

Phenomenon of China-Nigeria Economic Relations

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Abstract

By 1960, China recognized that the Western Imperialism was indeed a threat to the continent of Africa. In providing alternative, she was soon beginning to offer bilateral trade relations with her in order to foster the development of the Region. It was an offer which over the years eventually snowballed in the diplomatic Sino-Nigeria Economic Relations. The relations aging over forty years old have proven to yield more benefits to the nation than with their conventional partners of the West. Undeniably, like every other mutual relation, this relationship has also been bedeviled with a number of negative impact, which of course are mostly brewed from the challenges which the relationship poses. Nonetheless, these challenges and negative effects could be quickly subdued if more is done to expand policy creation, institution building, culture, leadership capabilities and investment in human capital and entrepreneurship so as to maximize gains. This paper therefore seeks to analyse this relationship using a historic-structural, analytical and multidisciplinary approach. Generally, while the relationship has been rightly identified as win-win situation in favour of the Chinese much could certainly have been achieved particularly in the area of technological transfer and institutional build up coupled with human investment. In what ways can this one-way traffic, lopsidedness, inequality, and one-sidedness, if there are, be tackled? What mechanism can be adopted for future references? What can other countries learn in this bilateral tie between China and Nigeria? In the light of the foregoing, this paper examines China-Nigeria tie from the perspectives of economic relations.

Keywords: Phenomenon, Bilateral Trade Relations, Technological Transfer, Institutional Build-ups, and Human Investment.

Introduction

The basis of every bi-lateral or multi-lateral relationship of sovereign states be it diplomatic, trade or otherwise has always been for the main purpose of mutual reciprocity in terms of political, diplomatic and most especially economical gains. The scenery of the Sino-Nigerian relations is no exception of this assertion as this relation over the years has tended to grow from limited and intermitted contact of the post-independent African era to an increasingly complex engagement barely four decades later.¹ Nigeria's age-long conventional developmental partners - her colonial master - Britain and her allies have done insignificantly little in fostering the development of the nation in particular and the sub-Saharan West Africa in general. Evidence of this claim has been conspicuously recorded by history in the policies of the capitalist West in the region, which has brought rather negative impact on the economy of the region and this is largely exemplified in the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imbibed by the then led Babangida's administration of Nigeria which till its decline recorded no significant fruition for neither the nation nor the region.

Inadvertently, like most African countries, Nigeria during the 1960's and 1970's viewed China as a nonaligned developing country and did little to foster economic or even special diplomatic relations with the "Asian Tiger". Following Deng Xiaoping's reform policies of the 1970s and 80s that brought about China's dramatic growth and modernization, industrialization ensued, hence, higher energy usage and market expansion became inevitable. These factors therefore brought China to greater contact with Africa and as such, the relation of these two entities i.e. Africa and China was soon perceived as alternative to Western ties by major stakeholders and state actors.² This internal factor of the Chinese economy coupled with the strained fruitless relationship of Nigeria with the West soon began to inform the development of the emerging Sino-Nigerian relations and in time China was soon infiltrating into the Nigerian economy gradually taking over economic ties supremacy of the West in Nigeria.

Considering the political scenario of events in the global world as at then and the ensuing cold war, Nigeria at first was reluctant to accept such an invitation by the Communist China. However, the economic sanctions of the West on Nigeria during the General. Sani Abacha de facto military regime soon saw the radical shift in the bi-lateral diplomatic relations from the conservative West to the progressive East.³ As relationship commenced,

China began to give moral and material support to the people of Africa and in return expected unrestricted access to the vast resources of Africa, which formed the major bases for the raw materials exported into China, upon which the end products produced were still imported back to Africa. This kind of action, began to make scholars inquisitive as to the trend of actions of the Chinese claiming that, the activities of the Chinese as at the period under review was synonymous to the legitimate trade period of the Europeans which was a stage in the European imperialism and as such, the activities of the Chinese might be termed as being a phase towards the new wave of Chinese Imperialism.⁴ Nonetheless, whether, the relationship of Chinese was imperialist based or not, the ensuing paragraphs attempted to elucidate.

Having given a background to the economic relation, the gradual development of the Chinese in the Nigerian economy (Both public and private) coupled with salient aspects of the economic relation as well as the impediments which are obstructing the growth, the relation and the impacts - both negative and positive of the relation on both the host and visiting country have been discussed in the ensuing paragraphs of this paper.

Chinese Gradual Infiltration into the Nigerian Economy

The Sino-African relations have been said to be dated to ancient antiquity, that ancient Chinese empire might have had contact with the peoples of Africa as early as the Second Century BC. ⁵ This was evidenced in the fact that, some of the silks which the Cleopatra of Egypt wore was of Chinese origin and as such, proof of contact at least on economic basis is said to have transpired between the two entities.⁶ To further reiterate the antiquity of this relation, Chinese activity in Africa had been dated back to the Tang Dynasty when Chinese porcelains have been uncovered along the coast of Egypt and Chinese coins that have been dated back to the 9th century have been excavated in places as far as Kenya, Zanzibar and Somalia. ⁷ Chinese ambassador to South Africa, Lui Guijin also reemphasized the historicity of this relation stating that over 600 years ago under the authority of the Ming emperor, Zheng He led 28 ships with 27,800 voyagers on board voyaging three continents to include Africa.⁸ The coming of the Europeans into the political and economic scenario of Africa however did not only bring about the comparative collapse of the Trans-Saharan trade, it might have also in its wake made China to look inward and began to develop themselves. However, these relationships did not become reinstated until the late 1950s and early 1960s

when formal European colonies in African began to be politically emancipated, though still strongly and economically dependent on their former colonial masters.

In the early post-independence years, economic exchanges between China and Africa were relatively lower than with the former colonial powers. China's interest during these early years was largely centered on the search for ideological allies against capitalism and opposition to Western influence than economic exchange. Her attempt to woo African countries in such event like the Bandung conference did little to convince the conservative government of Nigeria in Lagos to accept the invitation of the communist China. Perhaps, this was responsible for the exclusion of Nigeria in the list of the 10-countries which the Chinese Premier - Zhou En-Lai visited in 1963. Though, there have been records of relations between Nigeria and the Republic of China (Taiwan) during in the first republic, when Tafawa Balewa was the country's Prime Minister.⁹

The turmoil that followed the January, 1966 Coup and the subsequent outbreak of the Nigerian Civil war in the 1960s, could be said to be largely responsible for the decline of Nigeria's relation with China and the relationship became even more strained because indications of the support of the Mao's led administration to the secessionist Biafran government as against the de facto government of Nigeria. However, with the end of the war in early 1970, diplomatic relation began to be reinstated and for the first time, Nigeria along with other countries of Africa had begun to align on diplomatic matters and as such serious diplomatic and economic ties began to espouse. The year 1971 did indeed mark the changing point of this relation. ¹⁰ Among the most salient factors responsible for the beginning of such relations, is political reason. This was so because, it was in 1971 that Nigeria joined other developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to support Beijing's 21 years bid to win World recognition as one true government of China.¹¹ Apparently, as a result of this support, against the American opposition, Peoples Republic of China replaced the Republic of China (Taiwan) in the United Nations Security Council on 25th of November, 1971. China from this year started give direct support for the various national liberation movements in Africa.¹² The support which China had begun to give to Africa in 1970 had now exceeded mere diplomatic ties as the Chinese government started to invest in capital projects all over Africa, with the Tanzania-Zambia railway, as the biggest aid project on the continent. Then China began to stress the dichotomy between the world's super powers and their weaker third worlds for their survival. ¹³

It is within the context of relations with Africa in the 1970's that Nigeria established a formal diplomatic tie with China. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, General Gowon visited China in 1974 being the first head of State to do so.¹⁴ Though, ten months later, he was ousted from office and this invariably reduced the diplomatic ties once more. When Obasanjo took over power in 1976 as military head of state, he noticed the trade imbalance between Nigeria and China, consequently high level delegations travelled between the two countries to discuss the matter in 1978 and 1979. These visits were said to have resulted in China agreeing to a limited aid package for Nigeria including the sending of medical personnel and agricultural expert, though this did little to reverse the trade balance.¹⁵

The 1970s and 80s development in China, following Deng Xiaoping's reform policies dramatically and radically transformed China's economy. Ironically, the period of 1980s and 1990s was a period of political turmoil in Nigeria, as incessant military coup de' tat doted the history of the nation. However, it is significant to acknowledge that the regime of General Sanni Abacha saw improved Sino-Nigeria economic relations. It was during his regime that the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1994, and this witnessed the visit of the Chinese Premier Li Ping to Nigeria in 1997 and the signing of protocols to power generation, steel, oil, and the construction contract of the Nigeria railway system by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation costing \$529 million. Though, neither the Construction nor the Signing of the Protocols was seen to fruition. ¹⁶

From the foregoing however, it could be stated that the almost thirty years of diplomatic relations between the two countries i.e. China and Nigeria (1971-1999) was of little economic significance. Nonetheless, it still paved the way for the subsequent relation which was to be espoused in the fourth republic that recorded the highest involvement of Chinese in the mainstream Nigerian economy. The increased economic relation has been linked to the change of China's orientation towards Africa since 2000.¹⁷ The early years of Obasanjo's Civilian administration witnessed beneficial Sino-Nigeria economic relations so much that many Chinese firms won major contracts in the country. In fact, to solidify the Sino-Nigerian relations, both countries agreed on establishment of a Nigeria Trade Office in China and a China Investment Development and Trade Promotion in Nigeria. ¹⁸ The Second term of the Obasanjo administration also saw the development of the relations further. It was during this time that the Nigeria-China Investment Forum was founded in 2006.¹⁹ It is also

significant to understand that Obasanjo foreign Policy towards China and other Asian Countries was largely “Oil for Infrastructure”. However, one of the debacles facing Nigeria’s foreign policy has been inconsistency, and this is largely attributed to change in government. Therefore when Yar’Adua succeeded Obasanjo in 2007, there was a change in foreign policy objectives. Consequently, most of the policies of the Obasanjo administration especially the “oil for Infrastructure” were either suspended or discarded. Nonetheless, it saw little diminishing of the Chinese infiltration into the Nigerian economy especially in the private sector and as such, some of these aspects would be discussed in the following subsections.

Salient Aspect of Sino-Nigeria Economic Relation

China, as a country with deep historical memory of being colonized by western powers, has claimed that she is neither interested in the economic nor political control of Nigeria or any other state of Africa. The Sino-Nigeria relations which have its tenets on reciprocal benefits of win-win situation, has been argued to not just be a ‘slogan’ but rather a ‘fact’.²⁰ So far, the Chinese government has neither appointed military consultants to African governments nor constructed military bases on the continent like the West has always done. Moreover, there has also not been any deceitful means to steal or exploit African resources under the banner of aids and loans.²¹ Perhaps, this was what motivated Lui Guijin to state that “unlike Christopher Columbus in the New World, China did not occupy an inch of any new discovered land or set up any military fortresses” when justifying the voyages of Zheng He.²² However, to say that China is not a colonizing power today does not mean that it will forever not be in decades to come as there are pros and cons to analysis of economic domination.

Given that Nigeria is one of China’s major trading partners in Africa, it is important to highlight Sino-Nigeria economic relations as a way of illuminating its relations with other African nations. The belief that bilateral relations between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the People’s Republic of China have expanded on growing bilateral trade and strategic co-operation seems unfounded. This is so because, the history of the two political entities covers many mutual controversial areas. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations, Nigeria and the PRC grew closer as a result of international isolation and Western condemnation of Nigerian military regimes (1970s-1998) and China’s lack of acceptable human rights policy. Nigeria thence has become an important source of oil and petroleum for China’s rapidly—growing economy and Nigeria is looking to China for help in achieving

high economic growth and as such provided extensive economic, military and political support to Nigeria. 23

In 2004 and again in 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao made state visits to Nigeria and addressed a joint session of the National Assembly, in which both nations signed a memorandum of understanding on establishing a strategic partnership. China has also supported the Nigeria's bid for the seat in the United Nations Security Council. Reacting to the hesitation of the United States and other western nations in providing military in fighting insurgents in the oil-rich Niger Delta to protect Nigeria's oil resources, the Nigerian government has developed close military co-operation with China, which has supplied arms, equipment, training and technology to the Nigerian armed forces. Both nations also signed a US\$311 Million agreement to develop co-operation in communication and space programs; China helped developed and launched the Nigeria Communication Satellite (NigComSat-1) by 2007 to expand cellular and internet networks in Central Africa, though the NigComSat-1 had been lost in Space.²⁴

Bilateral trade grew from US\$384 million in 1998 to US\$3billion in 2006, most of which were attributed to the oil sector. During the Chinese president Hu Jintao's visit in 2006, China secured four oil drilling licenses and agreed to invest US\$4billion in oil and infrastructure development projects in Nigeria. Since then, both nations have agreed to a four-point plan to improve bilateral relations- a key component of which was to expand trade and investments in agriculture, telecommunications, energy and infrastructural development. Furthermore, China agreed to buy a controlling stake in the Kaduna oil Refinery that would produce 110,000 barrels per day (17,000m³/d). Nigeria also promised to give preference to Chinese oil firms for contracts for oil exploration in the Niger Delta and China Basin. In 2006, China also agreed to grant a loan of US\$ 1 billion to Nigeria to help it upgrade and modernize its railway networks. In 2005, Nigeria agreed to supply Petro China with 30,000 barrels per day (4800m³/d) of oil for US\$800 million. In 2006, the CNOOC purchased a share for US\$2.3billion in an oil exploration block owned by a former Defense Minister, China also pledged to invest US\$267 million to build the Lekki Free Trade Zone near Lagos.²⁵ The effect of these investments in Nigeria however, could connote that, the balance sheet of investment is not balance as there is no corresponding amount of investment in the Chinese economy by Nigerians.

In addition, to keep China's economy booming, she needed to import huge amount of timber wood from the forest of Cameroon, Equitorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria and Liberia. About 70% of Africa's top-grade timber has already been taken to China. Ironically, logging is banned in China in an effort to reduce the impact of environmental issues such as the flooding that took place in 1998 causing property damages and deaths. However, China has been claimed to be nonchalant in compromising the ecology of the sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria.²⁶ Nigeria is fast becoming a major market for China's textiles. China, is indeed the world's leading exporter of textiles and clothing. Invariably however, cotton which is the raw materials for these textiles are gotten mostly from Burkina Faso, Benin, Mali, Guinea, Nigeria, Togo and the Central African Republic, yet China textile exports enjoy comparative advantage of sales over Nigeria manufacturers even in Nigeria. ²⁷ Perhaps, this has been responsible for the closure of about 65 textile mills and the laying of over 150,000 textile workers over a course of a decade in Nigeria adding to the unemployment ratio. ²⁸

Nigeria, over the course of these relations has failed in exporting value added products and a commodity to China, meanwhile Nigeria is importing many goods from China. The Chinese have dominated the Nigeria markets so much that by 2009, she had overtaken the United States of America in the value and volume of trade it had with Nigerians. The over 160 million Nigerian population are buying China's cheap and sub-standard electronics, machines, textiles, clothing and household tools, most of which are produced by state owned factories in China. The number of Chinese traders in Nigeria has increased ever since the co-operation has begun and yet, there is no corresponding presence of traders in China and in fact, if there was, the capital projects which are won in Nigeria in terms of contract are not being reciprocated to Nigerians in terms of contracts in China, meanwhile, South Africans are enjoying these dividends of co-operation. ²⁹

China's economic boom, population and industrialization growth seem to threaten food production and farmland availability (which has been postulated to even get worsened in the future) in mainland China. Thus, in order to feed her over 1.379 billion population, ³⁰ the communist party has to invest in Agriculture in Africa and elsewhere so as to enable them import food into China. The Chinese have leased agricultural lands for about 50-100 years in Kwara, Niger and Delta and many more Nigerian states, hence speculations have been made that if the Chinese own the Nigerian farmlands, Nigerian food production will decline

significantly for the duration of the lease, further undermining the Nigeria's economic development and increase the impact of the ongoing poverty crises in Nigeria.³¹

The unidirectional pattern of Sino-Nigerian investments with the imbalance in favour of China has been worrisome. While Chinese investments in Nigeria continue to grow, Nigeria Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in China has been put on hold since 1999/2000. Furthermore, Chinese FDI in Nigeria have been argued to be majorly concentrated in oil and mineral resources as concerns have been raised over China's appetite for oil and other mineral resources from existing investment at any cost. ³² Perhaps, this was why Ambassador Aminu Wali, Nigerian ambassador to China remarked at the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of Nigeria-China Diplomatic Relations that China should increase its participation in the non-oil sectors of Nigerian economy³³.

Technological transfer however, which was also among the diplomatic agreement of the relation, has also tended to be a mirage. Chinese firms have been criticized for being 'closed' as they don't employ local experts.³⁴ Even when they do not, they refuse to expose them to the nitty-gritty of the production and manufacturing techniques. Most of the materials used have been imported from China and not produced in Nigeria. ZTE's claims to manufacturing handsets in Nigeria have been disputed. Findings have shown that rather than manufacturing handsets, ZTE only performs minor tasks of assemblage. With this practice, the transfer of technology has been made almost impossible and the technological advancement of Nigeria remain persistently low, a situation that makes Nigeria to remain a perpetual 'consumer state'³⁵.

Impediments of the Sino-Nigeria Relations

The foregoing analysis of the Sino-Nigeria relations has revealed so far that, the relations though might have it adverse effect on the economy of Nigeria, has proved to be an effective and formidable co-operation after all. However, most of these adverse effects of this relation might have been borne out of some of the impediments which are negating the effectiveness of the relation. Hence, some of the challenges limiting the scope and effect of this relation would be discussed thus.

First and foremost policies adopted by Nigerian policy makers to include the national and local officials are not setting legacies that will have the strongest possible impact on Nigeria's long-term economic growth for the widest array of her citizens. While many of the

current policies being pursued are likely to benefit Nigeria and significantly contributed to economic development in some areas, the strategies seem to neglect essential long-term needs, important segments of the population and the targeting of essential sectors leading to an undiversified economy, 36 Perhaps, this is why farmlands of the country are being sold out to the Chinese without taking cognizance of the nation's population growth in the nearest future.

The challenge of product quality has also been another albatross for the development of this relation. The flooding of Nigerian market with Chinese sub-standard goods is becoming alarming, the Standard Organization of Nigeria (SON) even threatened the Chinese to report them to the World Trade Organization (WTO) according to Iana Dreyer in 2014. 37 If the proliferation of inferior goods into Nigeria markets persist, however Chinese government has maintained that; Nigerian importers often pressure Chinese suppliers to produce low quality products in order to make them affordable for Nigerians and at the same time profit maximization made possible. 38 However, it has been argued that even if this claim was true, the integrity of the Chinese suppliers was also questionable, as recent developments have begun to raise complaints about the poor inferior service delivery of the Chinese owned media outlet -StarTimes.39

Evidences have also suggested that Nigeria is drastically underperforming in spite of the strong revenue flows from high priced crude oil exports. Various bureaucratic obstacles and lack of strong institutions have led to constrained progress in areas of infrastructure, agriculture and technological transfer. Similarly, widespread corruption has made the transfer of wealth to the lower classes and has shifted Foreign Direct Investment from the non-petroleum sector. Until Nigeria can develop credible, accountable and transparent institutions, a free-market system that encourages investments, diversification and competition is unlikely to emerge. 40

Invariably, like their predecessors- the West owned oil companies, the exploration of oil has often led to pollution and environmental degradation among others. In reaction to these, the local inhabitants responded through insurgency, a situation that makes working in the oil rich areas of the country unsafe.41

Language barriers and cultural differences weigh heavily against the transfer of technological skills and education from Chinese to Nigerian citizens and because cheap

Chinese labour is often used, large industrial products rarely transfer skills to local African population. In addition, low development has been claimed to be made in the development of Nigeria entrepreneurs. Although, Nigerian businessmen have learned to export successfully by using Chinese models and have profited by partnering in joint ventures with the Chinese, nonetheless cultural and language barriers restricted the number of beneficiaries to very few educated elites. Moreso, it has been argued that, even the few beneficiaries are just at the bottom of the 'food-chain', as the bulk of the profit is being reaped by the Chinese who are mostly at the fore front of the business transaction.⁴²

Finally, though Nigeria's elite officials have made China's engagement a priority, the strongest leadership has been observed on the Chinese side. Africans and especially Nigerians have dictated to the Chinese which development projects they would like to undertake, but the absence of true leaders who are willing to stand up and articulate a long-term development strategy that adequately addresses the needs of the majority of Nigerian citizens remains a key challenge. Nigeria's rampant corruption has also proved to be a serious economic obstacle that must be overcome if Nigeria is to successfully leverage its demands vis-a-vis China, ⁴³

Conclusion

By 1960, China recognized that the Western Imperialism was indeed a threat to the continent of Africa, and in providing alternative, she was soon beginning to offer bilateral trade relations with China so as to foster the development of the Region, an offer which over the years eventually snowballed in the diplomatic Sino-Nigeria relations in 1971. The relation aging over forty years old has proved to yield more benefits to the nation than with their conventional partners of the West. However, like every other mutual relation even in nuclear level, has also been bedeviled with a number of negative impacts, which of course are mostly brewed from the challenges which the relationship poses. Nonetheless, these challenges and negative effects could be quickly subdued if more is done to expand policy creation, institution building, culture, leadership capabilities and investment in human capital and entrepreneurship so as to maximize gains. Most importantly,

Nigeria needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to more effectively balance engagement of China and West so as to leverage its own strength and create a plan for sustainable development that resonates over the century with the interests of her citizen 'core at heart'. Interestingly things have proved better with Nigeria-China Economic relations so

much that it has also made America to become more conscious of Nigeria as epitomized by the recent visit of America's Secretary of State Mr. Rex Tillerson 11th March, 2018. Mr. Rex Tillerson although sacked by American President Donald Trump on 12th March, 2018, will interest to note that this is the highest visit by an American Diplomat in recent times. All this show that the Chinese have re-jigged world awareness of Nigeria, which is good for the country the next issue now is for Nigeria to leverage on this brighter days ahead.

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