



China's Economic and Strategic Engagement and Its Implications for Security Challenges in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: China has become one of Nigeria's most important economic and strategic partners through expanding trade, investment, infrastructure development, and bilateral cooperation. Despite these growing engagements, Nigeria continues to face persistent security challenges, including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and other forms of violent conflict. Although China has supported Nigeria through limited security cooperation, its longstanding foreign policy principles of non-interference and non-intervention have constrained its involvement in addressing Nigeria's internal security challenges.

Objective: This study examined the nature of China's economic and strategic engagement with Nigeria and its implications for the country's security challenges.

Method: The study adopted a documentary research design, drawing on secondary data from academic publications, policy documents, government reports, and other relevant documentary sources. Data were analysed using thematic and content analysis to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes.

Results: The findings indicate that while China has provided security-related assistance to Nigeria in the form of military equipment, intelligence support, and the training of security personnel, its overall engagement has remained predominantly economic. Consequently, China's contribution to addressing Nigeria's complex security challenges has been limited, with security cooperation receiving considerably less attention than trade, investment, and infrastructure development.

Conclusion: The study concludes that, despite the strategic partnership between China and Nigeria, addressing Nigeria's security challenges has not been a central priority in bilateral relations, largely due to China's adherence to its policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of partner states.

Unique Contribution: The study contributes to the literature on China–Africa relations by providing a nuanced understanding of the imbalance between China's extensive economic engagement and its relatively limited security cooperation with Nigeria, thereby highlighting an underexplored dimension of bilateral relations.

Key Recommendation: The study recommends that Nigeria and China strengthen their strategic partnership by renegotiating existing cooperation frameworks to incorporate more robust security collaboration, while respecting the sovereignty and foreign policy principles of both countries. Enhanced intelligence sharing, capacity building, and institutional cooperation should complement existing economic partnerships to address Nigeria's evolving security challenges more effectively.

Keywords: China, Nigeria, economic engagement, strategic partnership, security challenges, non-interference, foreign policy.



INTRODUCTION

Security remains one of the greatest impediments to sustainable development, economic growth, and political stability across Africa. Since the wave of independence that began in the 1950s and 1960s, many African states have continued to grapple with a complex mix of traditional and emerging security threats. These include civil wars, terrorism, insurgency, banditry, piracy, ethnic conflicts, coups d'état, violent extremism, organised crime, climate-induced insecurity, poverty, and forced displacement. Collectively, these challenges have undermined governance, weakened state institutions, disrupted economic activities, and threatened regional stability. Despite sustained interventions by national governments, regional organisations, and international partners, many of these security challenges have persisted, making security one of the continent's most pressing development concerns.

The persistence of insecurity has attracted the attention of both traditional and emerging global powers with strategic, political, and economic interests in Africa. While countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have historically maintained significant security and diplomatic engagements on the continent, emerging powers including China, Russia, and India have increasingly expanded their presence through trade, investment, infrastructure development, and strategic partnerships. Among these actors, China has emerged as Africa's most influential economic partner, with growing interests extending beyond commerce to diplomacy, infrastructure financing, technology, and, increasingly, security cooperation (Ubi, 2023).

China's engagement with Africa has expanded considerably over the past two decades, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Between 2013 and 2018, China's cooperation with African countries deepened significantly in both scale and scope. Beyond financing major infrastructure projects, China gradually expanded its involvement in peace and security initiatives by contributing combat troops to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali, mediating political conflicts in South Sudan, and strengthening institutional cooperation with the African Union on regional peace and security issues (Christof & Nele, 2020). These developments suggest that China's African strategy is increasingly shaped by an economy–security nexus, recognising that sustainable economic investments require a stable and secure operating environment. As Chinese enterprises, financial institutions, and infrastructure projects continue to expand across Africa, the country's economic interests have become increasingly vulnerable to instability and armed conflict on the continent.

Nigeria occupies a central position in China's African strategy because of its large population, strategic location, abundant natural resources, and economic potential. Over the years, bilateral relations between Nigeria and China have expanded considerably through trade, infrastructure financing, investment, telecommunications, manufacturing, energy, and construction. Today, Nigeria remains one of the largest destinations for Chinese investment in Africa and one of China's most important trading partners on the continent. In 2025, bilateral trade between Nigeria and China reached approximately USD 28 billion, while China's direct investment in Nigeria



amounted to about USD 690 million (Dun Hai, 2026). These figures demonstrate the strategic importance of Nigeria within China's broader engagement with Africa.

Despite these expanding economic relations, Nigeria continues to experience persistent and complex security challenges. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the country has faced multiple forms of violent conflict, including militancy in the Niger Delta, separatist agitations in the South-East, terrorism and violent extremism in the North-East, widespread banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and North-Central, communal conflicts, and other forms of organised criminal violence. The activities of Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have resulted in thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and severe humanitarian crises. The proliferation of banditry and kidnapping has further deepened insecurity, disrupted livelihoods, discouraged investment, and constrained socioeconomic development. Since 2009, more than 100,000 people have reportedly been killed, while nearly 2.5 million have been displaced because of conflict and insecurity in Nigeria (Odoh, 2009).

Paradoxically, while China has continued to expand its economic footprint in Nigeria despite these security challenges, its direct involvement in addressing the country's internal security problems has remained relatively limited. China's engagement has largely been guided by its longstanding foreign policy principles of non-interference and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Although China has provided military equipment, intelligence support, and training for Nigerian security personnel, these forms of assistance have remained modest compared with the scale of its economic investments and strategic interests in the country (Ubi, 2020). This imbalance has generated increasing scholarly and policy debates regarding the extent to which China's economic interests are matched by a corresponding commitment to supporting peace and security in one of its most important African partners.

The growing asymmetry between China's extensive economic engagement and its limited security involvement raises important questions about the nature and objectives of China–Nigeria relations. While some scholars argue that China's engagement reflects a mutually beneficial South–South partnership based on economic cooperation and respect for sovereignty, others contend that China's policy of non-interference limits its willingness to contribute meaningfully to resolving the security challenges that threaten its own investments and broader regional stability. Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding the activities of some Chinese enterprises in Africa, including allegations of bribery and involvement in illegal mining, logging, and fishing, which may exacerbate governance weaknesses, resource conflicts, and local grievances even when they do not directly trigger violence (Page, 2018).

Although a growing body of literature has examined China's economic engagement in Africa, infrastructure diplomacy, foreign direct investment, and Belt and Road Initiative projects, relatively few studies have systematically explored the relationship between China's expanding economic and strategic engagement and Nigeria's persistent security challenges. Existing studies have tended to examine economic cooperation and security cooperation as separate issues,



leaving insufficient understanding of how China's economic interests intersect with security dynamics within Nigeria. Consequently, the implications of China's engagement for Nigeria's security architecture remain inadequately understood.

Against this background, this study examines China's economic and strategic engagement and its implications for security challenges in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates the nature of China's engagement, assesses the extent of its contribution to Nigeria's security sector, and analyses the implications of China's policy of non-interference for bilateral security cooperation. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to the growing literature on China–Africa relations and provides evidence that may inform foreign policy formulation, strategic cooperation, and security partnerships between Nigeria and China.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted the documentary research design in order to address the research questions of the study. The documentary design seeks to categorise and identify documents that contain information about the phenomena we wish to study (Monageng, 2006). The rationale for the researcher's choice of the documentary research design is to identify and classify documents that have information on China's Economic engagement in Nigeria and its implications on security challenges.

Method of Data Collection

The study used secondary data sources. The study relied on multiple sources of evidence for data collection, including official policy documents and media reports and articles, to obtain a substantive understanding of the study.

Secondary Sources

The secondary data came from diverse sources, including books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers, and internet sources. Specifically, journals and monographs consulted for data for this study included Occasional Papers from the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), and the Chinese Studies Centre. These works contributed to the understanding of China's economic and strategic engagements and its implications for security challenges in Nigeria. Official and public documents such as; Security Special Report (United States Institute of Peace) helped to examine China's economic activities in Nigeria and its implications on security challenges.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were analysed through thematic and content analysis. The themes were generated in line with the research questions on the nature of China's economic and strategic engagement and its implications on security challenges in Nigeria. Accordingly, the content analysis was used to allow the researcher to distil words into fewer content-related categories.



DISCUSSION

China's Policies in Promoting Peace and Security in Africa

The most recent, and most remarked upon development policy by China is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a mega-strategy for the comprehensive export of China's distinctive approach to external development: complete upgrading of hard and soft infrastructure (roads, ports, railroads, energy generation, and communications) for the facilitation of trade and local development from China, softened by the organizing concepts of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. The original formulation for BRI consisted of land routes west through Central Asia to Europe and south to Pakistan, building and upgrading ports from the South China Sea through to Venice. Launched in 2013, for Africans, China's extension of BRI to Africa is focused on the Indian Ocean ports (and additional infrastructure to serve those ports) in Tanzania, Kenya, and Djibouti, omitting the rest of the continent (Strauss, 2020). Unlike the West, whose approach to security contribution is narrowly linked only with military intervention, for China, the problems and the root cause of insecurity in Africa and elsewhere stems from the undermining of inalienable rights of humans and the lack of access to basic amenities of life, which include, poverty, and economic issues, among others.

At the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, President Xi's address to African heads of state emphasized China's commitment to African capacity building to promote development and strengthen infrastructure: "Poverty is the root cause of chaos while peace is the guarantee for development," Xi said (Chen, 2018). Reiterating this fact, Ubi (2025) noted that Africa has the highest rate of extreme poverty. Using a poverty line of USD 1.90 per day, Africa's extreme poverty rate is estimated to be around 35.5%. Poverty has many causes, all of which reinforce one another and contributing factors include inadequate infrastructure, income inequality, lack of access to clean water, high unemployment rates, insufficient healthcare, economic instability, poor economic policies and ineffective leadership and governance. Thus, China preferred that security issues anywhere should be addressed by broad means, which rests on not only individual development but also on the development of society as a whole, and through the use of diplomatic means. This could be by putting in place necessary measures through social, political and cultural means for the nation's economic growth and development.

Secondly, China's engagement in Africa, once characterised as non-interventionist in its pursuit of economic interests, is on course to becoming more deeply involved in the region's security landscape. While the motivation behind Chinese involvement remains primarily economic (Alden, 2014), China conducts its military and security strategy at the multilateral, bilateral and unilateral levels. On the multilateral level, peacekeeping, peace enforcement and counter-piracy are a top concern. It offers China an indirect means to access fragile countries where its Belt and Road investments are concentrated. China has embraced this initiative after realising they can improve its combat capabilities, intelligence and surveillance and extend its security presence within an international mandate. While China's bilateral and unilateral relations are done through numerous FOCAC mechanisms. The China Africa Peace and Security Fund (CAPSF) focuses on operationalizing the African Union's African Standby Force by offering China opportunities for collaborative security when fully functional. The China Africa Peace and Security Forum



(CAPSF) and China Africa Security and Law Enforcement Forum (CASLF) reinforce partner capacity to defend shared interest including Chinese built critical infrastructure, assets and personnel. Around 50 programs focused on this from training and law enforcement to intelligence. For instance, African countries signed loans worth USD3.56 billion for such purposes between 2003 and 2017 (Paul, 2021).

Moreover, the Global Security Initiative, introduced by Xi Jinping in April 2022 and the core elements of GSI were featured prominently in China's proposal to reform global security and governance. Although, the GSI is still seen to be in its early stage because its implementation has been slow. In fact, its core aims were to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improving global security governance, increasing global stability and realizing lasting world peace and development. To achieve these goals; the GSI was framed to specifically; pursue China's vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, to abide by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, to take the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, to peacefully resolve differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation and to maintain security in both the traditional and non-traditional ways. This initiative was welcomed by African leaders where in August 2022 in a joint statement of a working meeting of coordinators of the Forum on China –Africa Cooperation showed that the African side welcomed and supported the GSI.

The linkage between development and security with special regard to the role of African regional organizations has also been a key theme of various policy documents. These statements stressed that: 'China will continue to support the leading role of the African Union and Africa's sub-regional organizations in peace making, peace building and post conflict reconstruction initiatives in achieving lasting peace and common prosperity' (FOCAC 2018b). At the FOCAC held in September, 2024, President Xi Jinping brought out 10 action plan to be implemented in the next three years covering areas of mutual learning among civilisations, trade prosperity, industrial chain cooperation, health, agriculture, connectivity, people to people and cultural exchange, green development and common security. In line with this plan, China' Foreign Minister, Wang Yi visit to Namibia, Congo, Chad and Nigeria is to implement the outcomes of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and to deepen the existing relationship for practical and sustained growth of China-Africa relations. In 2009 China provided AMISOM with US\$300,000 and added logistic support to the AMISOM contingents from Burundi and Uganda and in 2015 with a commitment over US\$2.2 million for the enhancement of the operational conditions of AMISOM and the building of an arms depot for the Somali National Armed Forces (SNAF). Daniel (2007) argued that:

The discrepancy between Chinese interests and those of the European and North American industrialized nations is due to China's traditional views on sovereignty and its strict observance of the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, as well as its huge demand for imports of raw materials and new outlet markets for its goods. China has for several years been pursuing a highly active policy towards the African continent featuring generous financial and technical support,



rapidly increasing direct investment, and a wide range of energy and trade agreements (p. 3).

Thus, China's security policy initiatives in Africa is more concerned about maintaining the unity and stability of African states through diplomacy and developmental assistance. This has been made possible by China promoting priority projects, projected investments and expected socio-economic outcomes in Africa.

China's Economic and Strategic Engagement and its Implications for Security Challenges in Nigeria

The end of the Cold War witnessed the appearance of new and emerging conflicts, not only with great implications for the globe but with unprecedented intensity and impact on Africa. Since 1990s to the present day, Africa has witnessed more protracted violent confrontations and massive genocide. Among the sub-regions that the Africa Union (AU) is divided into, the Sahel, West and Central African regions are noted to be the hottest trouble spots in Africa because of the pace and spread of conflict in these regions. Some of these include but are not limited to terrorism, insurgencies, banditry, intra-state conflicts among others. Some of these conflicts are considered new, because of their new, deadly, violent, and abnormally prolonged nature and more so are characterized by their low intensity and occur sporadically in both space and time (Ubi, 2023). Nigeria and other countries in the Sahel Region are ravaged by the activities of terrorist elements such as Boko Haram and ISWAP operating on ungoverned spaces for so many years. Nigeria has continued to battle these threats but the situation has remained unabated. Although distinctive in many ways, these security challenges are all products of Nigerian state weakness, especially corruption, poor governance, policing failures, and elite sponsorship of bad actors. These factors heighten the risk that legitimate Chinese commercial interests face—but also the rewards that illicit Chinese-led extractive activities can derive from Nigeria's conflict zones (Page, 2018).

Notwithstanding, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) by the Chinese government raises hope of a new dimension in curbing terrorism. It encompasses a thought-out plan by China to address security issues through a comprehensive economic and social development that will be supported by the Chinese Government, with particular focus on the government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it was proposed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in his speech at the annual Boao Forum in Beijing, China. The framework comprised of cooperation in maritime, overland, cyberspace and air connectivity. Charles Onunaiju, (Director, Centre for China Studies), emphasized that:

The Lake Chad falls into the area of maritime cooperation and we can engage the Belt and Road Initiative and the enormous liquidity it has to address the challenge of Lake Chad. So, within the broad context of our engagement with China, spanning cooperation in poverty alleviation, infrastructure, construction, security, we can put the Lake Chad issue on the table (Odoh, 2009).



Since the turn of the 21st century, Chinese companies – both state and private entities have invested in various countries in Africa. Most of the investments have been in the natural resource and manufacturing sectors. The heavy investments by Chinese companies in Africa have been given impetus by the “Go out” policy that is anchored on leveraging bilateral diplomatic ties with African states to provide and create business opportunities for Chinese firms (Oita & Simon, 2020). The introduction of higher socio-ecological production standards and the aging of China’s population forces Chinese companies to open production sites in less developed world regions with a surplus of cheap labour forces. In addition to (private) entrepreneurial migration to the African continent, the BRI secures contracts for China’s state-owned companies from the fields of infrastructure-building and allows Chinese banks to reinvest their currency reserves or to further strengthen the internationalization of the Chinese currency by offering loans and credit lines in renminbi (Nele, 2020).

China has been a source of funding to Nigeria to restore its dilapidated infrastructure. Since joining the BRI in 2018, Chinese private actors such as China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), Huawei, ZTE among others have played crucial part in infrastructure construction in Nigeria. In March 2011, the Federal government commissioned a 12.2-billion-naira 488 km Lagos-Jebba rail track rehabilitation contract awarded to Chinese Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) on November 3, 2009. Another important milestone of infrastructural development was a concessionary loan of USD 500 million from the Chinese government for the railway modernization programme of the Abuja-Kaduna standard gauge (single track) at the cost of USD 849 million. The Nigerian government provided the balance. The loan was given at less than 3 percent interest rate, repayable in 15 years. The rail modernization project which began with the Abuja-Kaduna line was flagged off by the Goodluck Jonathan’s administration on February 10, 2013. It was completed by the Chinese rail construction giant China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) in three years and handed over to the Federal government on December 1, 2014. On September 12, 2012, the Federal government secured a USD1.1 billion loan (N176 billion) from the China Export-Import Bank for the financing of railway and airport projects.

From the loan, USD600 million (N96 billion) was used to finance the Abuja light rail estimated to gulp USD 500 million (N80 billion) and the Galaxy Backbone Information and Communications Technology infrastructure at a cost of USD 100 million (N16 billion). The phase II of the Papalanto and Omotosho plant was awarded in 2010, it was meant to contribute additional 750 MW thermal power. China National Machinery and Equipment Company (CMEC) and Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) were awarded the Omotosho power plant. The contract took into consideration the plant, transmission line and switch yard as well as gas pipeline. It was noted that China Exim Bank was the actual financier of the second phase of Omotosho. The plant was commissioned in 2013 by President Goodluck Jonathan’s administration. The phase II of Papalanto was awarded to Shandong No.3 Electric Power Construction Corporation (SEPCO III), the Chinese firm that built the first phase of Papalanto. The work on the 750MW which was scaled down to 500MW was completed in 2012 and commissioned in 2013 (Rindap, 2024).



This shows that Nigeria benefitted by receiving much needed public goods that will stimulate economic activity, however, the pattern of providing infrastructure in Nigeria through China's financial resources created an issue of debt accumulation. The issue of debt accumulation and servicing was important for the reason that Chinese financing may not be as generous as it might be.

However, most of these infrastructural projects were constructed by Chinese companies relying heavily on imported Chinese technology and manpower thereby undermining local content development (Rindap, 2024). For instance, the Chairman of Dorman-Long Engineering (a steel yard in Lagos) divulged that "Chinese construction companies, mostly state-owned, largely imported their steel girders, reinforcing beams and other materials from home". But a Chinese Executive (CCECC, a construction firm in Nigeria) argued that "they do buy some local materials, but China's exports were more readily available and better made, so they could be quickly and reliably included in complex projects" (Bradsher & Adam, 2015). In this context, China's security interests in Nigeria are an outgrowth of its trade and investment priorities unlike the United States and United Kingdom, who see security, stability, and counterterrorism as their top strategic priorities in Nigeria.

Furthermore, in 2012, at the Fourth FOCAC Summit, Chinese President Hu Jintao voiced the idea of building a China-Africa strategic partnership for peace and security cooperation. To reduce costs and potential losses, Beijing formally stressed the role of the African Union in regional conflict solutions. The Chinese motive centres on strengthening Africa's peacekeeping and conflict-solving capacities by assisting in the training and financing of national and regional peacekeeping structures. Wang (2018) noted that:

political instability, local rebellions, religious extremism, and terrorism do, as Chinese scholars stress, not only have an impact on China's domestic energy and resource security but also pose a severe challenge to Chinese companies and banking institutions maintaining local branches, especially those in African states characterized by fragile political institutions and legal insecurity (p. 107).

In other words, China's relationships with African nations are mainly guided by the principle of non-interference and non-intervention in the internal matters of other countries. Moreover, the expansion of China's economic interests has also impacted on its policy on international security, as China has become more involved in the internal security operations of some African partners. For instance, during the September 2018 summit on Africa-China Forum held in Beijing, China pledged N2 billion within the framework of military-to-military relations to support Nigeria's fight against the Boko Haram insurgents. The cooperation culminated with the Nigerian government purchasing armoured tanks and artillery vehicles (including VT-4 main battle tanks (MBT), ST-1 wheeled anti-tank and two models of self-propelled howitzers from China North Industries Corporation Limited (NORINCO). Apart from military aid, the Chinese have also provided humanitarian support for victims of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's North-East. In 2017, it supported Nigeria with humanitarian aid of about USD\$5 million through the UN World Food Programme (Philip, 2021). According to Colonel Lin:



Military-to-military relations is an important component of the Nigeria-China cooperation. Under various frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Forum for China-Africa cooperation (FOCAC), China has launched programmes that helped train Nigerian military and security on areas of law and order, fighting piracy and combating terrorism and supply of state of art equipment such as ICT, drones, patrol vessels and hardware. For instance, Nigeria signed a memorandum of understanding with China in 2020 to fight terrorism. There are provisions of military aid gratis in 2013, 2016 and the acquisition of defence equipment in 2019 among others (Babatunde, 2023).

With the growing influence of the Chinese in the global diplomatic and political space, its interventions in Africa and Nigeria in particular remain a combination of human and material support as well as soft approaches in aid. This implied that China will continue to assert its influence through the policy of non-interference and intervention in domestic affairs in Africa as a whole, although, with much emphasis on promoting economic development as its core intention in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

It has become obvious that the analysis and evaluation of the role of China in addressing Nigeria's endemic security challenges is a somewhat difficult task. This is because the military cooperation between Nigeria and China is not primarily geared towards tackling Nigeria's security issues, but reflects predominantly the national interest of the two governments. Nonetheless, China has expressed desire to play a greater role in African security affairs, as it stands presently, its interests are still largely defined by its economic needs and the impact of African issues on its global reputation. Therefore, curtailing the country's insecurity does not seem to be a major priority in Nigeria-China relations because China's policy of non-interference and non-intervention has continued to overshadow these concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nigerian policy makers should take advantage of China's key global initiatives on development, security and dialogue to drive policies that will tackle the insecurity situation in Nigeria.
2. Nigeria and China should renegotiate their terms of engagement to reflect security needs which is highly crucial in order to maintain peace in Nigeria and Africa at large.

Ethical clearance

The study used documentary research which involves reviewing public records, policy and reports. To ensure ethical clearance, all sources were properly cited in line of ethical handling of sensitive information and copyrights.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research.

Authors' Contributions

The author conceived the study, including the design and Prof. Efem Ubi provided much of the data used in the analysis of results. The author also handled the analysis and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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