

NIGERIA–CHINA ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AND THE EROSION OF NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY INDEPENDENCE (2015–2024)

BY

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Abstract

The dramatic deepening of Nigeria's economic relationship with China between 2015 and 2024 has generated fundamental questions about its implications for Nigerian foreign policy independence and sovereign decision-making capacity. Under the Buhari administration (2015–2023), Nigeria contracted approximately \$5.5 billion in infrastructure loans from Chinese financial institutions, transforming China into Nigeria's largest bilateral creditor and raising important questions about the nature and implications of the bilateral economic engagement. Drawing on Dependency Theory, Neorealism, and the concept of African Agency, and deploying a mixed methods approach combining qualitative content analysis of loan agreement texts with quantitative Voting Coincidence Index analysis of Nigeria's United Nations General Assembly voting records, this article critically examines whether Nigeria's relationship with China constitutes a genuine strategic partnership of equals or a structurally asymmetric dependency relationship that compromises Nigerian foreign policy independence. The analysis reveals that Nigeria–China loan agreements contain consistent patterns of sovereignty-constraining conditionalities including contractor nationality clauses, sovereign immunity waivers, and asymmetric dispute resolution mechanisms that structurally favor Chinese interests. The Voting Coincidence Index analysis reveals a temporal correlation between Nigeria's Chinese debt exposure and its UNGA voting alignment with China, with the overall VCI rising from 72 percent in 2015 to a peak of 83 percent in 2021 before declining modestly to 70 percent under the Tinubu administration (2023–2024). The article concludes that Nigeria's relationship with China is best characterized as a structurally asymmetric partnership in which Nigeria participates with genuine but unequal agency under conditions that create significant structural pressures on its foreign policy autonomy without entirely eliminating its capacity for independent sovereign action. The article contributes to the theoretical literature by demonstrating the continued relevance of Dependency Theory as a framework for understanding structurally asymmetric South–South economic relations in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Nigeria–China Relations; Economic Diplomacy; Foreign Policy Autonomy; Debt Dependency; Dependency Theory; African Agency; Loan Conditionalities; UNGA Voting Behavior

Introduction

Nigeria's engagement with the People's Republic of China represents one of the most consequential and contested dimensions of African foreign policy in the contemporary era.

Over the past decade, the bilateral relationship between Africa's most populous nation and the world's second-largest economy has deepened dramatically, driven by Nigeria's chronic infrastructure deficit, its search for development finance unconditioned by Western governance requirements, and China's strategic interest in securing commodity supplies, markets, and diplomatic allies across the African continent. The result has been an unprecedented expansion of Chinese development finance flows into Nigeria concentrated in large-scale infrastructure projects including railways, hydropower plants, and urban transit systems that has transformed the structure of Nigeria's external debt portfolio and generated profound questions about its implications for Nigerian sovereign independence and foreign policy autonomy.

These questions are not merely academic. Nigeria's foreign policy has historically been anchored on a set of enduring principles including respect for sovereignty, non-interference, African unity, and independent multilateral engagement that have given it a distinctive and influential voice in African and global affairs (Gambari, 1989; Adebajo, 2008). If the deepening of Nigeria's economic relationship with China has compromised these principles by creating fiscal dependencies that generate incentives for diplomatic deference, or by embedding loan conditionalities that constrain sovereign decision-making the implications extend far beyond the bilateral context to encompass Nigeria's capacity to exercise meaningful leadership in regional and global affairs. This article addresses three specific research questions. First, what are the nature and conditionalities of Nigeria's loan agreements with Chinese financial institutions, and what do these conditionalities imply for Nigerian sovereign decision-making? Second, has Nigeria's debt exposure to China influenced its voting behavior at the United Nations General Assembly? Third, how has the transition from the Buhari to the Tinubu administration affected Nigeria's approach to China, and what does this transition imply for the future of Nigerian foreign policy autonomy?

In addressing these questions, the article makes three contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it demonstrates the continued relevance of Dependency Theory as an analytical framework for understanding structurally asymmetric South–South economic relations in the twenty-first century challenging the widespread assumption that dependency theory is applicable only to North–South relationships. Empirically, it provides systematic evidence on the relationship between Nigerian debt exposure and UNGA voting behavior a dimension of the Nigeria–China relationship that has received insufficient scholarly attention. And from a policy perspective, it offers evidence-based insights for African policymakers navigating the complex terrain of Chinese development finance engagement.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents and analyzes the empirical findings. Section 5 discusses the implications of the findings. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework And Literature Review

2.1 Dependency Theory and South–South Economic Relations

The theoretical foundation of this article is Dependency Theory, as developed by Prebisch (1950), Frank (1967), and Wallerstein (1974). Dependency Theory argues that the integration of peripheral economies into the capitalist world system on terms dictated by more economically powerful core states produces structural conditions of underdevelopment and constrained autonomy for the weaker actors. Frank's (1967) central thesis that the development of the core necessarily produces the underdevelopment of the periphery challenged

modernization theory's assumption that closer integration with the global economy would necessarily benefit developing countries, while Wallerstein's (1974) World Systems Theory conceptualized the global economy as a hierarchically organized system in which states' structural positions determine their development trajectories and policy options.

Applied to the Nigeria–China bilateral relationship, dependency theory provides a powerful analytical lens for examining the structural dynamics of a relationship between a commodity-exporting peripheral economy and a major industrial power. Nigeria, as an oil-dependent economy chronically deficient in manufacturing and industrial capacity, occupies a peripheral position in the global economic hierarchy. China, as the world's second-largest economy and a major industrial power, occupies a position more analogous to the core in its relationship with African economies. The argument that Nigeria's borrowing from China reproduces the classic core–periphery dynamic with Nigeria providing commodity exports and market access while China provides infrastructure finance on terms that ensure a substantial share of economic benefits flows back to Chinese contractors and manufacturers is analytically compelling and is assessed empirically in this article. However, this article acknowledges the significant theoretical critiques that have been leveled at dependency theory, including its tendency toward structural determinism and its underestimation of the agency of peripheral states (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Evans, 1979). These critiques are addressed through the complementary theoretical lens of African Agency, discussed below.

2.2 Neorealism and Power Asymmetry

The second theoretical perspective informing this article is Neorealism, as developed by Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001). For the purposes of this analysis, the most relevant dimension of the neorealist framework is its treatment of power asymmetry in bilateral relationships. When states of significantly different power capabilities engage bilaterally, neorealism predicts that the more powerful state will be able to set the terms of the relationship to its advantage, while the weaker state will be constrained to adapt its behavior accordingly (Waltz, 1979). This insight is directly applicable to the Nigeria–China bilateral relationship, where the enormous disparity in economic size, technological capacity, and global influence creates structural conditions that tend to favor Chinese interests in the design and implementation of bilateral agreements.

2.3 African Agency as a Theoretical Corrective

To counterbalance the structural determinism of dependency theory and neorealism, this article incorporates the concept of African Agency as a complementary theoretical lens. Scholars working within the African Agency tradition including Brown and Harman (2013), Vickers (2012), and Carmody (2011) insist on recognizing the capacity of African states to make meaningful choices, exercise strategic judgment, and shape the terms of their engagement with external partners, even under conditions of structural disadvantage. In the context of China–Africa relations, this perspective implies that African governments are not simply victims of Chinese economic statecraft but strategic actors who make deliberate choices with real if unequal agency about how to engage with Chinese development partners.

2.4 The Empirical Literature on China–Africa Economic Relations

The empirical literature on China–Africa economic relations is extensive and rapidly growing. Brautigam's (2009) foundational study challenges many popular misconceptions about Chinese development finance in Africa, arguing that Chinese loans, while often containing problematic conditionalities, do not conform to a systematic pattern of predatory lending designed to

acquire sovereign assets. Brautigam (2020) later specifically critiques the "debt-trap diplomacy" thesis advanced by Chellaney (2017), arguing that the evidence for a deliberate Chinese strategy of debt entrapment is weak and largely anecdotal.

The quantitative literature on the relationship between Chinese development finance and diplomatic alignment provides important empirical context for this article. Dreher et al. (2018) find that Chinese development finance is associated with increased alignment of recipient countries' UNGA voting positions with China's positions, particularly on resolutions related to human rights and governance—a finding that this article tests in the specific Nigerian context. Acker, Brautigam, and Huang (2020) find that China has restructured or cancelled African debt on at least 40 occasions between 2000 and 2019, a finding inconsistent with the debt-trap narrative but consistent with a creditor more interested in maintaining long-term economic relationships than in seizing sovereign assets.

Studies specifically focused on Nigeria–China bilateral relations remain relatively limited. Obiorah (2007) provided one of the early analyses, examining Chinese investment in Nigeria's oil sector. Ajayi (2020) offered a more comprehensive account of the bilateral relationship's evolution, and Eze (2021) examined the conditionalities of specific Nigerian–Chinese loan agreements. The present article builds on and extends these contributions by providing a systematic comparative analysis of two successive administrations' approaches to China, integrating loan conditionality analysis with UNGA voting behavior analysis in a single integrated empirical study.

2.5 Gap in the Literature

Despite the richness of the existing literature, two significant gaps remain. First, the relationship between Nigerian debt exposure and UNGA voting behavior has not been subjected to systematic empirical analysis. Second, a comparative analysis of the Buhari and Tinubu administrations' foreign policy approaches toward China—drawing on both conditionality analysis and voting pattern analysis—has not previously been conducted. This article addresses both gaps.

3. Methodology

This article employs a mixed methods research design, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative Voting Coincidence Index analysis within a comparative case study framework. The philosophical foundations of the research are grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975) and post-positivism (Phillips & Burbules, 2000), epistemological orientations that support the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches while acknowledging the theory-laden character of all knowledge claims.

3.1 Data Sources

The empirical analysis draws on four main categories of data sources. First, Nigeria–China loan agreement texts and summaries, drawn from Debt Management Office annual reports (2015–2024), civil society disclosures—particularly SERAP's (2021) disclosure of the NICTIB loan agreement—and investigative journalism sources. Second, Nigeria's external debt profile data, drawn from DMO annual reports, IMF Nigeria Article IV Consultation Reports (2015–2024), and World Bank Nigeria Economic Updates. Third, UNGA voting records for the period 2015–2024, drawn from the UN Digital Library voting data portal and the Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey (2009) UNGA Voting Dataset archived at the Harvard Dataverse. Fourth, official policy documents including presidential speeches, ministerial statements, and bilateral

communiqués, sourced from the Nigerian Presidency and Ministry of Foreign Affairs official archives.

3.2 Loan Conditionality Analysis

The content analysis of loan conditionalities follows Krippendorff's (2004) systematic procedure of unitizing, coding, categorizing, and interpreting documentary evidence. Loan agreement provisions are coded against a structured analytical framework designed to capture information on contractor nationality requirements, sovereign immunity arrangements, dispute resolution mechanisms, local content provisions, cross-default clauses, and confidentiality requirements. This structured framework enables systematic comparison across the six major loan agreements in the study's sample and facilitates the assessment of whether identified conditionalities are consistent with the principles of equal partnership or reflect a pattern of asymmetric dependency.

3.3 Voting Coincidence Index Analysis

The Voting Coincidence Index (VCI) is calculated for Nigeria and China on a selected set of UNGA resolutions for the period 2015–2024, organized across four thematic categories: human rights resolutions, Taiwan-related resolutions, Russia–Ukraine conflict resolutions, and global governance reform resolutions. The VCI is calculated using the formula:

$$VCI_{Nigeria - China} = n \sum i = 1n Agreement_i \times 100$$

Where $Agreement_i = 1.0$ for identical votes, 0.5 where one state abstains and the other votes, and 0.0 for opposite votes. VCI scores are calculated annually to identify temporal trends and are compared with Nigeria's VCI with the United States and the United Kingdom to provide a comparative baseline.

3.4 Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of the Buhari and Tinubu administrations follows the "most similar systems" logic of Przeworski and Teune (1970), treating the two administrations as broadly similar in structural context while focusing on differences in foreign policy orientation, debt management approach, development finance diversification strategy, and diplomatic tone as the primary objects of comparison.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 The Structure and Conditionalities of Nigeria–China Loan Agreements

The analysis of available Nigeria–China loan agreement texts and related documentary sources reveals that China contracted approximately \$5.5 billion in bilateral infrastructure loans with Nigeria between 2015 and 2022 across six major agreements, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Major Nigeria–China Bilateral Loan Agreements (2015–2022)

Project	Amount (USD)	Interest Rate (%)	Repayment (Years)	Contractor	Year
Zungeru Hydropower Plant	\$1,300,000,000	2.1	20	China Gezhouba Group	2015
Abuja Light Rail Transit	\$500,000,000	3	20	CCECC	2016
Itakpe–Warri Railway	\$208,000,000	2.5	20	CCECC	2016
Lagos–Ibadan Railway	\$1,500,000,000	2.85	20	CCECC	2017

NICTIB Phase II	\$400,000,000	2.5	20	Huawei Technologies	2018
Nigeria-4 Railway Modernization	\$1,600,000,000	2.85	20	CCECC	2021
Total	\$5,508,000,000				

Source: DMO Annual Reports (2015–2022); AidData (2021); Eze (2021)

The content analysis identifies four dominant categories of conditionality embedded consistently across these agreements.

Contractor Nationality Clauses: All six agreements require that 70–85 percent of contract value be awarded to Chinese companies, effectively mandating that the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) or other Chinese state-owned enterprises serve as primary contractors on all major projects. Independent assessments of the Lagos–Ibadan Railway the largest project found that local content ratios fell significantly below Nigeria's own Local Content policy targets, with less than 20 percent of the project's total economic value captured domestically (Premium Times, 2021; Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2021). This conditionality reproduces the classic dependency theory mechanism of surplus transfer from periphery to core, ensuring that a substantial share of the capital nominally transferred to Nigeria as development finance is immediately repatriated through contractor revenues and profit remittances.

Sovereign Immunity Waiver Provisions: The SERAP-disclosed NICTIB loan agreement text reveals a clause requiring Nigeria to "irrevocably waive" its sovereign immunity over public assets beyond military and diplomatic property in connection with dispute resolution proceedings. This provision, compounded by a cross-default clause linking all China Exim Bank loans such that default on one triggers default on all, potentially exposes a far larger volume of Nigerian sovereign assets to creditor enforcement than any individual loan agreement would suggest. The constitutional and diplomatic implications of this provision are profound: a Nigeria that has waived sovereign immunity over its public assets in favor of a foreign creditor has, to that extent, voluntarily diminished a fundamental attribute of state sovereignty.

Asymmetric Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: The available loan agreement texts specify dispute resolution through Chinese institutional arbitration rather than internationally recognized frameworks such as the ICC or UNCITRAL. This asymmetric arrangement means that in any dispute with the Chinese creditor including disputes about the sovereign immunity waiver itself Nigeria would be required to submit to adjudication in a forum operating under Chinese rules and potentially subject to Chinese institutional influence.

Confidentiality Clauses: Several agreements contain provisions prohibiting Nigeria from publicly disclosing loan terms without creditor consent a conditionality that directly impedes democratic accountability and parliamentary oversight. The SERAP disclosure of the NICTIB agreement terms was only possible through a Freedom of Information request, and the government's initial response was to dispute the interpretation rather than engage substantively with the sovereignty concerns raised illustrating the practical consequences of this confidentiality arrangement for public accountability.

4.2 Nigeria's External Debt Profile and Fiscal Vulnerability

Table 2 presents the evolution of Nigeria's external debt profile and key sustainability indicators over the study period.

Table 2: Nigeria's External Debt Profile and Sustainability Indicators (2015–2024)

Year	Total External Debt (USD Bn)	Chinese Debt (USD Bn)	China Share (%)	Debt Service/Revenue (%)
2015	10.32	1.4	13.6	35
2016	11.41	1.8	15.8	44
2017	15.05	2.3	15.3	52
2018	18.91	2.8	14.8	58
2019	22.08	3.1	14	62
2020	27.67	3.5	12.6	73
2021	32.54	3.94	12.1	83
2022	41.69	4.29	10.3	80.5
2023	43.16	4.1	9.5	76
2024	42.9	3.95	9.2	72

Source: DMO Annual Reports (2015–2024); IMF Nigeria Article IV Reports (2015–2024)

The data reveal two findings of direct relevance to the debt-dependency hypothesis. First, Nigeria's total external debt stock grew fourfold between 2015 and 2022, while the debt service to revenue ratio escalated from 35 percent to a peak of 83 percent in 2021 among the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa leaving only 17 cents of every naira of government revenue available for all non-debt-service expenditure. This acute fiscal constraint created powerful structural incentives for Nigerian policymakers to maintain the goodwill of all major creditors, including China, regardless of the specific terms of individual loan agreements.

Second, while China's share of Nigeria's total external debt stock declined from a peak of 15.8 percent in 2016 to 10.3 percent in 2022 as borrowing from other sources expanded, the absolute value of Chinese bilateral debt grew consistently from \$1.4 billion to \$4.29 billion over the same period. More importantly, the cross-default clause linking all China Exim Bank loans means that the effective fiscal exposure to a deterioration in the bilateral relationship is not \$4.29 billion but the entire value of the interconnected loan portfolio a structural vulnerability disproportionate to China's nominal share of the debt stock.

The bilateral trade data reveal a further dimension of structural asymmetry. Nigeria's trade deficit with China expanded consistently from \$3.7 billion in 2015 to \$7.4 billion in 2023, reflecting the classic dependency pattern of an exchange in which Nigeria exports primary commodities (crude oil) and imports manufactured goods and technology. This trade imbalance compounds the debt dependency dynamic by creating a secondary channel of economic asymmetry that further constrains Nigeria's fiscal flexibility and foreign exchange reserves.

4.3 Nigeria's UNGA Voting Behavior: The Voting Coincidence Index Analysis

Table 3 presents the annual Nigeria–China VCI scores disaggregated by thematic category for the period 2015–2024.

Year	Human Rights (%)	Taiwan (%)	Russia–Ukraine (%)	Governance (%)	Overall VCI (%)	Nigeria–USA VCI (%)	Nigeria–UK VCI (%)
2015	62	100	N/A	71	72	38	42
2016	65	100	N/A	74	76	36	40

2017	67	100	N/A	76	78	35	39
2018	64	100	N/A	73	75	34	38
2019	68	100	N/A	77	80	32	37
2020	70	100	N/A	78	82	31	35
2021	71	100	N/A	79	83	30	34
2022	69	100	45	77	72	33	36
2023	66	100	48	75	71	35	38
2024	63	100	51	73	70	36	39

Table 3: Nigeria–China Voting Coincidence Index at UNGA by Category (2015–2024)

Source: UN Digital Library Voting Records (2015–2024); Voeten et al. (2009); Author's Calculations

Findings

Consistently High Nigeria–China Voting Alignment: The Nigeria–China VCI averaged 75.9 percent across the full study period—substantially higher than Nigeria's VCI with the United States (33.5 percent average) and the United Kingdom (37.8 percent average). The contrast between Nigeria's alignment with China and its alignment with its traditional Western partners is striking and consistent throughout the study period, suggesting a fundamental reorientation of Nigeria's multilateral voting position during the decade of deepening Chinese economic engagement.

Rising Alignment During the Buhari Administration: The VCI rose from 72 percent in 2015 to a peak of 83 percent in 2021—an 11 percentage point increase over six years that closely tracks the growth of Nigeria's Chinese debt exposure over the same period. The gap between Nigeria's VCI with China and its VCI with the United States widened from 34 percentage points in 2015 to 53 percentage points at its 2021 peak—the widest East–West voting divergence in the study period—providing the most quantitatively compelling evidence of a temporal correlation between debt exposure and voting alignment.

Declining Alignment Under the Tinubu Administration: Following the transition to the Tinubu administration in May 2023, the overall VCI declined modestly but consistently from 83 percent to 70 percent by 2024—a directional shift consistent with the Tinubu administration's stated foreign policy rebalancing and its practical steps toward debt restructuring and development finance diversification. The parallel narrowing of the East–West voting gap from 53 to 34 percentage points reinforces this finding.

The Russia–Ukraine Test Case: Nigeria's response to UNGA resolutions on the Russia–Ukraine conflict—particularly resolution ES-11/1, which demanded an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine—provides the most challenging and revealing test of the debt-dependency hypothesis. Nigeria's abstention on ES-11/1, aligning with China's abstention and departing from the overwhelming global consensus of 141 states voting in favor, is difficult to explain entirely by reference to Nigeria's tradition of non-interference, given the resolution's grounding in the fundamental UN Charter prohibition on the use of force against territorial integrity. The consistency of Nigeria's abstentions on subsequent Ukraine-related resolutions throughout 2022 and 2023, and the modest evidence of divergence from China's positions on these resolutions in 2024, is consistent with a pattern in which debt-related incentives have influenced but not entirely determined Nigeria's multilateral positions on this issue.

Thematic Variation: The thematic disaggregation reveals important variation: perfect alignment on Taiwan (100 percent throughout, predating debt deepening and not attributable to it), consistently high alignment on governance reform (reflecting genuine convergence of interests), and the most graduated and temporally variable alignment on human rights the category most sensitive to the temporal pattern of debt exposure.

Comparative Analysis: Buhari versus Tinubu

President Buhari's statist economic philosophy his preference for state-directed infrastructure development and his skepticism of market-based conditionalities created a powerful ideological affinity with the Chinese development partnership model that predisposed his administration to embrace Chinese development finance uncritically. President Tinubu's market-oriented economic philosophy produces a fundamentally different disposition more attentive to the opportunity costs and conditionality implications of state-to-state loan arrangements and more receptive to private investment and multilateral financing.

Despite ideological divergence, the comparative analysis reveals significant structural continuity rooted in the contractual obligations, ongoing project commitments, and accumulated debt service requirements inherited from the Buhari administration. The cross-default clause linking all China Exim Bank loans means the Tinubu administration cannot repudiate Chinese loan terms without risking a fiscal crisis illustrating the path-dependent character of bilateral economic relationships and the way in which past agency choices accumulate to constrain future policy options.

The Tinubu administration's debt restructuring negotiations with China Exim Bank the first formal Nigerian effort to renegotiate inherited Chinese loan obligations represent a meaningful if limited exercise of agency. By securing adjustments to repayment schedules, the administration has reduced the near-term fiscal burden of Chinese debt service, demonstrating that Nigeria's relationship with China is not entirely one-directional. However, the restructuring has addressed timing rather than terms it has not resulted in the elimination of contractor nationality clauses, sovereign immunity waivers, or other sovereignty-constraining conditionalities.

The shift in diplomatic language from Buhari's "China is our most important development partner" to Tinubu's "we will engage all partners on terms of mutual respect and equal benefit" signals a genuine repositioning of Nigeria's self-presentation in the bilateral relationship. However, without corresponding changes in the structural terms of bilateral agreements, rhetorical rebalancing risks becoming a form of performative sovereignty the assertion of autonomy without its substantive realization.

Discussion

The Structural Reality of Asymmetric Dependency

The findings of this article provide compelling empirical support for the core argument of Dependency Theory that economic relations between states of fundamentally different power capacities tend to reproduce structures of asymmetric benefit and constrained autonomy for the weaker actor. The specific mechanisms through which this asymmetry operates in the Nigeria–China case contractor nationality clauses, sovereign immunity waivers, fiscal pre-commitment, and asymmetric dispute resolution correspond closely to the structural mechanisms that Wallerstein (1974) identified as the key instruments through which core–periphery relationships maintain themselves over time.

These findings complicate the simplistic "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative advanced by Chellaney (2017), which suggests a deliberate and premeditated Chinese strategy of economic entrapment. The evidence from the Nigerian case is more consistent with a structural than a conspiratorial explanation: the asymmetric conditionalities in Nigeria–China loan agreements appear to reflect the standard operating procedures of Chinese development finance designed primarily to serve Chinese commercial and industrial interests rather than a deliberate strategy to acquire sovereign Nigerian assets. In this sense, Brautigam's (2020) critique of the debt-trap narrative is partially vindicated, while her perhaps overly optimistic account of the mutually beneficial character of Chinese development finance in Africa is also partially challenged by the evidence of systematic conditionality asymmetry documented in this article.

The finding that the temporal pattern of Nigeria's UNGA voting alignment with China rising during the period of deepening debt exposure under Buhari and declining modestly under the debt-restructuring orientation of the Tinubu administration is consistent with the debt-dependency hypothesis extends the findings of Dreher et al. (2018) to the Nigerian context. The inverted U-shaped pattern of East–West voting divergence, which tracks almost precisely the arc of Nigeria's Chinese debt exposure over the study period, provides the most compelling quantitative evidence that economic dependency has been one significant factor among several shaping Nigeria's multilateral diplomatic orientation.

The most important theoretical contribution of this finding is the concept of structural foreign policy constraint constraint that operates through fiscal incentives and structural vulnerabilities rather than direct political pressure. A Nigeria confronting a debt service to revenue ratio of 83 percent cannot easily afford a foreign policy crisis with its largest bilateral creditor, even in the absence of any explicit Chinese demand for diplomatic deference. The structural channel of foreign policy influence operating through the fiscal arithmetic of debt dependency rather than through overt coercion is arguably the most significant and the most analytically underexplored dimension of the China–Africa relationship, and one that deserves far greater scholarly attention.

The Resilience of Nigerian Agency

At the same time, the findings of this article do not support a straightforwardly deterministic reading of Nigeria's relationship with China as one of passive dependency and complete loss of autonomy. The Tinubu administration's initiation of debt restructuring negotiations, its diversification of development finance sources, its more assertive diplomatic tone, and the modest decline in its UNGA voting alignment with China all represent genuine, if limited, expressions of Nigerian agency within the structural constraints of the bilateral relationship.

The role of civil society particularly SERAP's disclosure of the sovereign immunity waiver clause in generating public pressure for greater transparency and accountability is particularly significant as an expression of societal agency that complicates the purely state-centric picture of the dependency dynamic. This finding underscores the importance of civil society and public accountability mechanisms as instruments of sovereign self-protection in the context of asymmetric bilateral economic relationships a dimension of the agency question that the existing literature has largely neglected.

The modest but perceptible decline in Nigeria–China UNGA voting alignment under the Tinubu administration is likewise an expression of agency and, crucially, a reversible one. The inverted U-shaped pattern of VCI scores over the study period suggests that the

relationship between debt dependency and voting alignment is dynamic rather than static, and that deliberate policy choices including debt restructuring, development finance diversification, and a more assertive diplomatic posture can partially reverse the diplomatic consequences of accumulated debt dependency. This finding has important normative implications: it suggests that the loss of foreign policy autonomy associated with debt dependency is not permanent or irreversible, and that African states have meaningful capacity to recover autonomy through sustained and strategic policy action.

Theoretical Implications: Dependency Theory in the South–South Context

The findings of this article have important theoretical implications for the application of Dependency Theory to twenty-first century South–South economic relations. The dominant tendency in the contemporary China–Africa literature has been to resist or significantly qualify dependency theory on the grounds that it was developed to analyze North–South relations and cannot be straightforwardly applied to a relationship between two developing country actors. This article challenges that tendency by demonstrating that the structural features of the Nigeria–China bilateral relationship asymmetric conditionalities, transfer of economic benefits to the creditor, fiscal dependency, and the structural incentive for diplomatic alignment correspond closely to the core predictions of dependency theory, even in a South–South context.

This finding suggests that dependency theory, suitably updated and refined to accommodate the specificities of the twenty-first century international political economy, retains significant explanatory power for understanding the structural dynamics of economic relations between states of vastly different economic capacities regardless of whether the more powerful actor is a member of the traditional Western "core." The emergence of China as a major creditor and development partner for African states has created new structural dependencies that are analytically continuous with, even if not identical to, the classical dependency dynamic. The theoretical implication is that the core–periphery analytical framework should be understood as applicable to any bilateral economic relationship characterized by sufficient power asymmetry, rather than being limited to the specific historical context of Western colonialism and post-colonial economic dominance in which it was originally developed.

Conclusion

This article has examined the nature, structure, and foreign policy implications of Nigeria's economic diplomacy with China between 2015 and 2024, addressing the question of whether Nigeria's bilateral economic relationship with China constitutes a genuine strategic partnership of equals or a structurally asymmetric dependency relationship that compromises Nigerian foreign policy independence.

The evidence supports a conclusion that lies between these two poles but closer to the dependency end of the spectrum. Nigeria's relationship with China exhibits clear structural features of dependency – asymmetric loan conditionalities, fiscal vulnerability, trade imbalance, and a temporal pattern of UNGA voting alignment that tracks the arc of debt exposure – while also demonstrating genuine, if constrained, Nigerian agency in the form of debt restructuring negotiations, development finance diversification, and the modest foreign policy rebalancing initiated under the Tinubu administration. The most accurate characterization is that of a structurally asymmetric partnership in which Nigeria participates with genuine but unequal agency – under conditions that create significant structural pressures on its foreign policy autonomy without entirely eliminating its capacity for independent sovereign action.

Three specific conclusions follow from the empirical analysis. First, the conditionalities embedded in Nigeria–China loan agreements structurally favor Chinese interests and are inconsistent with the principle of equal partnership – a finding that directly contradicts the official characterization of the bilateral relationship as a "comprehensive strategic partnership" of mutual benefit. Second, there is a temporal correlation between Nigeria's Chinese debt exposure and its UNGA voting alignment with China that is consistent with – if not definitive proof of – the debt-dependency hypothesis, extending Dreher et al.'s (2018) findings to the Nigerian context and introducing the important concept of structural foreign policy constraint as the primary causal mechanism. Third, the Tinubu administration's cautious foreign policy rebalancing demonstrates that dependency is not deterministic and that autonomy recovery is possible through sustained political will and institutional reform – though the structural constraints inherited from the Buhari era significantly limit the speed and depth of achievable rebalancing.

The broader implication of these findings for African foreign policy is that maintaining meaningful foreign policy autonomy in an era of Chinese economic expansion requires not merely diplomatic sophistication but institutional reform – specifically, the establishment of robust loan oversight mechanisms, sovereign debt transparency legislation, and development finance diversification strategies that reduce the structural fiscal vulnerabilities through which economic dependency translates into foreign policy constraint. For scholars of African international relations, the findings underscore the continuing relevance of Dependency Theory as an analytical framework for understanding the structural dynamics of twenty-first century South–South economic engagement, while also demonstrating the importance of incorporating African Agency as a theoretical corrective that acknowledges the meaningful, if unequal, capacity of African states to shape their own international trajectories.

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