deep Seaport in Lagos undertaken by China Harbor Engineering Company(CHEC) with the capacity to handle ~1.2 million Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) per year has abated congestion in Apapa, while increasing Nigeria's container capacity by ~80%. In terms of railways, the Abuja-Kaduna standard gauge rail (SGR), the Itakpe-Warri Rail line, and the Lagos-Ibadan Rail line stressed the mutual benefits of Chinese economic diplomacy through the BRI in Nigeria. The transmission effect included limited pressure on decrepit Nigerian roads, employment generation, and technology transfer, although the bilateral relationship is skewed towards China

in term of trade (Nura, 2023), while environmental concerns, debt burden, human rights abuse, political influence of Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with natural resource exploitation, and capital flight reinforce the growing argument of debt trap and neocolonial tendency of BRI in Africa (Dahir & Kazeem, 2018; Jarso, 2018).

Amidst the foregoing infrastructural transformation, infrastructural expectancy gap remains soaring in Nigeria with infrastructural score of about 31 that is a little above the 28 African average, but falls significantly below Seychelles, Egypt, South Africa, and Tunisia, among others in 2020 (African Development Bank, 2022). This weak infrastructural development despite existing BRI funding may not be unconnected with issues of neocolonialism, the opaque nature of BRI investments, increasing debt dependence, crowing out effect on domestic firms, and inflated investment costs. A more reinforcing issue is the domineering influence of Chinese firms in BRI investments in Nigeria, implying limited technology transfer with a crowding-out effect on indigenous firms. The implication is a high tendency of crowding out effect on domestic businesses, increasing unemployment among the growing reserve army of labor in Nigeria, exploitation of natural resources by Chinese firms, and increasing dependence on China, underscoring the neo-colonial tendency of BRI (Butts & Bankus, 2009).

Despite these drawbacks, scholars argued that the growing railway transformation evidenced by the 1780km railway line from Tanzania to Zambia, the 1302km Bengue railway line in Angola, the 560 km Belinga-Santa Clara railway in Gabon, the 172 km and 430 railways in Libya and Mauritania, respectively, with the 1315 km Kano-Lagos railway in Nigeria signify China's wealth distribution and infrastructural development of BRI countries rather than neo colonialism (Kayebe et al., 2020; Kayembe & Zhao, 2017). Accordingly, scholars argued that China's US5billion commitment in aid to Africa in the second FOCAC in 2006 (Nura, 2023), with notable

infrastructures such as the Abuja-Makurdi Road dualization, Lekki Deep Port, and industrial zones in Nigeria (Odoh, 2019) reflect China's genuine commitment towards development in Nigeria against existing Western policies such as Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), deregulation, and devaluation with adverse effects on African economies. While BRI investment remains glaring, Nigeria's infrastructure remains decrepit and the sixth most inadequate in Africa as over 63% of the 200,000 kilometers of roadways across Nigeria's 922,768 square kilometers remain in a state of disrepair (Punch, 2023; Akpa, Itanyi, Ago, Ademu, Musa, Bako & Opeyemi, 2025). In terms of energy, there is an epileptic power supply with the collapse of the national grid 105 times between June 2015 and October 2025 (Akpa et al., 2025) despite increasing BRI infrastructural funding to bridge infrastructural expectation gap in Nigeria. This raises critical questions that need empirical investigation, calling for this study that is situated within the dependency theory and mixed methods to assess the effects of BRI on railways and port development in Nigeria, as existing nuanced scholarly attention on the phenomenon under investigation is limited.

Theoretical Framework

Dependency Theory

This study is situated within the dependency theory attributed to Andre Gunder Frank in 1967 as the theoretical framework. The theory reinforces economic interconnectedness between industrialized and developing nations (Ghosh, 2019). According to Frank, impoverished states remain in a state of dependency due to their economic connections with more affluent industrialized countries, which dominate trade, investment, and access to global markets (Carrete, 2014). These connections frequently result in an imbalanced exchange in which affluent nations control industrial production, cutting-edge technology, and financial influence, while developing countries provide raw materials and low-cost labor (Kay, 2018). This can be drawn from the Sino-

Nigerian diplomatic relations were China's US$18 billion export to Nigeria stood marginally above Nigeria's US$2.5 billion in 2022 (OEC, 2025). While Nigeria's export is dominated by raw materials and petroleum products, import from China is dominated by manufactured goods, resulting in negative term of trade and perpetual dependence on China.

The foregoing suggests that employing dependency theory to examine China's BRI in Nigeria facilitates an inquiry into whether these extensive infrastructure projects are fostering genuine national development or merely reinforcing Nigeria's economic dependence on China. Critics of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have condemned it for promoting debt dependency, as participating nations incur substantial loans that may be challenging to repay, so compromising their economic sovereignty. In Nigeria's context, it is crucial to ascertain whether BRI agreements exacerbate the nation's reliance on China for money, technology, or knowledge, or if they promote self-sufficiency and economic advancement. If BRI projects lead to inequitable trade policies, enduring debt burdens, or Chinese dominance over critical national assets, Nigeria may become ensnared in a form of neo-colonial reliance that obstructs its ability to achieve sustainable national development.

Relating the theory to this study, it can be deduced that the economic relationship between Nigeria and China over time has been relatively unequal. This relationship is better explained in the context of dependency and inequality. This assertion can be said to be true when an insight into several decades and still counting deduces that the Nigerian market has been practically flooded by Chinese goods, such as electronics, home appliances, hardware, computer accessories, hospital equipment, mobile phones, and several industrial equipment running into billions of US dollars. On the other hand, Nigeria's export to China remains primarily agricultural goods and raw materials, which are processed, packaged, and brought back to Nigeria at higher prices. This,

among others such as the stringent loan requirements, has continued to exacerbate the continuous dependence of Nigeria on China with a persistent increase in trade imbalance, thus, underscoring the relevance of the theory to this study.

Methodology

The desk review approach was relied upon with secondary data sourced from extant literature, textbooks, newspapers, and document sources. Additionally, secondary data sourced for this study was augmented with Key Informant Interviews. Data collected through secondary sources and interviews was analyzed using content analysis to place side-by-side relevant themes, contexts, and concepts in line with the phenomenon under investigation. The choice of content analysis is because it provides a structured and systematic way to study communication, detect patterns, quantify trends, and derive insights that inform research, policy, and practice.

Impact of Economic Diplomacy through the BRI on Infrastructural Development

According to Nura (2023; 17), "the availability of infrastructure is a crucial requirement for economic progress and social development." Howbeit, infrastructures remain low in most African nations because of limited funding with stringent conditions attached to Western financiers such as the Paris Club and the IMF. This paved way for alternative means presented by the BRI. The BRI, an ambitious foreign policy initiated in China since 2013 underscores the importance of international trade relations and the difficulties in enforcing stiff protectionism through tariffs, embargoes, and import duties, among others, in contemporary globalized economies. Because of this difficulty, nations often engage in diplomacy, usually economic diplomacy, to deepen trade relations, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and national development, of which infrastructural development is most relevant. The BRI, as an important and ambitious diplomatic policy, stems

from the Old Silk Road, a network of trade routes established during the Han dynasty to connect China, Asia, and Europe over 7000 km (Li & Hilmola, 2019; Kayembe et al., 2020). McBride et al. (2023) added that the old Silk Road extended more than 4000 miles and linked Eastern and Western markets, where China traded silk, spices, jade, and other goods for gold and other precious metals with ivory and glass products.

Since its inception in 2013 during Xi's official visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, China has committed about US$1 trillion into BRI funding with positive impacts such as the reduction in cost of doing business by 1.1% globally, while lifting about 40 million people out of poverty (Cui Jianchun, 2023; World Bank, 2022). At the regional level, BRI's visible impact cuts across Asia with evidence in the US$6 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a collection of projects connecting China to Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea, the port of Piraeus in Greece (Europe), and in Africa with increasing presence in about 52 African counties in 2023 (Caiyu,, 2024; McBride et al., 2023). In spite of the global reach, critics have faulted the BRI for its neocolonial tendency, increasing debt dependency of BRI countries, and what was termed the string of pearls (McBride et al., 2023). In contrast, Kayebe et al. (2020) in their report revealed that the BRI has contributed positively to infrastructural development in Egypt through the Suez Canal, resulting in US$9.4 billion revenue in 2023 (Reuters, 2023), while benefits from the Doraleh port in Djibouti implied China's wealth distribution rather than neocolonialism. Importantly, the Bandung conference of 1955 to strengthen cooperation between China and Africa with visible projects such as the 1,860 km TAZARA railway connecting Tanzania to landlock Zambia support China's commitment towards development in Africa, a notable reason for China's permanent seat in the UN in 1971 due to overwhelming support from African countries (Busse, Erdogan & Mühlen, 2016).

In Nigeria and most African countries, BRI is most appealing because of China's limited interference in the political structure of African nations unlike European counterparts. Additionally, the BRI flexible loan conditions compared to Western financiers such as the Paris Club and IMF, whose conditional policies, such as SAP and devaluation, have marginally underdeveloped Africa reinforced its penetration in Africa. However, the growing criticisms of the opaque nature of BRI investment with hidden clauses, inflated investment costs, environmental and labor concerns, poor accountability, substandard products, project abandonment, capital flight, and crowding out effect on domestic firms call for adequate assessment of the effects of BRI on Railways and port development broadly assessed below.

Economic Diplomacy through the BRI and Railway Infrastructural Development

Prior to Nigerian independence in 1960, the railway was instrumental to the movement of raw materials and mineral resources for the colonial government, and as well constituted one of the major means of transportation. According to Nura (2023: 47), the British built railways in Nigeria to consolidate its administration and to create a cheaper way to transport raw materials, crops, and other goods from the inland areas to the coastal ports for export to Britain. The post-colonial Nigerian society continued to depend on the railways that contributed to employment generation, mobility, and commercial activities across the country. Odeleye (2000) reiterated in his study "reviving the Nigeria railway: Options and challenges," that after Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) had around 340 carriages, 257 locomotives, and 3,890 wagons, serving about 20 million passengers.

Agbo and Garba (2025), however, observed that the railway system experienced a comatose in the aftermath of the colonial era as railway infrastructures witnessed wear and tear with limited funding, resulting in the collapse of the railway system in Nigeria. Additionally, the discovery of

oil shifted transport to pipelines, inland water ways, and roads, reducing the need for railways, while neglect of agriculture further weakened demand for rail transport in Nigeria (Nura, 2023). The neglect of the railways sooner than later created problems because Nigerian roads remained decrepit, while the Gele-Gele port and Onitsha inland port were moribund and operating below global standards to exacerbate the cost of business and delay in travel times. This aligns with the view of an interviewee who alluded that "*the collapse of the rail system with rising insecurity on congested and poor roads, as well as a non-functional port in the Southeast despite the potential of the Onitsha inland port, have exacerbated the cost of doing business and rising inflation in the Southeast and Nigeria.*"

Against this persistent neglect, Andrić, Wang, and Zhong (2019) argued that railways are the most efficient means of transport because it is cheaper than air transport, faster than road transport, and have connected several countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to major seaports in South Asia to deepen trade relations and economic development. Accordingly, President Obasanjo, on October 9, 2006, posited that "no nation has achieved holistic development without a coherent, integrated, efficient and reliable transportation system" (Nasiru, 2018). This background birthed the Standard Gauge Railway Modernization Projects (SGRMP) and the Lagos-Kano standard gauge awarded to China Civil Engineering and Construction Co (CCECC), for $8.3bn, to be funded with a soft loan from China (Nasiru, 2018). Another landmark event was the signing of three loan agreements with China's Exim Bank during Goodluck Jonathan's administration to revamp the railway system in Nigeria (Katarzyna, 2020). Howbeit, the railway system remained in a poor state till the aftermath of 2015, when Nigeria fully entered into the BRI agreement, metamorphosing into the Abuja-Kaduna Railway with a total length of 186.5 km and a maximum speed of 150km/h (Bukola, 2019), the Lagos-Oyo rail line,

and the Itakpe-Warri rail line, among others. A comprehensive overview of railway projects undertaken to deepen infrastructural development and economic growth in Nigeria through the BRI is represented below.

Table 1: Railway Projects under the BRI arrangement in Nigeria

Rail project	Cost ($)	Funding Model	Description	Contractors
Abuja – Kaduna	876m	$500m financed through concessionary loans from China' Export-Import Bank with the remaining $374m provided by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN).	187km from Abuja to Kaduna (part of the US$3.8b and 2,700km Lagos – Kano line)	China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC)
Lagos – Ibadan	1.5b	Loan from the Export Import (Exim) Bank of China	156 km from Lagos to Ibadan (with 6.51km extension to Apapa port).	CCECC
Ibadan – Kano	5.3b	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)	CCECC

Abuja – Warri	3.9b	FGN to provide an equity stake of 15%, China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (CRCC), an equity stake of 10%, and the remaining 75% borrowed from China's Exim Bank. The CRCC will operate the railway and the port for 30 years to recover its investment.	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 approximately 440km.	CRCC, Julius Berger
Kano- Maradi	1.959b	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.	Mota-Engil Engenharia E Construcao Africa (MEECA); China Communication Construction Company (CCCC)
Lagos- Calabar	11b	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	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	CCECC

		completed in 2018), the FGN is currently exploring other funding options.	between Port Harcourt and Lagos via Onitsha.	
Port Harcourt-Maiduguri	3.02b	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.	The project involves the renovation of the current 1,443-kilometre line and adding new branch lines to Owerri and Damaturu, extending the total length to 2,044 km.	CCECC

Source: Ighodalo and Adeyemi-Faboya (2021); Chen (2021); Sumaina, (2022); Railway Technology (2024), Angbulu (2025).

While the BRI has drawn mixed reactions, Table 1.1 depicts a glaring positive influence of the BRI on railway development in Nigeria. Specifically, the Abuja-Kaduna rail line, which operates at a speed of 150 kilometers per hour, is one of Nigeria's major transport achievements. Covering a distance of 186.5 kilometers with nine stations, it connects the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, to Kaduna State, easing movement between the two major cities. Since its launch in 2016, the rail service has transported about 6.5 million passengers up to 2023 (Xinhua, 2023), showing its growing importance as a safe, reliable, and faster alternative to road travel, especially considering the security challenges often faced on the Abuja-Kaduna highway. The railway project also plays an important economic and social role. It employs about 534 staff (Agbor & Garba, 2025), contributing to job creation and local economic growth. The stations along the route stimulate business activities and improve trade and connectivity between communities. In agreement, an

interviewee revealed that the "*Abuja-Kaduna rail line has strengthened regional integration, supported national development goals, and enhanced the comfort and safety of intercity travel in Nigeria.*" Elsewhere in Africa, railway development through the BRI has deepened interconnectivity and trade relations between landlocked Ethiopia and Djibouti through the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway (Andrić et al., 2019).

Also, the 156 km Lagos-Ibadan rail line, running at a speed of 150 km per hour, is an important transport link that connects Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo states, with a total route of 380.03 km and 10 stations reaching the Apapa port (Sumaina, 2022). It plays a key role in improving transport infrastructure and easing the movement of people and goods between the southwest states. The rail line also helps reduce traffic congestion and road accidents by offering a safer and faster travel option. In addition, it supports urban growth along its route and contributes to a better layout of the national railway network, promoting regional development and economic expansion (Sumaina, 2022).

Importantly, the US$3.9 billion Abuja–Warri rail project, connecting major cities such as Abuja-Itakpe or Abuja-Baru-Itakpe and Lokoja, is of great economic relevance as it enhances intercity connectivity, facilitates the movement of goods and people, and supports regional trade and industrial growth (Nnodim, 2019). The railway is also expected to boost the development of the Warri port, reduce road congestion, and strengthen national integration by linking the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. Despite these potential benefits, the 30-year concession agreement for managing both the railway and the new Warri port reflects growing concerns about neocolonial dependency of China' BRI investments. The arrangement reinforces the argument that Nigeria and other less developed countries remain vulnerable to China's BRI funding, which often embeds

long-term economic and political obligations with resource exploitation under the guise of development assistance (Butts & Bankus, 2009).

Also important is the US$1.959 billion Kano–Maradi railway, which links Kano, Danbatta, Kazaure, Daura, Mashi, Katsina, Jibiya, and Maradi in Niger Republic, together with a branch line from Kano to Dutse. It is a major regional infrastructure designed to enhance trade and connectivity between Nigeria and its northern neighbors. Similarly, the Lagos–Calabar rail line covering 1,402 km and the Port Harcourt–Maiduguri rail project is expected to strengthen economic integration, promote industrialization, and facilitate the movement of goods across key commercial hubs in southern and northern Nigeria. These projects also aim to support agricultural value chains, expand market access, and foster regional development by reducing transportation costs and logistics barriers, thereby contributing to national economic growth and cohesion.

Drawing from Table 1.1, BRI infrastructural development in railways has created positive externalities and social well-being in Nigeria. In agreement, Nura (2023) deduced that Chinese-built trains have eased mobility for some mid-class commuters, but the cost versus benefit of the trains does not seem to be effective due to the relatively high cost of the railway tickets for the average Nigerian. Gbadebo (2025) affirmed that the BRI, through rail infrastructural development, notably the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan rail projects, has an overarching positive effect on transportation networks, industries, and integration of Nigeria into global supply chains, though issues of debt sustainability, sovereignty encroachment, unequal distribution of benefits, and concerns about the transparency and conditions of Chinese-funded projects remained major concerns in the Sino-Nigerian bilateral relationship. More reinforcing is inequitable distribution of railway infrastructures in line with the Federal Character Principle in Nigeria. A cursory evaluation of Table 1.1 showed neglect of the Southeast region in the distribution of standard gauge railway

lines, negating the Federal Character Principle, which advocates equitable allocation of socioeconomic and political resources across Nigeria. It suffices that the Abuja-Kaduna rail line connects the North-Central region to the Northwest, the Itakpe-Wari (Abuja-Warri) line links the Northcentral through Kogi State to the Niger Delta, while the Lagos-Oyo links Southwestern States, the Southeast and the Northeast are grossly secluded. From the railway networks, only the Port Harcourt-Maiduguri line connects the Southeast, a commercial region to the Northeast, yet remains largely uncompleted.

This feeling of exclusion reinforces the long-standing perception of marginalization and deliberate social, economic, and political strangulations of the Igbo people, a concern earlier captured in the petition presented before the Oputa Panel by *Ohaneze Indigbo*, a sociopolitical group in Southeast, Nigeria (Larab, 2008). Similarly, the persistent infrastructural neglect and perceived inequity have further fueled agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), who interpret such exclusion as justification for their demand for external self-determination, manifesting through the Sit-at-Home order with an adverse effect on socioeconomic and political activities in the region (Itanyi & Garba, 2025).

Economic Diplomacy through BRI and Port Development

Ports play a major role in supporting national economies through trade facilitation, employment generation, and revenue creation. They serve as vital gateways for import and export activities, connecting nations to global markets and stimulating industrial and commercial growth. The economic benefits of ports are seen through their contributions to national income, employment, and regional development. In Panama, the Panama Canal stands as a major contributor to the country's economy, accounting for about 7.7% of the total annual GDP. It provides around 23.6% of the government's annual income and contributes 2.9% to total employment, creating

approximately 55,000 jobs (Ramos et al., 2024). This shows how maritime infrastructure can serve as a strong source of national revenue and job creation. Similarly, in Europe, the Port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands recorded a total throughput of 468.7 million tons in 2021 and generated 772.7 million euros in revenue. Its contribution to the Dutch GDP stood at 3.0%, with direct and indirect employment reaching 174,057 in 2020 (Port of Rotterdam Authority, 2022). The port's consistent investment in innovation and infrastructure has supported its growth. For instance, a total of 226.3 million euros was invested in client-related infrastructure, public facilities, and capital assets, which contributed to a 2.6% increase in annual revenue (Rotterdam Port Authority, 2022).

In Asia, Singapore's maritime cluster—which includes port operations, logistics, and related services—accounts for about 8% of the country's GDP and provides around 170,000 jobs (Medina, 2025). The strong integration of port and logistics operations has made Singapore a key global trade hub. In China, the Shanghai and wider Yangtze Delta ports have shown a positive short-term impact on regional GDP, reflecting how port development supports regional economic performance (Cai & Song, 2024).

While ports remain a backbone of trade-driven economic growth and have contributed significantly to economic growth and employment in Panama, the Netherlands, Singapore, and China, African ports face major challenges caused by poor funding, outdated infrastructure, and weak management. These issues have led to delays, congestion, and higher logistics costs. Handling costs in African ports are estimated to be about 50% higher than global averages, making trade more expensive and less competitive (Nantulya, 2025). Nigeria's low position of 110 out of 160 countries on the 2018 Logistics Performance Index, with an overall score of 2.53, shows weak port performance (Mohammed, 2023). Key factors such as customs clearance, international shipments, infrastructure, tracking and tracing, logistics skills, and timeliness were used as

yardstick, implying poor performance and high congestion, manifesting in economic loss of US$55 million per day in Nigeria (Mohammed, 2023). These weaknesses have allowed Chinese firms to expand their presence across the continent. In present time, China has stakes in over a quarter of Africa's 331 commercial ports (see Figure 1.1 for Chinese involvement in ports development and activities in Africa), a presence larger than in other regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean with only 10 Chinese-built ports, and 24 in Asia (Nantulya, 2025).

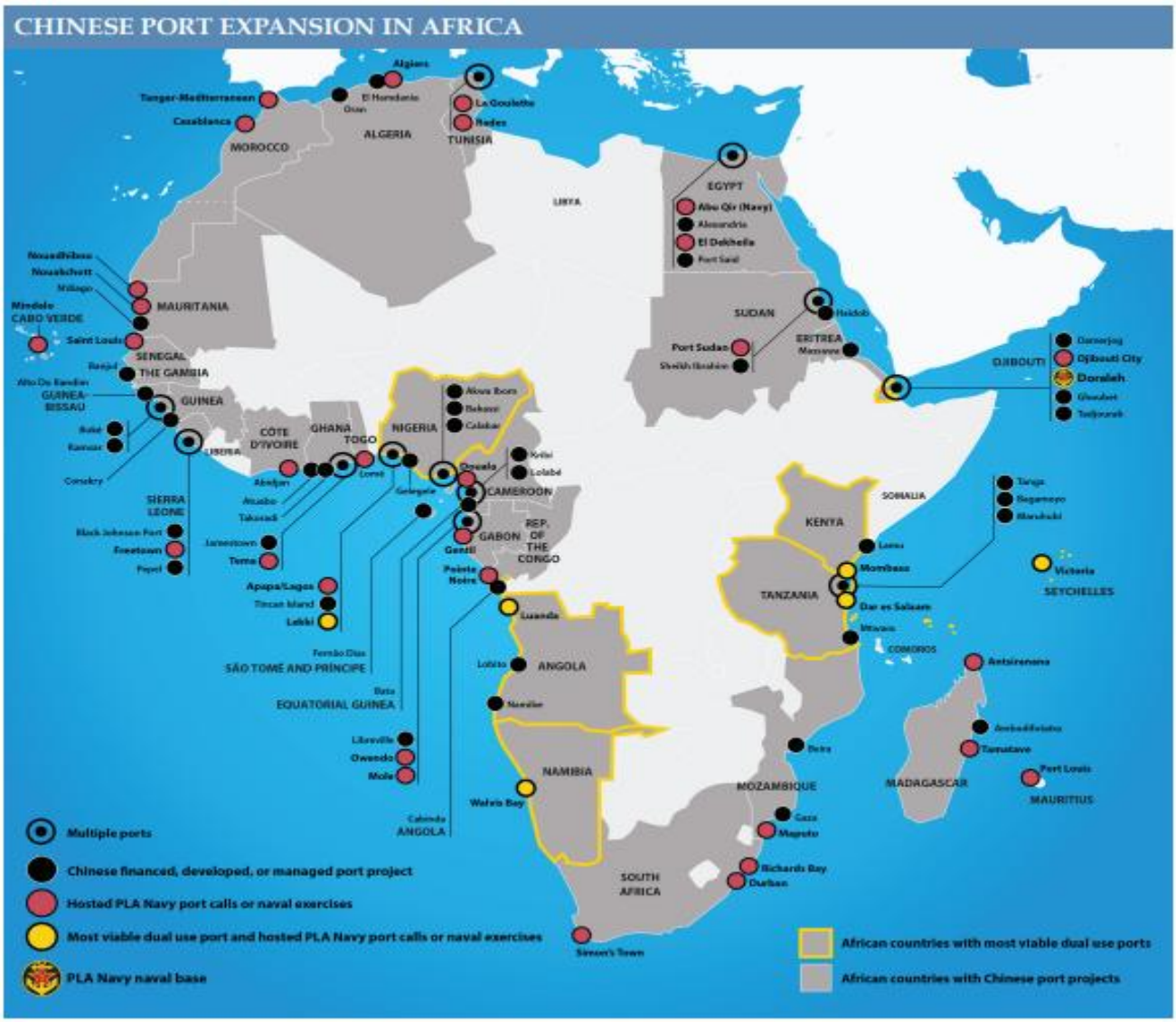

Figure 1.1: Distribution of ports and Chinese involvement in Africa

Source: Adapted from Nantulya (2025)

The benefits of China's port investments through the BRI in Africa remain mixed but skewed towards China. African countries such as Egypt, Djibouti, Tanzania, and Angola, among others have benefited from Chinese port investments through improved infrastructure, job creation, and increased trade capacity. For example, Egypt's Suez Canal expansion and Djibouti's Doraleh terminal have strengthened logistics and transshipment capacity, while Tanzania's Bagamoyo and Angola's Lobito ports have improved connectivity for export goods (Reuters, 2024; Arteh, 2017). These developments have stimulated local economies, reduced trade bottlenecks, and created employment. However, the greater financial benefit leans toward China, which gains an estimated $13 for every $1 invested in African ports (Nantulya, 2025).

A compelling issue is the security risks attributed to foreign influence of national ports. Because of this, the growing control of Chinese firms over African port infrastructure has raised concerns about security and sovereignty. There are fears that China could replicate military bases in other ports, as seen in the Doraleh Port in Djibouti, which hosts China's first overseas naval base (Nantulya, 2025). Analysts warn that the country's "Go Out" or "Go Global" strategy, combined with its "Overseas Strategic Strong Point" policy, may be embedding dual-use port facilities capable of supporting the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA). This raises questions about long-term control, maritime security, and Africa's strategic independence.

On the positive side, China's port development plan has helped connect Africa's 16 landlocked countries through Chinese-built inland transport systems, making it easier to move goods and resources to and from markets. China now has a strong presence in 35 West African ports compared to 17 in East Africa, 15 in Southern Africa, and 11 in North Africa. The Lekki Deep Port in Lagos State, Nigeria, stands as a clear example of the Belt and Road Initiative's impact on

African port infrastructure. In Nigeria, port expansion aligns with the National Agenda 2050, which targets an average GDP growth of 7% and a nominal GDP of about US$11.7 trillion (TBY, 2025). Yet, funding gaps remain a major setback, pushing the government toward public-private partnerships and foreign investments. The Lekki Deep Port reflects this model, with CHEC and Singapore's Tolaram Group holding a 75% stake, while the Lagos State Government and the Nigerian Port Authority share the remaining 25% (TBY, 2025).

The Lekki Deep Port stands out as one of Nigeria's most promising infrastructure projects, showing strong potential for trade expansion and economic growth. Its dry cargo terminal can handle up to four million tons yearly, while vessels docking at the port can carry over 14,500 containers (TBY, 2025). These capacities have driven positive economic forecasts. Over the next 45 years, it is projected to produce about US$361 billion in total economic output and create around 170,000 jobs, and an estimated US$201 billion contribution to both federal and state revenues through taxes, duties, and royalties (TBY, 2025; Mohammed, 2023).

Beyond revenue and employment, the Lekki Deep Port will play a major role in promoting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by boosting regional trade and supporting export diversification, especially in non-oil sectors. It also has the potential to raise Nigeria's internally generated revenue through increased trade and logistics activities. However, concerns remain over foreign influence and national control, as key administrative positions, including the Managing Director and CEO, held by Wang Qiang, a Chinese national and senior executive from CHEC (Mohammed, 2023) reignite this fear. This raises questions about sovereignty and long-term decision-making power. Overall, the Lekki Deep Port highlights the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in advancing port development in Nigeria, while also calling attention to the need for stronger local oversight and balanced foreign involvement.

While the Lekki Deep Port has drawn major attention, a comprehensive distribution of ports with Chinese involvement under the BRI arrangement is represented in below in Table 2.

Table 2: Ports and BRI Involvement in Nigeria

Port	Chinese Firms involvement	Proven capacity to berth PLA Naval vessel	Hosted PLA port calls/drills	Contractors
Akwa Ibom	finance, building, shareholding	No	No	Bollore-Power China consortium
Apapa-Lagos	finance, building, shareholding	No	Yes	China's Lianyungang Port Holding
Bakassi	Finance, building	No	No	
Calabar	finance, building	No	No	CHEC
Gelegele	finance, building	No	No	CHEC
Lekki	finance, building, shareholding, operations	Yes	Yes	CHEC
Tincan Island		No	No	CHEC

Source: Nantulya (2025); Anagor-Ewuzie (2023); Vanguard (2018); Emmanuel (2020)

In addition to the Lekki deep port extensively discussed above, the Gele-Gele Port in Edo State, with a planned capacity of one million TEUs and an expected 10,000 direct and indirect jobs, holds deep historical importance that dates back before the colonial era (Aliyu, 2025). Despite this legacy, the port has long suffered neglect (Abubaka, 2000). However, renewed efforts following

the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Edo State Government and CHEC during the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing have revived hopes for its development (Vanguard, 2018). Once completed, the port is expected to ease congestion at Lagos ports and open Edo State to international trade. It will also boost state revenue and create new markets for key agricultural products such as oil palm, cassava, and fruits, making it a vital step toward economic diversification and regional integration.

A further assessment deduced that improved Chinese participation in Nigerian ports, as shown in Table 2, has supported trade, growth, and infrastructure development by providing the finance, technology, and expertise needed for port modernization and expansion. Projects in Apapa-Lagos, Calabar, and Tin Can Island have enhanced cargo handling, improved port efficiency, and boosted trade connectivity, positioning Nigeria for greater participation in regional and global commerce. However, the limited inclusion of other regions and local firms creates imbalance in development and over-dependence on Chinese firms. This reliance risks crowding out indigenous companies and limiting technology transfer, while raising sustainability concerns if Chinese dominance continues unchecked.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Poor infrastructure has continued to hinder sustainable development and better living standards in Nigeria due to limited infrastructural funding, poor resource use, and corruption, leading to reliance on foreign support. More compelling is that before Nigeria joined the BRI in 2015, much of its infrastructure funding came from European financiers such as the Paris Club and the World Bank, whose conditional policies like deregulation, devaluation, and austerity measures slowed development (Zissimos, & Stroup, 2013; Oberdabernig, 2010). The shift toward China through the BRI has, however, opened new opportunities for growth, particularly in railway and port

development. Importantly, agreements reached during the 6th China–Nigeria Logistics Line Supply Chain Platform Forum and the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing have driven key projects such as the Apapa Port, the Gele-Gele Port, and the industrial park in Lagos and Benin State (Anagor-Ewuzie, 2023; Vanguard, 2018). Other infrastructural milestones included the Lekki Deep Port, the Lagos–Ibadan rail line, the Abuja–Kaduna rail line, and the Itakpe–Warri line. These projects have boosted trade, reduced road congestion, raised internally generated revenue, and created jobs. Despite criticisms of debt dependence, weak local participation, and environmental risks, the BRI has provided Nigeria with more visible development gains than earlier Western-led interventions. This study concludes that the BRI has played a major role in reshaping Nigeria's infrastructure, but issues such as uneven project distribution, limited inclusion of indigenous firms, and environmental challenges remained salient, underscoring the need for stronger negotiation and oversight by the Nigerian government. Also, future BRI projects should align with Nigerian laws, support local firms for technology transfer, and ensure environmental protection to promote sustainable growth.

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