

# THE ROLE OF CHINA IN THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION OF NIGERIA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM: A STUDY OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the place of China in Nigeria's democratic transition, analyzing the intersection of Chinese investments and Nigeria's political development through the lens of Dependency Theory. The theory highlights how excessive reliance on external powers can perpetuate underdevelopment and dependency, raising critical questions about Nigeria's growing economic and strategic partnership with China. While China's contributions to Nigeria's infrastructure, digital technology, and economic growth have been significant, they come with challenges such as debt dependency, reduced transparency, and potential authoritarian influences. Key findings reveal that China's economic support often fosters dependency, risking Nigeria's political autonomy and democratic governance; the opacity surrounding Chinese-backed projects enables corruption and undermines institutional accountability; and China's principle of non-interference may embolden authoritarian tendencies among Nigeria's political elites. These dynamics risk weakening Nigeria's democratic structures and shifting focus away from democratic norms toward economic gains. To address these challenges, the study recommended among others strengthening regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency and accountability in foreign partnerships, (2) diversifying economic partnerships to reduce over-reliance on China, and empowering civil society and independent media to monitor foreign investments and promote democratic accountability. The study concludes that while China's involvement presents opportunities for economic growth, Nigeria must prioritize its democratic values and institutional integrity to ensure that its partnership with China supports, rather than undermines, its democratic transition

**Keywords:** Politics, Political System, Dependency, Democratic Transition, Sovereignty, Accountability and Transparency.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The democratic transition in Nigeria, particularly since the return to civilian rule in 1999, has been fraught with challenges stemming from a legacy of military dictatorship, corruption, and political instability. Despite these hurdles, Nigeria has made significant strides toward consolidating democratic institutions, yet the country's political system continues to face external and internal pressures that threaten its democratic trajectory (Adebayo, 2023). Among the external factors influencing Nigeria's democratic development is China, whose growing economic and political presence in Africa has had profound implications on Nigeria's governance, economy, and political practices. Nigeria's relationship with China began to take shape in the early 21st century, as both nations sought to strengthen economic ties. China's engagement with Nigeria, particularly since the early 2000s, has been driven by its need to secure access to Africa's vast natural resources and expand its geopolitical influence on the continent. In Nigeria, China has invested heavily in infrastructure, including railways, power plants, and roads, which have contributed significantly to the country's development goals. However, the partnership between China and Nigeria is not without its complexities, especially in the context of Nigeria's democratic consolidation. While the economic benefits are clear, China's influence in Nigeria raises significant questions about the future of democratic governance, political autonomy, and sovereignty (Falade, 2022).

China's involvement in Nigeria's political system has been characterized by a range of economic partnerships, trade deals, and infrastructure projects. Since 2000, China has emerged as one of Nigeria's largest trade partners, with China accounting for a significant portion of foreign investments in the country (Adebayo, 2023). In particular, Chinese loans have funded numerous infrastructural projects aimed at addressing Nigeria's significant infrastructure deficit. However, while these investments have provided much-needed infrastructure, the resulting debt burden has raised concerns about Nigeria's financial independence and political autonomy. Critics argue that the increasing reliance on Chinese loans places Nigeria in a position where it risks becoming beholden to Chinese interests, which could undermine its democratic governance (Falade, 2022). One of the primary challenges of China's growing role in Nigeria's political system is the potential erosion of democratic accountability. Unlike Western nations, which typically attach conditions to their economic aid, such as human rights and democratic reforms, China's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states has allowed Nigeria's political elites to receive aid without the pressure for democratic reforms. As

Uche (2021) points out, this policy of non-interference can embolden Nigerian leaders to adopt authoritarian practices without fear of international retribution. This is especially concerning in a country like Nigeria, where political leaders have historically exploited power for personal and partisan gain. The absence of external pressure for democratic reforms, coupled with China's provision of economic and military support, creates an environment in which democratic institutions and political norms may be further weakened.

Moreover, China's increasing presence in Nigeria's political system has led to a growing ideological shift, where some Nigerian political leaders view China's centralized, one-party system as a potential model for Nigeria. Obi (2021) observes that this "authoritarian allure" is evident among some political elites who prioritize economic growth over democratic principles, leading to a decline in democratic commitment. This shift could undermine democratic consolidation, as political leaders may be more inclined to adopt authoritarian policies that limit political freedoms, suppress opposition, and undermine democratic processes. As these practices take root, the basic tenets of democracy, such as transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights, risk being sidelined in favor of more autocratic governance models.

China's influence on Nigeria's political system is further complicated by the social and cultural implications of its investments. Although Chinese-funded projects have played a role in addressing Nigeria's infrastructure gap, there is widespread dissatisfaction with some of China's labor and environmental practices. Many Nigerians have expressed concerns about the treatment of local workers employed by Chinese companies, as well as the environmental impact of Chinese-backed projects (Adebayo, 2022). These concerns, combined with the perception that Chinese companies are prioritizing their interests over local communities, have led to public discontent and growing resentment. Falade (2022) argues that these social tensions, if left unaddressed, could exacerbate political instability, undermining the social cohesion necessary for democratic stability. Public dissatisfaction with Chinese investments can polarize public opinion, weakening support for democratic processes and further eroding trust in government institutions.

The geopolitical dynamics of China-Nigeria relations also present a challenge to Nigeria's democratic transition. As Nigeria deepens its economic ties with China, it risks alienating its Western allies, particularly the United States and European Union, which have historically been significant backers of Nigeria's democratic reforms. Western countries, which have long supported Nigeria's democratic transition, often expect Nigeria to adhere to democratic norms and governance standards. Adebayo (2023) notes that this growing alignment with China could strain Nigeria's relations with the West, as Western nations may view China's influence as a threat to Nigeria's democratic values. This diplomatic tension places Nigeria in a precarious position, where it must navigate competing interests without compromising its commitment to democracy.

The influence of Chinese digital technology on Nigeria's telecommunications sector further complicates the country's democratic challenges. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE have become major players in the development of Nigeria's digital infrastructure, providing telecommunications technology that has revolutionized the country's communication landscape. However, concerns have emerged over the potential for Chinese surveillance technologies to be used to monitor political opposition, limit freedom of expression, and infringe upon citizens' privacy rights. Okoro (2022) argues that this could lead to a situation where the political elite, in partnership with Chinese firms, uses digital technology to suppress dissent and control the flow of information. The potential for surveillance and information manipulation undermines democratic principles such as freedom of speech and access to information, which are fundamental to a functioning democracy.

Therefore, China's growing involvement in Nigeria presents both opportunities and challenges for the country's democratic transition. While China's investments have contributed to Nigeria's economic development and infrastructure growth, they have also raised critical questions about the impact on Nigeria's political autonomy, democratic practices, and social stability. The lack of democratic conditionalities in Chinese aid, combined with ideological shifts toward authoritarianism, social tensions, and geopolitical implications, presents significant risks to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. It is crucial for Nigeria to carefully manage its relationship with China to ensure that its economic partnerships do not undermine its democratic values and governance structures.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study is to examine the impact of China-Nigeria Relations on Nigeria's Democratic Stability in the Fourth Republic, 2010-2024 while the specific objectives are to:

- examine the political and strategic implications of China-Nigeria relations on Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic-2010-2024
- examine the challenges facing China- Nigeria relations in Nigeria's quest for democratic stability from 2010-2024

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will guide the study:

- What are the political and strategic implications of China-Nigeria relations on Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic-2010-2024?
- What are the challenges facing China- Nigeria relations in Nigeria's quest for democratic stability from 2010-2024

### 4. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### China-Nigeria Political Relations

In its endeavour to be a major player in the globalization process as well as expand its spheres of diplomatic ties, China established political relations with Nigeria on 10th February 1971 even though China's official contact with Nigeria was in 1960 when at the instance of the Nigerian government a Chinese delegation came to partake in the independence celebration (Utomi 2007). The diplomatic relationship started on a rather slow pace but became close when Nigeria acting in cohort with other countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa overcame opposition from Western Europe and America to help Peoples Republic of China (PRC) to secure a permanent membership seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). With this development the two nations scaled their diplomatic relation to an ambassadorial level with the establishment of embassies at each other's capital (Kwanashe, 2015), within this period (1971-1993) political events occurring in both countries helped to solidify the diplomatic relationship. In Nigeria for instance, the emergence of totalitarian military regimes and the killing of the Ogoni activists, the Nigerian government came under increasingly international condemnation and isolation from Western Europe and America. On the other hand, the massacre of protesting students at the Tiananmen Square by Chinese government also attracted condemnation and political isolation to China. These political developments drew Nigeria and China closer. Furthermore, during the period 1970-1993, China's political diplomatic strategy in Africa was anchored on search for ideological allies against capitalism and support for the various national liberation movements (Kwanashie, 2015).

Nigeria though not a frontline state became- the conduit for channeling support from China to the liberation fighters. This interface strengthened the diplomatic relationship between China and Nigeria which resulted in more high level diplomatic visits as well as the driving force behind the increase in the tempo of Chinese trade and investment in Nigeria. Nigerian government invited Chinese investors to take advantage of the thriving cotton production business in Northern Nigeria and this helped shaped the fortunes of the early days of the textile manufacturing industry in Nigeria (Alobo, 2014). The warm diplomatic ties coupled with Nigeria's support for "One China, Two systems" policy resulted in the signing of several protocols and bilateral trade, economic, scientific, technical, cultural, and educational agreements between 1972 and 1997 (Ode, 2019)

In addition to the various bilateral agreements and to underline the importance of political-diplomatic engagement, the following high-profile state visits were undertaken from both sides. In 1974, General Yakubu Gowon as Head of State visited China. Ten years later, Dr Alex Ekwueme in his capacity as vice president visited China. General Abacha followed suit in 1998. With the return to democratic governance, President Olusegun Obasanjo visited China in 1999, 2001, and 2005. From the Chinese side, Vice Premier Geng Biao visited Nigeria in 1978, Vice Premier Huang Hua in 1981, President Jiang Zemin in 2002, and President Hu Jintao in 2006. From the above analysis, it is clear that China and Nigeria's political engagement is positive and warm with both sides benefitting even though the scale of balance is more in favour of China than Nigeria

**The Place of China in Democratic Transition in Nigeria's Politics** The relationship between China and Nigeria has also had implications for democratic transition in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While China is known for its authoritarian regime, its economic and political engagements with Nigeria have raised concerns about their impact on Nigeria's democratic stability. Scholars like Adewole (2019) argue that China's non-interference policy in Nigeria's domestic affairs has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has allowed Nigeria to pursue its democratic processes without external interference. However, on the other hand, it has also been criticized for enabling undemocratic practices, such as authoritarian tendencies and human rights violations, to persist in Nigeria. The influence of Chinese investments and partnerships in Nigeria's governance structures has raised questions about the balance between economic development and democratic principles in the country.

China's influence on democratic transition in Nigerian politics cannot be ignored. With its growing economic power and increasing presence in Africa, China has become a major player in shaping political landscapes in countries like Nigeria. One way in which China impacts democratic transition in Nigeria is through its economic relationships with the country. China is Nigeria's largest trading partner, investing heavily in infrastructure projects and providing loans for development initiatives. However, these economic ties come with strings attached, as China often requires certain

political concessions in exchange for financial support. This can include supporting authoritarian regimes or turning a blind eye to human rights abuses, which can hinder the development of democratic institutions in Nigeria.

China's own system of governance has been held up as a model for some African leaders, including those in Nigeria. The Chinese Communist Party's tight control over the political system and lack of true democratic institutions have drawn interest from Nigerian politicians seeking to consolidate power and limit opposition. This can have a negative impact on democratic transition in Nigeria, as leaders may prioritize maintaining control over fostering a truly inclusive and participatory political system. There have been several studies that have explored the influence of China on democratic transition in African countries, including Nigeria. For example, a study by Fozouni and Krause (2018) found that Chinese investments in Africa are often accompanied by support for authoritarian regimes, which can hinder the development of democratic institutions. A study by Mawdsley (2019) examines China's role in shaping governance in Africa, including its impact on democratic transition. China's role in democratic transition in Nigerian politics is a topic of significant scholarly interest, as the country's growing influence on the African continent has raised questions about the impact of Chinese investments and political relationships on the development of democracy. Several authors have explored the interaction between China and democratic transition in Nigeria, shedding light on the complexities of this relationship.

One key aspect of China's influence on democratic transition in Nigerian politics is its economic engagement with the country. Chinese investments in Nigeria, particularly in infrastructure projects and natural resource extraction, have played a significant role in shaping the economic landscape of the country. However, as Fozouni and Krause (2018) argue, these investments often come with conditions that can undermine democratic governance. In exchange for financial support, China may require political concessions from the Nigerian government, such as supporting authoritarian regimes or turning a blind eye to human rights abuses.

Chinese investments in Nigeria can also have implications for the political elite in the country. Mawdsley (2019) notes that some Nigerian leaders may be drawn to China's model of governance, which prioritizes stability and economic development over democratization. This can lead to a situation where Nigerian politicians seek to emulate aspects of China's political system, such as centralizing power and limiting opposition, in order to maintain control and further their own interests. In addition to economic relationships, China's diplomatic support for Nigerian leaders can also influence democratic transition in the country. As noted by Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014), China's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries can provide cover for authoritarian leaders in Nigeria to crackdown on dissent and consolidate power without facing criticism from external actors. the place of China in democratic transition in Nigerian politics is a complex and multifaceted issue that warrants further examination. While Chinese investments can bring much-needed resources for development, they can also come with political implications that may hinder the establishment of democratic governance in Nigeria. It is crucial for policymakers and researchers to carefully consider the consequences of China's influence on Nigerian politics and work towards building a more inclusive and participatory political system in the country.

Factors influencing China's role in democratic transition in Nigeria's political system:

**Economic Interests:** China's economic interests play a significant role in shaping its involvement in democratic transition in Nigeria. China is Nigeria's largest trading partner and has made substantial investments in infrastructure projects and natural resources in the country. These economic ties can influence China's stance on democratic transition in Nigeria as it may prioritize maintaining stable political relationships to safeguard its economic interests (Fozouni & Krause, 2018).

**Geopolitical Influence:** China's growing geopolitical influence in Africa and its strategic interests in the region can impact its approach to democratic transition in Nigeria. China may seek to cultivate political alliances with Nigerian leaders who align with its interests in exchange for economic support, potentially impacting the democratic process in the country (Brautigam, 2013).

**Non-interference Policy:** China's long-standing principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries could limit its involvement in promoting democratic transition in Nigeria. This policy may prevent China from actively supporting democratization efforts that challenge the status quo in Nigeria, as seen in its approach towards authoritarian regimes in other African countries (Cheeseman, 2015).

**Ideological Factors:** China's own political system, characterized by one-party rule and limited political freedom, could influence its perspective on democratic transition in Nigeria. Chinese leaders may be more inclined to support political stability over democratization in Nigeria, viewing a strong central government as essential for economic growth and social stability (Mawdsley, 2019).



**Bilateral and Multilateral Engagements:** China's engagement with Nigeria through bilateral agreements and participation in multilateral fora can influence its stance on democratic transition in the country. Chinese investments in Nigerian infrastructure and development projects may lead to political leverage that shapes its position on democratization efforts in Nigeria (Brautigam, 2014).

In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced by China has significant implications for Nigeria's political landscape. The BRI's infrastructure projects in Nigeria may contribute to economic development, but they also come with potential risks to democratic processes. Scholars like Hameiri and Jones (2018) have highlighted the strategic and political implications of China's BRI in Africa, including concerns about debt dependency, lack of transparency, and the potential for Chinese influence to undermine democratic governance.

Therefore, China's influence on democratic transition in Nigerian politics is a complex and multi-faceted issue. While Chinese investments can provide much-needed resources for development, they can also come with political implications that may hinder the establishment of true democratic governance in Nigeria. It is important for Nigerian leaders to carefully consider the implications of their relationships with China and work towards building a more inclusive and democratic political system.

#### **The Consequences of Trade Imbalance with China on Nigeria's Democratic Stability in the Fourth Republic-1999-2024**

The trade imbalance between China and Nigeria has posed challenges to Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic. China is Nigeria's largest trading partner, with a significant trade surplus in favour of China. This imbalance has been attributed to the dominance of Chinese imports in Nigeria, leading to concerns about the impact on Nigeria's domestic industries and economic self-sufficiency. According to Umar (2020), the influx of cheap Chinese goods has disrupted local industries, leading to job losses and economic vulnerabilities in Nigeria. This has, in turn, influenced Nigeria's democratic stability by contributing to social discontent, economic inequality, and political unrest. The growing trade dependency on China has raised questions about Nigeria's ability to maintain its sovereignty and democratic resilience in the face of external economic pressures. The trade relationship between China and Nigeria has been a subject of interest in recent years, with many scholars and experts expressing concerns over the imbalances in the trade relationship and its potential consequences on Nigeria's democratic stability. The trade relationship between China and Nigeria is characterized by a significant imbalance, with Nigeria importing a large quantity of goods from China while exporting very little in return" (Igwe, 2020). This imbalance has led to a significant trade deficit for Nigeria, which has serious implications for the country's economy and democratic stability.

A former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria has also expressed concerns over the trade imbalance, stating that "the large trade deficit with China has significant implications for Nigeria's economic and political stability" (Moghalu, 2019). He further noted that the deficit has led to a decline in Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, which has had a negative impact on the country's ability to fund its development projects. The trade imbalance has also led to a significant increase in Nigeria's debt profile, with the country owing a significant amount of money to China. The debt owed to China is a significant concern for Nigeria, as it has the potential to undermine the country's economic and political stability" (Okonjo-Iweala, 2020).

The consequences of the trade imbalance on Nigeria's democratic stability are far-reaching. The trade imbalance has led to a significant decline in Nigeria's economic fortunes, which has had a negative impact on the country's democratic stability" (Ibrahim, 2020). He further noted that the decline in economic fortunes has led to a rise in poverty and unemployment, which has created a sense of disillusionment among the population and has the potential to undermine the country's democratic stability. The trade imbalance has also led to a significant increase in Nigeria's dependence on China for critical infrastructure and technology, which has raised concerns about the country's sovereignty and national security. Nigeria's dependence on China for critical infrastructure and technology has significant implications for the country's sovereignty and national security (Osamor, 2020). The trade imbalance has led to a significant decline in Nigeria's industrial sector, as local industries are unable to compete with the cheap imports from China. The decline in Nigeria's industrial sector has significant implications for the country's economic development and democratic stability" (Adi, 2020).

## **5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Dependency theory provides a critical framework for understanding the unequal economic and political relationships that often characterize interactions between developed and developing nations. Originally articulated by scholars like André Gunder Frank and Samir Amin, dependency theory posits that the global capitalist system perpetuates a hierarchical structure in which developing countries, such as Nigeria, remain economically dependent on developed or emerging economies like China. This dependency is maintained through trade imbalances, unequal investment terms,

and the extraction of resources, leaving dependent countries vulnerable to external influences that undermine their sovereignty and development. At the core of dependency theory is the idea that relationships between dominant and subordinate nations are structured to serve the interests of the dominant partner. In the case of Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2024), the country's heavy reliance on China for financing, infrastructure development, and trade has reinforced a pattern of dependency that has far-reaching political and economic consequences. While China's engagements have addressed Nigeria's infrastructural deficits and provided alternatives to Western-led financial systems, they have also deepened Nigeria's vulnerabilities, limiting the country's autonomy in governance and decision-making.

The theory is particularly relevant in the context of China-Nigeria relations because of the asymmetric nature of their interactions. China's provision of concessional loans for large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Abuja-Kaduna railway and hydropower plants, reflects the structural imbalance inherent in these engagements. While these projects address Nigeria's critical developmental needs, they are often accompanied by conditions that favor Chinese contractors, labor, and technology, leaving Nigerian industries sidelined. As Okafor and Musa (2023) argue, this exclusion of local stakeholders from key economic activities undermines Nigeria's capacity for self-sustaining growth, a central tenet of democratic stability.

Dependency theory also highlights how economic dependence can have political implications. Nigeria's reliance on Chinese funding often results in agreements that bypass democratic oversight mechanisms, such as parliamentary debate and civil society consultation. This lack of transparency weakens institutional accountability, erodes public trust, and exacerbates perceptions of elite corruption. For instance, Akinola and Chukwu (2023) note that Chinese-funded projects in Nigeria are frequently negotiated in secrecy, creating opportunities for mismanagement and limiting the public's ability to hold political leaders accountable. Such dynamics are detrimental to the consolidation of democracy, as they undermine the principles of transparency and inclusivity.

Dependency theory emphasizes the transfer of power and decision-making from dependent nations to dominant ones. In Nigeria, this is evident in the influence China wields over critical sectors, including telecommunications and digital infrastructure. Chinese companies, such as Huawei, have played a significant role in building Nigeria's digital ecosystem. While this has facilitated technological advancement, it has also enabled the Nigerian government to adopt surveillance tools that restrict political freedoms, particularly during election periods and protests. Eze and Ibrahim (2023) argue that this alignment with authoritarian technologies risks eroding democratic practices, as it empowers the state to suppress dissent and undermine political pluralism. The debt burden associated with Chinese loans further illustrates the dependency dynamic. Nigeria's increasing debt obligations to China limit its fiscal autonomy, as a significant portion of government revenues is allocated to debt servicing rather than social welfare or economic diversification. Dependency theorists contend that this type of economic relationship locks developing countries into cycles of dependency, where resources are extracted or redirected to meet external obligations, leaving little room for internal development. Omole and Ibrahim (2024) observe that such economic constraints weaken the social contract between the state and its citizens, contributing to political instability and undermining democratic governance.

Applying dependency theory to China-Nigeria relations reveals the double-edged nature of these engagements. On one hand, China provides critical infrastructure and financial support that has driven economic growth in Nigeria. On the other hand, the lack of transparency, increasing debt dependency, and political alignment with non-democratic practices undermine the democratic ideals of accountability, rule of law, and citizen participation. This dependency has broader implications for Nigeria's democratic stability, as it fosters an environment where political elites are incentivized to prioritize external alliances over domestic accountability, exacerbating governance challenges and social inequality.

Therefore, dependency theory offers valuable insights into the structural imbalances and vulnerabilities that define China-Nigeria relations. It highlights the interconnected economic and political challenges that arise from Nigeria's reliance on China, emphasizing the need for strategic reforms to balance these engagements. As Nwankwo (2024) argues, addressing dependency requires strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency, and fostering economic policies that prioritize local capacity building and citizen engagement. Without these measures, Nigeria risks entrenching its dependency on China, further undermining its democratic stability in the Fourth Republic.

## 6. RESEARCH METHOD

The historical research design was employed in this study as a systematic investigation and critical evaluation of present and past events concerning Nigeria-China relations and its effects on Nigeria's democratic stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The historical design is appropriate because it will enable the researcher to present issues concerning Nigeria-China relations for policymakers and stakeholders to think. It is concerned with conditions and relationships that had existed, practices that prevailed, beliefs, points of view, and activities that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are being felt, and those that are developing within the area of study (Sanubi, 2014). The researcher obtained

secondary data from previous studies and records according to how the events occurred in the past to the present. Data that are relevant to the study were critically evaluated to give meaning and a sense of direction to the research questions raised in this study. Data derived from the secondary sources were analyzed by qualitative content analysis which allowed the researcher to extract the contents of documents related to the topic understudied by providing answers to the research questions.

## 7. RESULTS

### **Question Three: What are the political and strategic implications of China-Nigeria relations on Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic-2010-2024?**

The political and strategic implications of China-Nigeria relations on Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic are both profound and multifaceted. Since the transition to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has actively diversified its foreign relations, leading to strengthened ties with China. While this relationship has delivered economic benefits such as increased trade, investment, and infrastructure development, it has also introduced significant challenges for governance and democratic consolidation. At the core of these dynamics is China's principle of non-interference in internal affairs, which contrasts with the conditional approach of Western partners that often ties aid and investments to governance reforms and human rights standards. This policy has allowed Nigerian leaders to access crucial loans and investments while avoiding external pressures for democratic reform, prioritizing short-term stability and growth over long-term democratic development (Adebayo, 2022).

China-funded infrastructure projects, such as railways and power plants, have had a significant impact on Nigeria's economy and politics. These projects bolster economic growth, improve citizens' quality of life, and serve as political capital for Nigerian leaders, particularly during election cycles. However, the lack of transparency and regulatory oversight surrounding these projects raises concerns about fostering corruption and undermining democratic institutions. The concentration of resources among political elites often results in patronage networks that erode accountability and transparency in governance, weakening the foundations of democracy (Olumide, 2023). Strategically, Nigeria's pivot towards China marks a shift from its traditional alignment with Western powers like the United States and the United Kingdom. This diversification of foreign relations has enabled Nigeria to adopt a more multipolar approach, providing leverage in international negotiations and reducing dependency on former colonial powers. While this offers Nigeria greater diplomatic flexibility, it also risks creating overreliance on China. As China's influence grows, concerns emerge about Nigeria becoming trapped in a dependency dynamic that undermines its political independence and democratic resilience (Adigun & Afolabi, 2021). China's governance model, characterized by centralized control and limited political freedoms, presents another challenge. Its economic success under an authoritarian regime can appear appealing to Nigerian leaders, particularly in times of political or economic instability. This admiration risks emboldening authoritarian tendencies in Nigeria, potentially eroding democratic norms such as checks and balances, political competition, and civic engagement (Akinwale, 2022). Additionally, Chinese investments have created opportunities for patronage politics, allowing political elites to exploit foreign-backed projects for personal and political gain, further marginalizing civil society and opposition groups (Falade, 2022).

In the security domain, China has supplied military equipment to Nigeria, assisting in counter-insurgency efforts. While this support strengthens Nigeria's security capabilities, it also raises concerns about the potential misuse of military aid to suppress political dissent and reinforce authoritarian rule. Without conditionalities promoting democratic accountability, there is a risk of exacerbating political repression under the guise of maintaining stability (Olumide, 2023). On the international stage, China's partnership has enhanced Nigeria's status as a key player in Sino-African relations and within the African Union. However, as Nigeria leverages this relationship to solidify its leadership in Africa, it must balance economic ties with China against the need to maintain democratic legitimacy. Too close an alignment with China risks undermining Nigeria's sovereignty and its capacity to navigate a complex global landscape dominated by competing powers (Uche, 2021).

Ultimately, the impact of China-Nigeria relations on democratic stability depends on how Nigeria manages this partnership. While the economic benefits of Chinese investments are significant, ensuring that these contributions align with democratic values is critical.

Nigeria must strengthen its domestic institutions, promote transparency, and safeguard electoral integrity to mitigate the risks associated with China's growing influence. This requires fostering an environment where civil society can thrive, opposition parties operate freely, and governance prioritizes accountability and inclusivity. Only by addressing these challenges can Nigeria harness its relationship with China to support democratic consolidation and sustainable development (Bamigboye, 2023).

#### **Question Four: What are the challenges facing China- Nigeria relations in Nigeria's quest for democratic stability from 2010-2024?**

The challenges of China-Nigeria relations for Nigeria's democratic stability arise from a complex interplay of political, economic, and cultural factors. While Chinese investments have bolstered Nigeria's infrastructure and economic growth, they also raise concerns over sovereignty, transparency, debt dependency, and authoritarian influence, which threaten democratic consolidation. A key issue is Nigeria's growing debt dependency on China due to large-scale loans for infrastructure projects. Since 2010, Chinese funding has supported railways, highways, and telecommunications but has significantly increased Nigeria's national debt. This situation risks limiting Nigeria's political autonomy, as reliance on Chinese loans could force alignment with Chinese priorities at the expense of democratic values. Akinwale (2022) describes this as a "debt trap," where financial strain leads to compromised sovereignty and governance. Transparency and accountability in Chinese-funded projects also present challenges. Unlike Western financial institutions, Chinese investments often bypass oversight mechanisms, enabling corruption and patronage networks. This lack of public scrutiny fosters distrust in government institutions and undermines democratic accountability. Bamigboye (2023) argues that opaque practices in Chinese-backed projects erode public trust in governance, divert resources from democratic institutions, and weaken citizens' confidence in democratic processes.

China's principle of non-interference, while appealing to Nigerian elites, complicates democratic stability. By refraining from pushing for political reforms, China indirectly enables authoritarian tendencies among Nigerian leaders, reducing pressures for democratic accountability. Uche (2021) highlights that this approach creates an environment where political leaders feel empowered to act with impunity, weakening opposition parties and civil society's role in maintaining democratic norms. Cultural and ideological differences between China's centralized governance model and Nigeria's multi-party democracy further exacerbate tensions. Some Nigerian elites may view China's rapid economic development under authoritarian rule as a viable alternative, potentially undermining their commitment to democratic principles. Obi (2021) warns of this "authoritarian allure," which risks shifting priorities toward centralized power and away from democratic norms. A social backlash against Chinese influence also threatens democratic stability. Resentment over perceived exploitation, labor abuses, and environmental concerns by Chinese companies has sparked public discontent. Such tensions can polarize communities, creating rifts between the government and citizens. Falade (2022) notes that these grievances undermine social cohesion, a critical element for sustaining democratic governance.

In security and digital technology, China's involvement poses additional risks. Chinese military support, while enhancing Nigeria's security, could be misused to suppress dissent and political opposition, as Okon (2023) warns. Similarly, reliance on Chinese telecommunications infrastructure raises concerns about surveillance and restrictions on freedom of expression, threatening citizens' democratic rights. Navigating relations with China while maintaining Western alliances adds a geopolitical dimension to these challenges. As Nigeria strengthens economic ties with China, it risks alienating Western nations that support democratic initiatives. Adebayo (2022) emphasizes the difficulty of balancing these relationships without compromising democratic principles.

To mitigate these challenges, Nigeria must adopt policies that prioritize democratic governance. Strengthening regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency in foreign partnerships is essential. Bamigboye (2023) suggests public disclosure of contracts and competitive bidding processes to curb corruption and enhance accountability. Empowering civil society and independent media is equally critical. By monitoring foreign investments and exposing malpractices, these institutions can promote transparency and uphold democratic values. Falade (2022) highlights their role in holding leaders accountable and fostering public trust. Diversifying economic partnerships would reduce dependency on China and ensure balanced foreign relations. Adebayo (2022) advocates for engaging both Western and Eastern allies to leverage multiple funding sources, safeguarding Nigeria's sovereignty. Finally, public engagement through education and awareness campaigns can enhance democratic resilience. Obi (2021) underscores the importance of an informed and active citizenry in holding leaders accountable and countering external influences that threaten democracy.

## **8. DISCUSSION**

Several key findings have emerged. The strategic and political implications of China-Nigeria relations further underscore the potential challenges to Nigeria's democratic stability. China's growing influence in sectors critical to national security, digital infrastructure, and economic policy shapes Nigeria's political landscape in ways that can both support and hinder democratic processes. Adebayo (2022) emphasizes that Nigeria's dependency on Chinese funding and technology could compromise the country's political autonomy, as any misalignment with Chinese interests might risk economic repercussions. This finding, stemming from the third question, reveals how China's influence in Nigeria's political affairs is more indirect yet profoundly impactful. As Nigeria aligns more closely with Chinese interests, it faces the risk of alienating Western allies who often promote democratic governance. This delicate balancing act between China and the West underscores the geopolitical tension inherent in China-Nigeria relations, where Nigeria's



engagement with China may inadvertently shift its governance practices away from democratic ideals towards more centralized, authoritarian approaches observed in the Chinese model.

The challenges facing China-Nigeria relations, particularly concerning Nigeria's quest for democratic stability, underscore the complexities of this international partnership. Debt dependency, lack of transparency, ideological differences, and potential social backlash highlight the obstacles Nigeria faces in maintaining democratic principles amid increasing Chinese influence. The debt dependency, for example, represents more than financial strain; it reflects a dependency that may compel Nigeria to adopt policies favorable to China, even when these policies might conflict with democratic priorities.

Akinwale (2022) contends that this dependency not only limits Nigeria's political autonomy but also risks creating a cycle of indebtedness that ultimately prioritizes economic gain over democratic governance. This perspective aligns with Okoro (2022), who warns that Nigeria's reliance on Chinese digital technology could introduce risks of surveillance and control, potentially stifling freedom of expression, a cornerstone of democracy.

The social and political challenges posed by this relationship also bring to light public resentment and mistrust, particularly as Chinese investments sometimes neglect local labor rights and environmental standards. As Falade (2022) notes, this resentment, if unaddressed, can create social unrest that disrupts Nigeria's internal stability. Such discontent can lead to a fragile democratic environment where citizens feel disenfranchised by a government perceived to be aligning with foreign powers at their expense. Okon (2023) further highlights that Chinese military and digital support, while beneficial for national security, can be misappropriated to suppress dissent, leading to concerns over Nigeria's democratic integrity.

This misuse of Chinese resources underscores a broader issue within China-Nigeria relations: while these resources enhance Nigeria's infrastructure and security, they also risk fostering a governance model that prioritizes stability over democratic freedoms, leading to a paradox where increased security results in diminished civil liberties.

## 9. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The following findings were observed:

- The study discovered that China's extensive investments in Nigeria, particularly through infrastructure financing, have created a pattern of economic dependency that undermines Nigeria's sovereignty. Large-scale loans from China, often characterized by opaque terms, have led to significant debt accumulation. This dependency restricts Nigeria's policy autonomy, forcing it to adopt policies favorable to Chinese interests, which may not align with democratic priorities. This dynamic jeopardizes Nigeria's ability to maintain democratic governance while managing foreign relations effectively.
- The study found that Chinese-funded projects in Nigeria lack transparency, bypassing the regulatory frameworks and oversight mechanisms that safeguard democratic accountability. This has fostered an environment where political elites exploit these investments for personal gain, fueling corruption and eroding public trust in democratic institutions. The absence of rigorous checks on these projects has facilitated the growth of patronage networks, undermining institutional frameworks essential for a robust democracy.
- The study revealed that China's principle of non-interference and its model of centralized governance appeal to some Nigerian political elites, potentially encouraging authoritarian tendencies. This influence can weaken Nigeria's commitment to democratic norms such as free elections, independent judiciary, and civil liberties.

## 10. CONCLUSION

China's role in Nigeria's democratic transition reflects a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. While China's investments in infrastructure, trade, and technology have contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic development, they have also introduced risks that could undermine democratic consolidation. The dependency on Chinese loans, the lack of transparency in project implementation, and the subtle adoption of authoritarian governance practices highlight the potential for Nigeria's democratic principles to be compromised.

To safeguard its democratic stability, Nigeria must balance its economic relations with China by fostering transparency, ensuring accountability in foreign partnerships, and upholding democratic governance. Diversifying international partnerships, strengthening institutional safeguards, and empowering civil society will be critical steps in mitigating the adverse effects of these relations. Ultimately, Nigeria's ability to maintain its sovereignty, uphold democratic values, and align foreign investments with its long-term national interests will determine the success of its democratic transition in the face of growing Chinese influence.

## 11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- Nigeria should enact and enforce policies that mandate public disclosure of all agreements and contracts with foreign partners, including China. This can be achieved by requiring competitive bidding processes, conducting independent audits, and fostering parliamentary oversight. Such measures would reduce corruption, ensure that foreign investments align with national priorities, and bolster public trust in government institutions.
- To reduce over-reliance on China, Nigeria should actively seek partnerships with a broader range of international allies, including Western nations and emerging economies. By fostering economic ties with diverse partners, Nigeria can gain leverage in negotiations, secure more favorable terms for investment, and ensure balanced development that aligns with democratic governance principles.
- Empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) and ensuring a free and independent press are critical to monitoring the impacts of foreign investments. CSOs and media outlets can investigate and report on Chinese-funded projects to ensure adherence to labour rights, environmental standards, and democratic principles. By amplifying the voices of citizens and holding leaders accountable, these entities can safeguard Nigeria's democratic stability amidst foreign influence.

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