


## STRATEGIC DIVERSIFICATION OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN AFRICA: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

This article examines the strategic diversification of China's foreign policy in Africa and its operationalization in Nigeria, the continent's largest economy and most populous market. It asks how China converts economic engagement - trade, investment, infrastructure, and development assistance - into longer-term political and normative influence, and treats soft power and public diplomacy as analytical instruments rather than descriptive labels. Drawing on a qualitative case study and descriptive data from authoritative sources (SAIS-CARI, UNCTAD, the World Bank, FOCAC documents, and Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics), the article argues that China's leverage rests on a diversified, bundled model in which infrastructure finance, market access, technical standards, and cultural and digital cooperation are deployed jointly and reinforced through FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative. The findings show deepening but asymmetric ties: a persistent Nigerian trade deficit and hydrocarbon-concentrated exports alongside Chinese dominance of manufactured imports and infrastructure contracts. The article contributes a disaggregated, instrument-level account that distinguishes the continental, Sub-Saharan, and bilateral levels of China's African engagement.

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Received: 07.03.2026

Revised: 20.05.2026

Accepted: 22.05.2026

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**Keywords:** *Belt and Road Initiative, Nigeria, public diplomacy, soft power, FOCAC, infrastructure diplomacy, economic statecraft, China-Nigeria relations.*

## **Introduction**

China's deepening engagement with Africa raises a central question for the study of contemporary statecraft: how does a rising power convert economic engagement - trade, investment, infrastructure, and development finance - into durable political and normative influence? This article pursues that question through the case of Nigeria, where the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is anchored in transport and communications infrastructure and in access to strategic mineral and hydrocarbon resources. The presence and activities of Chinese companies in Nigeria, particularly in the energy, mining, and construction sectors, have contributed to the intensification of bilateral cooperation (Duan, Ivanov and Werner 2025). Furthermore, Nigeria is a huge market for Chinese products that the country is not yet able to produce. This factor also plays a significant role in the development of bilateral cooperation. In this regard, countries influencing global politics and economic development should not underestimate the importance of the African continent and its individual countries in international economic relations (Carmody, Taylor and Zajontz 2022). This conclusion reinforces the relevance of this study, which helps uncover the current state of Chinese-Nigerian trade and economic relations. This requires expanding knowledge of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, as well as assessing its current status and development trends (Ajah and Onuoha 2025).

In recent years, China-Nigeria relations have attracted growing scholarly and policy attention because they reflect broader shifts in Africa-China engagement under the BRI. Beyond trade, the BRI now encompasses infrastructure development, industrial cooperation, technology transfer, public diplomacy and strategic partnership. For Nigeria, BRI-related projects offer opportunities to address infrastructure deficits, support structural transformation and improve regional connectivity; for China, Nigeria provides access to one of Africa's largest economies and a gateway to West African markets. At the same time, this engagement raises debates about development outcomes, state agency and the long-term sustainability of bilateral cooperation (Duggan, Gottwald and Bersick 2024; Li and Lu 2024; Cabestan 2023; Chiyemura, Gambino and Zajontz 2023; Edeh 2024).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state of trade and economic relations between China and Nigeria and to develop proposals aimed at strengthening mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation, taking into account the specifics of economic development and resource availability of each country, as well as emerging global geopolitical trends, and, more centrally, to explain the instruments through which China converts economic engagement into political and normative influence.

This objective of the study determined the solution of the following tasks: 1) to identify China's economic and political interests in Africa in terms of public diplomacy and soft power; 2) to prove that the alignment of economic development strategies between China and Nigeria contributes to the strengthening of bilateral cooperation; 3)

to assess trade and investment cooperation between China and Nigeria and consider possible areas of cooperation within the framework of infrastructure projects; 4) to determine priority areas of cooperation in the field of digital economy, transport and infrastructure projects (Idrees, Bashir, Zurkallaini et al. 2024; Hussain 2026; Guest 2026).

More specifically, the study addresses three questions: through which instruments and in which sectors does China translate economic engagement in Nigeria into political and normative influence; how asymmetric is the current structure of China-Nigeria trade, investment, and infrastructure cooperation; and what policy options can help Nigeria rebalance the relationship? Its central argument is that China's influence rests less on aggregate trade volumes than on a diversified, bundled model that combines infrastructure finance, market access, technical standards, and cultural and digital cooperation, reinforced by public-diplomacy instruments.

This study substantiates the feasibility of further developing trade and economic cooperation between the two largest developing economies, in which China serves not only as an economic but also a strategic ally of Nigeria. Based on the existing theoretical foundation and a comprehensive analysis of potential development options for further trade and economic cooperation between China and Nigeria, sound proposals were formulated for the prospects for developing bilateral cooperation in infrastructure and innovation, taking into account the specific characteristics of Chinese and Nigerian relations (Gbadebo 2025; Yin, Abu Hassan and Kamaruzzaman 2025; Idrees et al. 2024).

Methodologically, the article is a qualitative case study supported by a descriptive analysis of secondary data on trade, investment, and aid. Given well-documented gaps and divergences in FDI and bilateral-trade statistics (for example, between Chinese customs and Nigerian sources), the figures reported below are treated as indicative rather than exact, and the analysis does not test causal claims. Nigeria is selected as a representative, high-salience case: it is Africa's largest economy and most populous market, a leading recipient of Chinese infrastructure finance, and a major hydrocarbon exporter, which renders the mechanisms of China's diversified engagement unusually visible. The analysis draws on secondary trade, investment, aid and project-level data (SAIS-CARI, UNCTAD, the World Bank, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics, FOCAC documents and AidData) and deliberately distinguishes three levels of analysis: the continental, the Sub-Saharan, and the bilateral China-Nigeria level - so as not to conflate aggregate trends with the specific dynamics of the Nigerian case.

The relevance of this study is also determined by China's intensive development of its geopolitical projects in Southern Africa. A particular role in this is played by the BRI, which was integrated in 2018 at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Isingizwe and Cirella 2023; dos Santos Junior 2025; Emupenne and Small 2024). In this sense, the multi-vector nature of the development of the African direction in China's foreign policy has consistently attracted the attention of the academic community, since China's historical interaction with the countries of Southern Africa represents a partnership based not only on equality and mutual respect, but also on regional dominance in the form of a unique strategy of

diversifying cooperation with African countries. Clearly, these countries need more than just political support and the transfer of state-building experience; above all, they need economic assistance. Cooperation between African countries and a developed economic power that is successfully addressing domestic challenges offers African countries the opportunity to gain new experience in interacting with a developed power in new venues, formats, and principles (Zhang 2022; Cabestan 2023; Duggan et al. 2024; Li and Lu 2024; Ndofor, Jones and Li 2025; Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2026). This can contribute to state building, economic sovereignty, and the resolution of key humanitarian challenges such as hunger, poverty, epidemic diseases, low literacy, and environmental issues.

### **China's economic diversification strategies as a factor in strengthening cooperation**

By pursuing a differentiated foreign policy, China is strategically increasing its influence in Africa by expanding trade and economic cooperation with African countries, including Nigeria, and intensifying humanitarian exchanges and socioeconomic development assistance. This policy is well received in the region; for example, the Nigerian government endorses and supports the BRI, considering it an important foundation for achieving mutual benefit and win-win results, as well as the joint development of Africa and China. Therefore, African countries and China have a common interest in developing mutually beneficial cooperation. Initially, China's globalization strategy was based on an export-oriented model. China leveraged its advantages, namely cheap labor and attractive conditions for foreign investors, to become the 'world's factory' (Zhang 2014; Mees 2016). This allowed the country to rapidly increase foreign trade and accelerate economic development. However, after the 2008 global financial crisis, China realized it needed to rethink its economic strategy. The low-cost export model no longer ensured sustainable growth, and the country needed a new globalization strategy.

Modern China is pursuing a dual strategy: developing the domestic market, creating domestic demand by stimulating consumption and technological innovation, and global expansion through the BRI, which allows Chinese companies to invest in overseas projects and create transnational supply chains. As part of the BRI, Chinese companies are building large-scale infrastructure projects that are then integrated into the global trading system.

The African continent occupies a key place in China's foreign policy strategy amid the transformation of the global order. A complex set of internal challenges, such as demographic growth, weak government institutions, political instability, infrastructure shortages, and continued dependence on commodity exports, make African states vulnerable yet strategically important partners in the context of global interaction (Naz 2025). These factors motivate China's objective interest in increasing its economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian presence in Africa.

China is building its policy in sub-Saharan Africa as a strategy of selective, deep engagement, where the choice of countries and instruments is subordinated to the goals of ensuring resource and market security, creating trade and data corridors, and institutionalizing the long-term presence of Chinese companies and fintech platforms,

as seen in Nigeria (Cabestan 2023; China Africa Research Initiative 2025b; Duggan, Gottwald and Bersick 2024). This deliberately secures a credit support mechanism in exchange for the reconfiguration of energy, road, and port infrastructure, converting this into long-term commitments to buy back produced oil and reduce the logistics costs of exports to Chinese processing clusters. This is why China is focusing on increasing port and road capacity and telecommunications connectivity, using special economic zones and digital governance to expand its own production and trade chains, thereby maintaining a sustainable portfolio in energy, construction, and niche ICT projects (Pradt 2016; Danner 2018).

China's current intervention policy is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which have become the foundation of its foreign policy steps to strengthen soft power in Nigeria. These include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes, equality and mutual benefit, and the policy of peaceful coexistence (Bert 2003; van Eekelen 2016). These principles reflect China's aspiration to build a stable and peaceful international environment based on respect for national interests, equality of all parties, and the renunciation of the use of force as a means of resolving disputes. They have laid the foundation for an independent and balanced foreign policy aimed at developing stable and mutually beneficial international relations.

By the beginning of the 21st century, China had firmly established itself as a leading player in global politics. China had reached a new level of international influence, becoming one of the world's leading economic and political forces. Rapid economic growth, expanding foreign economic ties, active participation in international organizations, and the widespread use of soft power tools contributed to China's emergence as a key player in global politics. Amidst the transformation of the global political architecture, China formulated a foreign policy strategy known as the concept of peaceful rise, based on the idea of achieving great power status not through confrontation or coercion, but through the gradual and non-violent strengthening of its international position (Hu 2025; Li and Lu 2024; Mulugeta 2025; Razzaq 2025)). This concept emphasized economic diplomacy, the development of trade and investment cooperation, the deepening of multilateral cooperation, and the fostering of a positive international image of China as a responsible and constructive participant in global processes. Implementing this approach allowed China to minimize foreign policy risks, strengthen the trust of its partners, and ensure a sustainable presence in key regions of the world. China has become the largest investor in developing countries, and its diplomatic strategy has included not only bilateral relations but also participation in multilateral formats (Bijian 2005; Hussain 2026; Guest 2026).

One of the central pillars of China's modern foreign policy strategy is the BRI, officially unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. It aims to shape a new architecture for global economic interaction by creating a vast network of transport, energy, trade, and digital infrastructure connecting China with Asia, Europe, Africa, and other regions. Investment projects are being implemented in dozens of countries as part of the initiative, including the construction of railways and highways, ports, logistics centers, industrial and energy facilities. The BRI serves not only as an instrument of economic influence but also as a means of strengthening political ties and

expanding China's strategic presence. Alongside the economic dimension, China's foreign policy is gradually strengthening its military and military-political component. This is clearly demonstrated by the construction of China's first overseas military support base in Djibouti, in the strategically important Horn of Africa, on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which guards the southern approaches to the Red Sea and the maritime route to the Suez Canal. The base provides logistical support and an operational presence for the Chinese Navy beyond its borders, consistent with the broader objective of protecting Chinese interests in international trade zones and ensuring the security of maritime communications. The development of the fleet and the expansion of military cooperation with a number of countries demonstrate that China's foreign policy is increasingly combining economic, diplomatic, and military instruments within the framework of a comprehensive global strategy (Razzaq 2025).

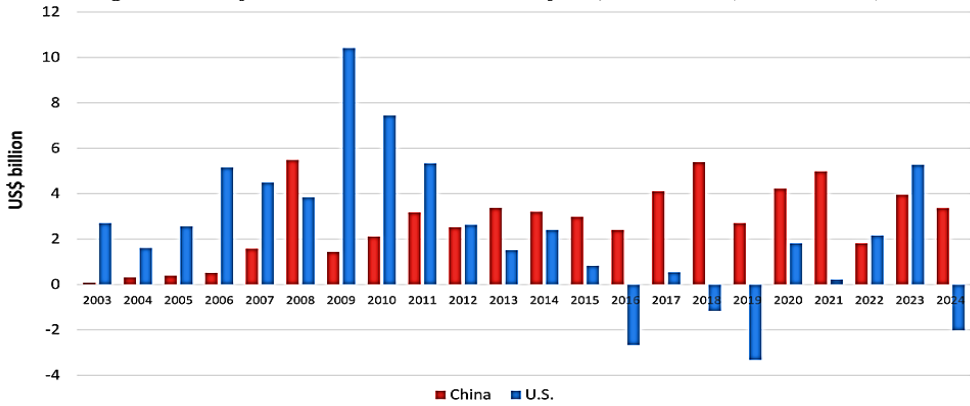
China's rapid growth in international influence in recent years has been accompanied by a number of challenges and conflicts affecting key areas of its foreign policy (Ndofor, Jones and Li 2025). One of the key factors fueling tensions in Chinese-American relations has been the trade and economic standoff that has unfolded since 2018 (Milliken 2025; Udeogu 2025.).

An analysis of trade and investment cooperation between China and Nigeria revealed that Nigeria is of economic interest to China primarily as the holder of vast hydrocarbon and other raw material reserves, as well as a capacious consumer market in which Chinese goods are in demand. At the same time, for Nigeria, as for most African countries, developing trade with China is crucial for integrating into China's value chains. Despite the differences in China's and Nigeria's foreign trade structures, trade relations play a key role in maintaining economic stability in both countries. Over the years of cooperation, bilateral trade volumes have increased, demonstrating Nigeria's integration into China's value chains.

The strengthening of China-Nigeria cooperation is also driven by the partial alignment between Nigeria's development priorities and China's external economic strategy. Nigeria seeks to address infrastructure deficits, accelerate industrialization, diversify beyond crude oil exports and improve regional connectivity. These objectives correspond to China's emphasis on infrastructure-led development, industrial cooperation and trade facilitation. Chinese-financed and Chinese-built projects in railways, ports, energy, telecommunications and special economic zones may enhance Nigeria's productive capacity and connectivity, while also expanding opportunities for Chinese firms, standards and exports (Ajah and Onuoha 2025; Gbadebo 2025; Li and Lu 2024; Edeh 2024; Duggan et al. 2024; Idrees et al. 2024).

China is less dependent on Nigerian exports, as evidenced by its export structure to Nigeria, which has changed little in recent years, and by the growing trade deficit. Mineral raw materials continue to account for the majority of Nigeria's exports. At the same time, China has added mechanical, human, and investment capital to its list of exports to Nigeria. This approach by China continues its unabated trend of dominance in many sectors of Nigeria's relatively less developed economy and the persistence of a trade imbalance.

**Figure 1. FDI from China and the U.S. in Africa, 2003-2024 (in US dollars)**

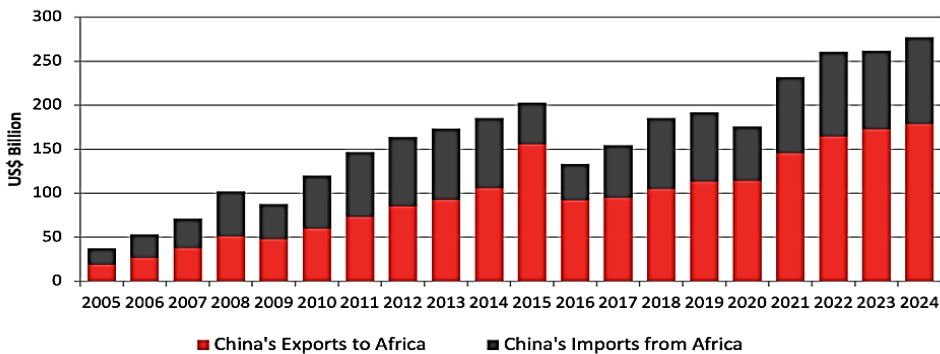


Source: China Africa Research Initiative 2025a

Figure 1 shows that the comparative FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) flows of China and the U.S. to Africa are dynamic, as their year-on-year values fluctuate considerably rather than following a steady upward trend. US flows, in fact, exceeded China’s in several years (for example, 2009-2011); in 2024, however, China’s flows to Africa remained positive (about US\$3.4 billion), while US flows turned negative.

Figure 1 suggests that Chinese FDI in Africa has become more consistent over time, while U.S. flows have been more volatile, including several years of negative net flows. Although U.S. investment exceeded Chinese flows in some earlier years, China’s sustained presence after the mid-2010s reflects its long-term infrastructure, industrial and connectivity strategy in Africa. This pattern supports the article’s argument that China’s influence is not based only on trade volumes, but also on persistent investment, infrastructure finance and institutionalized economic engagement.

**Figure 2. China-Africa Trade, 1992-2024 (in US dollars)**



Source: China Africa Research Initiative 2025b

Figure 2 shows trade between China and Africa for the period 1992–2024, with trade growing since 2021. While Africa’s exports to China grew by 7% in 2024, China’s exports to Africa (Africa’s imports from China) rose by about 3.5% (Ecofin Agency 2025). Clearly, significant opportunities are opening up for Chinese investors in Nigeria, largely because investors from the US and other countries are wary of investing in the Nigerian economy, citing political instability, terrorist threats, corruption, and other negative factors. Therefore, for Chinese companies seeking to diversify their supply chains—for example, in the automotive, electronics, energy, medical equipment, and other sectors—and to establish trade and economic relations with Nigerian suppliers or clients, investing in the construction of facilities in these sectors and the creation of related infrastructure, particularly in transport and logistics, remains a viable option.

More recent data confirm the deepening of these ties. According to Chinese customs figures, China-Africa trade reached a record US\$348 billion in 2025 (up 17.7%), with Chinese exports of about US\$225 billion against roughly US\$123 billion of imports from Africa (China–Global South Project 2026); Nigeria’s imports from China rose by about 37% to around US\$13 billion, widening its bilateral deficit to a record (Finance in Africa 2026). In a further significant shift, on 1 May 2026, China extended zero-tariff treatment to all 53 African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations, the first such unilateral and comprehensive measure by a major economy (State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2026), building on the duty-free access granted to African least-developed countries from December 2024 (FOCAC 2024).

Figure 2 illustrates the rapid expansion of China-Africa trade between 2005 and 2024, with Chinese exports to Africa consistently exceeding imports from Africa. This pattern points to a persistent structural asymmetry: African countries supply energy, minerals and agricultural commodities, while China exports manufactured goods, machinery, transport equipment and consumer products. The post-2021 recovery and record trade levels in 2024 reinforce the article’s argument that China’s African engagement combines market expansion with infrastructure, investment and connectivity strategies.

China’s current foreign policy is a combination of pragmatic economic cooperation, diplomacy, and military capability. China seeks to cement its status as a leading global power through a comprehensive approach that includes infrastructure projects, scientific and technological development, and cultural influence. Africa holds a special place in this strategy, as China implements large-scale investment programs, shaping a new model of cooperation with developing countries. China pursues an active international policy, balancing economic interests with strengthening its geopolitical influence, striving to maintain stability both domestically and internationally (Writer 2023; Kopiński and Carmody 2023; Zhang 2022). For example, in Niger, China is developing transport links to uranium and oil assets and promoting irrigation and electrification, cementing a minimal social consensus around Chinese projects. In Nigeria, China is leveraging its market scale to deploy railways and metros, modernize power grids, develop oil and gas projects, and build telecom and fintech platforms, creating synergies between government contracts and private demand for Chinese

technology. This allows China to promote digital government, ICT campuses, and industrial parks, and support agricultural processing to cement demand for Chinese software and hardware solutions. This is why Chinese public diplomacy is successfully linking road and bridge projects with industrial platforms, while simultaneously expanding cultural and educational exchanges and enhancing institutional acceptance (Frimpong 2025a; Liu and Ding 2024).

Thus, China's engagement with Niger demonstrates a high degree of differentiation and strategic selectivity. China relies on a pragmatic approach, driven by economic feasibility, the political climate, and the potential of partner countries to implement their own global initiatives. This engagement reflects the evolution of soft power and public diplomacy in China's foreign policy strategy amid the emergence of a multipolar world and intensifying competition for influence on the African continent.

### **China's dynamic policy model as a soft power instrument**

China's diversification initiatives and strategies for expanding into the African continent differ from similar projects in other countries, primarily the U.S. and the EU. China's diversification strategy in Africa aims to create a positive image of the country and strengthen its financial presence there. This is accomplished by providing affordable loans to countries across the continent in exchange for contracts awarded to Chinese corporations. For Nigeria and other African countries, engagement with China has become part of a historical and strategic course aimed at strengthening political independence and accelerating economic development. Even during decolonization, China was perceived as an ally in the struggle for liberation from colonial rule. Beijing supported national liberation movements both diplomatically and through humanitarian aid.

Beijing has built engagement with sub-Saharan Africa as a targeted state-corporate strategy, institutionalized through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Kyirewiah and Xiaolong 2022). It serves as a focal point for China to scale up its export infrastructure model, standardize access rules for Chinese companies, and strengthen long-term resource supply and industrial sales channels (King 2025; Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2026). In this logic, portfolios in energy, transport, industrial cooperation, healthcare, education, and digital technologies act not only as instruments of soft power but also as mechanisms to reduce transaction costs for Chinese value chains, hedge commodity and logistics risks, and promote technical standards and payment solutions in China.

Under its new policy model, China is building multilayered cooperation with Sub-Saharan African states, utilizing its full range of economic, diplomatic, humanitarian, and military instruments (Ename Minko 2025). The highest priority is infrastructure investment, encompassing the construction of ports, highways, energy facilities, and industrial clusters. These initiatives simultaneously address two objectives: promoting the internal development of the region's countries and ensuring China's sustainable, direct access to strategically important natural resources, including oil, non-ferrous and rare-earth metals, and agricultural products. From Beijing's perspective, particularly with regard to Sub-Saharan Africa, the partnership is a viable tool for implementing China's foreign economic strategy: through the rapid deployment of infrastructure and

industrial packages and the standardization of financing procedures through development banks and state-owned companies, China gains access to expanding markets, a resource base, and regional logistics hubs (Mjenga 2024). Diagnosing structural deficiencies—namely, infrastructure gaps, insufficient production capacity, and limited integration into global value chains—Beijing is pursuing policies aimed at reducing transaction costs and increasing connectivity, with an emphasis on the principles of non-interference and mutual benefit to mitigate political risks and formalize long-term contracts. In practical terms, this is reflected in the targeted mobilization of Chinese contractors and equipment suppliers in Nigeria, where China is promoting comprehensive programs to modernize transport corridors, expand energy capacity, and establish industrial zones, simultaneously seeking to expand the presence of Chinese technological standards and sustain demand for Chinese goods and services. As a result, China's presence is being constructed as an end-to-end political and economic instrument that not only supports partners' internal transformations but also institutionalizes predictable supply channels, markets, and regulatory compatibility for China, thereby strengthening China's strategic position in the region (Yigit 2024; Zhu, Zhou and Brockman 2026).

Deepening cooperation with sub-Saharan African countries is positioning China as a functional alternative. China offers project-oriented, less politically sensitive financing based on principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, and rapid capital mobilization. Beijing thus converts infrastructure and industrial packages into expanded markets, access to resource bases, and the promotion of its own technical standards. For countries with a history of international isolation, including Zimbabwe, Sudan, Chad, and the Central African Republic, a more flexible configuration of lending and investment instruments is applied: export and consumer credits, resource-backed schemes, and debt restructuring agreements according to agreed-upon schedules (Li et al. 2022; Ename Minko 2024; Mulugeta 2025). This architecture reduces sanctions and reputational risks for China, strengthens long-term relationships, and gradually integrates partners into Chinese logistics and production chains. From China's perspective, sub-Saharan African countries' interest in the Chinese experience is viewed as a resource for their foreign development policy: China is purposefully promoting its own narrative of transitioning from dependence to sustainable growth through domestic consolidation, institutional reform, and industrialization, packaging it with tools for South-South cooperation, poverty reduction programs, technology transfers, and personnel training. Facing reputational costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, isolated xenophobic incidents, and harsh domestic governance measures, Beijing is strengthening public diplomacy and policy exchange channels, expanding scholarships, technical assistance, agricultural demonstration centers, digital solutions for public administration, and scientific and technological cooperation platforms. China is thus creating a set of adaptable practices for its African partners to combat poverty, modernize infrastructure, and advance technological development, while simultaneously cementing its own standards, brands, and educational trajectories as the foundation for long-term political and economic influence.

From Beijing's perspective, its policy toward sub-Saharan Africa prioritizes developing human capital and digital infrastructure as key factors in institutional

convergence and the sustainable integration of partners into China's expanding production, logistics, and information systems (Jiang 2020; Yang 2026). China is systematically scaling up educational exchanges, training and retraining programs, and technical cooperation, integrating them with digital transformation projects, e-governance, and the development of payment and communications solutions. This integration creates conditions for accelerated technology transfer, localization of competencies, and growth in endogenous employment, while simultaneously generating stable demand for equipment, software, and services from Chinese companies. This results in regulatory compatibility and standardization linkages, whereby national practices in data management, connectivity, and service infrastructure are reproducible in configurations compatible with Chinese technical and organizational standards (Züfle, von Carlowitz and Büechl 2024).

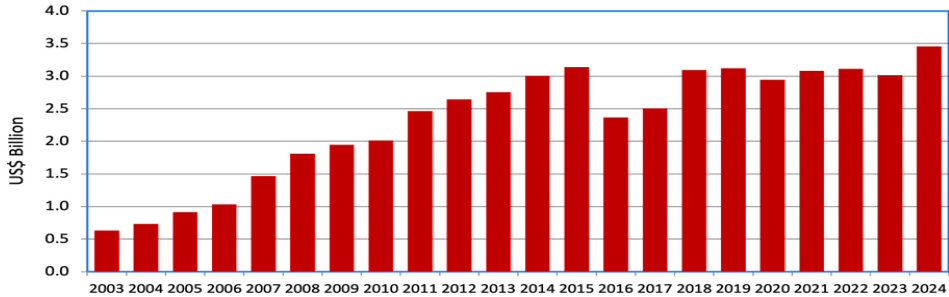
### **Cultural and Humanitarian Dialogue as a Factor in Long-Term Political and Economic Cooperation**

The humanitarian and cultural framework of this policy aims to reproduce cognitive and normative effects that ensure the long-term legitimization of China's presence. The expansion of the Confucius Institute network, the provision of academic scholarships, the promotion of media platforms, and the support of bilingual educational tracks create a layer of managerial and entrepreneurial elites familiar with the Chinese language, economic management practices, and technological ecosystems. This configuration strengthens mutual trust, increases transactional predictability, and creates channels for the circulation of personnel and experts between African institutions and Chinese organizations. Taken together, educational, entrepreneurial, and digital initiatives serve as complementary tools alongside infrastructure and investment projects, ensuring ecosystem-based alignment of partners with Chinese standards and transforming cultural and humanitarian dialogue into a resource for long-term political and economic cooperation. From Beijing's perspective, the political and diplomatic dimension of engagement with sub-Saharan African countries constitutes an independent foreign policy direction, focused on building sustainable coalitions to advance Chinese priorities within global institutions (Khan 2025; You and Hu 2026).

The Nigerian government's national economic development strategies cannot be implemented without the support and financial assistance of other countries, particularly China, as well as international organizations. In this regard, potential areas of cooperation were discussed to facilitate the development of several national industries and strengthen existing ties between China and Nigeria. Cooperation in the mining industry requires diversification of the sector, a technological leap forward, diversified collaborations, and the development of alternative partnerships, investment in research and development, the establishment of research centers and training centers, and the creation of a 'Made in Nigeria' brand for mineral exports. Implementing these proposed strategies requires a combination of factors, including attracting significant capital and constructing critical infrastructure. Equally important is training the local population, as a skilled workforce capable of employing modern technologies is essential. Fulfilling these conditions will facilitate the production of high-quality

products at competitive prices and, consequently, the development of local and regional markets.

*Figure 3. Foreign aid, 2003-2024*



*Source: China Africa Research Initiative 2025c*

Figure 3 shows that China's foreign aid increased from 2003 to 2015, followed by a decline. However, since 2018, China's global foreign aid has recovered, reaching a new peak in 2024. In this context, China plays a significant role in supporting Nigeria's food security by providing investment, new technologies, and resources to develop the agricultural sector and maintain it. China has proposed and continues to propose a number of promising areas that will contribute to the development of Nigerian agriculture and strengthen existing ties between the two countries. Key areas include: developing Nigeria's agricultural sector and strengthening food security by leveraging China's experience and advanced Chinese technologies designed to increase agricultural productivity; training the Nigerian population in new technologies for processing agricultural raw materials, seed selection, and other fields at established agricultural centers; and establishing stable, sustainable supply chains and facilitating Nigerian companies' entry into the Chinese market (Adegbite 2026; Oben, Daga and Zhakanova 2026).

China is deliberately institutionalizing its political coordination agenda through the FOCAC public-diplomacy track, bilateral cooperation commissions, interparliamentary formats, and mechanisms for ongoing consultations ahead of key sessions of the UN General Assembly and specialized agencies. This architecture ensures coordinated votes on key resolutions, expands the window for co-authorship of texts and amendments, and strengthens China's ability to shape norms and procedures on issues of development, digital sovereignty, development rights, and global economic governance reform (Ben-Enukora, Okoye and Adeyeye 2025). Support for the one-China principle, in this context, serves not only as a marker of recognition of China's territorial integrity but also as an indicator of partners' readiness for long-term mutual political loyalty. On this basis, Beijing builds reciprocal packages comprising diplomatic support for African initiatives, coordination of positions within Global South groups, and prioritization of access to project financing and technical assistance.

In the public diplomacy dimension, China complements coalition work by developing personnel and expert channels, including advanced training programs for

African diplomats, thematic seminars on multilateral procedures, and joint analytical platforms. This enhances delegations' procedural competence and fosters sustainable compatibility of negotiation practices. As a result, the political-diplomatic component of cooperation serves as an influence multiplier for China, consolidating a supportive periphery for Chinese initiatives while simultaneously creating a replicable resource of political capital for African partners in the global governance architecture. Beijing complements the educational, digital, and infrastructural vectors of the political-diplomatic component, focusing on the coalition assembly of African states' positions in key multilateral formats. At the level of framework coordination, China uses FOCAC as a platform for preliminary agreement on approaches to reforming global institutions, where guidelines for African representation in the UN Security Council are established and parameters for joint voting in relevant committees are agreed upon.

At the network mobilization level, China is intensifying its interactions to aggregate developing countries' demands for the transformation of the financial and political architecture, as well as to advance related priorities such as digital sovereignty, scientific and technological exchange, and inclusive development. Support for strengthening the African Union's standing in leading economic forums serves as a procedural tool to increase the continent's weight. Taken together, this configuration allows China to synchronize material incentives with normative and procedural support, forming a stable coalition of African countries capable of strengthening the reform agenda and simultaneously expanding the legitimacy of Chinese initiatives in the global governance system (You and Hu 2026). At the same time, from Beijing's perspective, increasing the military-political component is a logical extension of the economic and infrastructure agenda, as the security of maritime and land corridors is seen as essential to predictable supplies, asset protection, and mitigating operational risks. To this end, China is institutionalizing defense dialogue formats, concluding status-of-force agreements, developing joint training and equipment maintenance programs, and supporting the participation of its units in UN peacekeeping missions, thereby enhancing procedural compatibility and strengthening trust in Chinese security practices (Chen 2025; Frimpong 2025a). For states with limited military budgets, the appeal of such schemes is determined not only by the price of supplies but also by the linkage with training, technical assistance, and the ability to integrate communications and surveillance systems into national security systems. The result is a complex matrix of interactions, in which investments in logistics and energy are supported by the protection of key facilities, anti-piracy and search-and-rescue operations, humanitarian missions, and officer training programs (Montenegro and Alves 2024). Security itself is treated as a public good, creating corollary benefits for regional partners while simultaneously entrenching China's strategic presence. This configuration lowers barriers to entry for Chinese companies in sensitive markets, expands the window for standardizing communications and surveillance equipment, facilitates coordination with law enforcement and border agencies, and enhances the political resilience of bilateral relations in the face of external pressure. At the same time, Beijing strives to maintain a balance of non-interference and practical support, minimizing involvement in internal conflicts and positioning its actions as a contribution to collective security, thereby maintaining the legitimacy of its presence and mitigating reputational risks in

the eyes of African societies and international institutions (Dagold and Stimers 2024; Frimpong 2025b).

Continuing this logic for African states themselves involves seeking mechanisms to rebalance the benefits and costs of investment, employment, debt, and data sovereignty. Governments are strengthening localization requirements, introducing quotas for the share of national personnel in management, insisting on technology transfer, and tightening environmental and social assessment procedures for projects. In the debt sphere, the demand for transparency is growing: countries are promoting portfolio audits, disclosure of loan agreement terms, and debt sustainability assessments based on regional and multilateral methodologies, and are seeking to restructure and recalculate service schedules linked to export revenue and balance of payments indicators. In the social sphere, labor safety standards and non-discriminatory hiring practices are becoming more prominent, accompanied by strengthened inspections, institutionalized collective bargaining, and the obligation of contractors to comply with national labor codes and labor safety indicators. At the same time, a strategy to diversify partnerships is being developed to reduce dependence on a single source of funding and technology. Governments are combining Chinese infrastructure with resources from multilateral development banks and private capital, leveraging competition among contractors to improve prices and conditions, and building regional value chains to enhance the multiplier effect of infrastructure investments. In the digital realm, there is growing attention to data management, cybersecurity, and interoperability of standards, resulting in the development of regulatory frameworks for data localization, personal information protection, and sovereign control over critical platforms. Taken together, these measures aim to institutionalize corrections to asymmetries, strengthen the social license for projects, and transform interactions with Beijing into a more equitable exchange, in which long-term benefits consistently outweigh transaction risks.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

China's policy in African countries, including Nigeria, is integrated into China's own strategic socioeconomic development plans and the implementation of its global projects, which fundamentally distinguishes its initiatives and strategies for promoting itself on the African continent from similar projects of the U.S. and the EU. China's strategy in Africa is aimed at building a positive image and strengthening its financial presence there. This is accomplished by providing affordable loans to African countries in exchange for contracts with Chinese corporations. Furthermore, China's diplomatic presence in these countries is of paramount importance. By pursuing a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its partners, China has primarily pursued its own national interests, which include ensuring security and achieving global leadership status, influencing all global processes. At the same time, African countries have supported Chinese initiatives, considering them an important component of their economic development.

Positioning the creation of a China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era as its ultimate goal, China is becoming a key partner for countries in the region. Thanks to China's abundant mineral and human resources, untapped economic

potential, technological know-how, and financial resources, trade and economic cooperation between China and African countries has a long-term future, thereby providing impetus for sustainable development. While pursuing policies to secure the support of African partners, including Nigeria, China must balance maintaining its economic growth with advancing its initiatives and strategies. From the perspective of Chinese public diplomacy, integrating sub-Saharan African countries into its foreign policy orbit is viewed as a systemic project designed to simultaneously address supply security, expand markets, and entrench China's regulatory and technical standards in key sectors of the global economy.

The policy is built on the institutional framework of FOCAC, where economic packages are combined with diplomatic coordination, humanitarian programs, and security components. This design ensures predictable access to raw materials and infrastructure assets for China, stable demand for equipment, ICT, and engineering and construction services, and political support within multilateral institutions. At the same time, a perimeter of standardization compatibility is being established across the digital, energy, and transportation spheres, reducing transaction costs for Chinese companies and strengthening the network effects of Chinese platforms.

Going forward, Beijing will deepen the 'investment plus institutional coordination' link in areas that yield the greatest strategic impact. Priorities will include green industrialization and critical minerals for battery and renewable energy, modernization of port and rail corridors, localization of services and operational management, and the promotion of cashless payments and yuan settlements. Chinese companies are expected to expand their participation in projects related to the digital transformation of public administration, telecom networks, cybersecurity, and satellite navigation, thereby enhancing technological connectivity with the Chinese ecosystem. Diplomatically, China will continue to build coalitions at the UN, BRICS, and the Group of 77, supporting African demands for global governance reform and thereby increasing its own negotiating power. Taken together, this approach allows China to evolve from an external investor to a long-term political and economic partner, thereby improving the manageability of external risks, scaling up exports of technologies and services, and strengthening China's normative power in the emerging multipolar world.

The legal framework for China's cooperation with sub-Saharan African countries comprises several key categories: the White Papers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, the FOCAC Cooperation Plans, the FOCAC declarations, and the PRC's five-year plans.

This FOCAC serves as an institutional platform for intensifying trade and investment cooperation. Its key mechanism is to consolidate African countries' aggregate demand for capital goods, engineering services, and maintenance services originating in China. At the same time, the forum optimizes project risk allocation through comprehensive financial instruments. These include blended financing schemes, export credit and insurance products, and co-financing transactions with international multilateral development banks.

This policy promotes linking contracts to settlements in Chinese yuan, strengthens the role of Chinese financial institutions, and fosters the development of a market for guarantees and refinancing instruments, thereby reducing dependence on the dollar and

foreign exchange costs. The regularity of three-year cycles creates a predictable schedule for the approval of packaged initiatives, allows for the synchronization of the African track with China's five-year plans and domestic industrial policy, and prioritizes sectors based on the budget capacity and debt sustainability of partner countries. Politically, FOCAC strengthens Beijing's negotiating position in international organizations by institutionalizing African elites within the narrative of a community with a shared future, enhancing the legitimacy of its long-term presence, and serving as a reputation-management tool in response to criticism of debt and environmental risks. Taken together, this transforms FOCAC into a converter of China's strategic priorities into manageable project portfolios, ensuring the reproducibility of results from cycle to cycle and increasing China's soft power in the region.

To put the magnitude of this mechanism in perspective, at the most recent FOCAC summit, held in Beijing in 2024, China pledged RMB 360 billion (approximately US\$51 billion) in financial support to Africa over the following three years. According to the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (FOCAC 2024), this package comprises RMB 210 billion in credit lines, RMB 80 billion in various forms of assistance, and no less than RMB 70 billion in investment by Chinese companies. The 2024 pledge is lower than the US\$60 billion announced at the 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit, but higher than the US\$40 billion package announced at the 2021 Dakar Ministerial Conference. Aligning China and Nigeria's economic development strategies could create favorable conditions for strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation, leading both sides to sustainable growth and development. This could be achieved through factors such as:

- Infrastructure projects, as China has significant experience and resources in implementing large-scale infrastructure projects. This could contribute to the development of Nigeria's transport, energy, and communications networks, laying the foundation for accelerated economic growth.
- Complementary economies, such as China and Nigeria, are positioned as the largest economies in their respective regions by a number of parameters. This facilitates effective cooperation between them and the mutual benefit of each side's respective strengths. China is the largest manufacturer and exporter of various industrial goods, while Nigeria is rich in natural resources, with oil and gas being the leading producers.
- New technologies, such as China's leadership in advanced technologies, which it actively applies in manufacturing, energy, agriculture, and other sectors, allow Nigeria to draw on its experience and benefit greatly from such technological transfers with China, increasing the efficiency of its production while simultaneously modernizing various industries;
- Energy cooperation through Chinese investment in the extraction and transportation of energy resources from Nigeria, as well as joint projects to develop renewable and more environmentally friendly energy sources;
- Trade and economic cooperation, whose strengthening can contribute not only to reducing the trade deficit but also to increasing trade turnover by expanding and improving the conditions for its implementation.

It has been determined that China's implementation of infrastructure projects in Nigeria, particularly those related to transport and logistics, not only opens access to the growing Nigerian market for goods and services but also expands China's presence in the African region. This is also beneficial for Nigeria, as the construction and modernization of infrastructure increases mobility and accelerates freight and passenger transport, which in turn stimulates the development of logistics not only within the country but also internationally. Prospects for developing this cooperation may include the construction of modern highways and new airports in Nigeria, which, together with the implementation of railway projects, will improve transport accessibility and increase tourism and business flows. The automotive industry, particularly the construction of auto assembly plants, may be a promising area for the development of the Nigerian economy. Further prospects for bilateral cooperation in this area may include attracting more Chinese automakers to Nigeria. To achieve this goal, various preferential terms and privileges can be introduced to attract foreign companies. While expanding technological cooperation, special attention should be paid to the creation of automotive industry clusters. The creation of specialized zones with the necessary infrastructure to produce both conventional and electric or hybrid vehicles will ensure the sustainable development of the industry. Cooperation between China and Nigeria in this area could support Nigeria's port networks, positively impact trade flows and the development of the blue economy, and attract investment.

China's soft power in Africa has steadily grown over the past several decades. The country has invested heavily in development projects across the continent. One of the primary ways this has been demonstrated is through infrastructure development initiatives: the construction of roads, railways, ports, communications, and other critical infrastructure. China has also invested heavily in the education sector, offering scholarships and exchange programs for African students to study in China. Chinese media have established a strong presence in Africa, providing local audiences with news and entertainment content. This has helped foster a favorable image of China among Africans, fostering mutual understanding.

Analytically, these instruments matter less as expenditure than for their effects: scholarships and Confucius Institutes cultivate elites familiar with Chinese practice, media presence shapes the information environment, and infrastructure fosters reliance on Chinese standards and platforms - together translating attraction into regulatory convergence, predictable elite networks, and market preference.

One of the main forms of soft power between China and African countries is long-term economic cooperation, investment, and the provision of preferential loans. This format not only facilitates regional development but also derives economic benefits for China. Key areas of Chinese investment include the raw materials sector, energy, and urban and transport infrastructure. Active participation in the region's development strengthens China's geopolitical status as a partner and also positively impacts the investment climate in African countries, thereby attracting other foreign investors and shaping the image of a region of opportunity.

This study has limitations. It relies on descriptive secondary data, some of which are incomplete or diverge across sources; it does not test causal claims about influence; and it draws on documentary rather than primary evidence. Future research could

pursue project-level case studies in Nigeria, interview-based evidence on elite socialization and standards adoption, and systematic comparison with other African cases to identify the conditions under which China's diversified engagement yields development gains rather than dependence.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and critiques.

### **Ethics Statement**

The authors affirm that this research was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

Author Ashot Aleksanyan is the Editor-in-Chief of this journal. To ensure an impartial review process, the author was not involved in the editorial handling, peer review, or decision-making process for this manuscript. The review and editorial process was managed by another member of the editorial team in accordance with the journal's policy.

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