

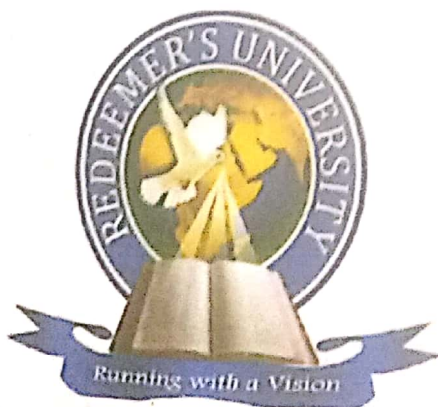
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Beyond the Solidarity, Trade and Aid: An Interrogation of the Wider Implications of Sino-Nigerian Relations, 1960-2016

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Abstract

As China refocused its relations with Africa from an ideological standpoint to trade and aid in the 1990s, Nigeria became a centerpiece of Sino operations in Africa. This development was occasioned by China's emergence as an economic colossus and Nigeria's enduring status as the largest oil producing nation in the continent. Ever since, there appears to have been a symbiotic relationship between both nations with the West African country catering for Chinese energy needs, while benefitting from generous aids, loans and trade agreements. Indeed, China offers itself as a viable alternative to the West in terms of aid and trade since the latter attaches more stringent conditions in this regard. Despite its allure, however, how healthy is this Sino-Nigerian relationship, given that the Chinese are less concerned with attaching conditions to these benefits to ensure socio-political and economic standards that the West would otherwise have insisted on? It is against this background that the article, using the historical research methodology, interrogates the wider implication of China's engagement with Nigeria. The essay argues that Nigeria, like other African countries, needs to exercise caution in its future dealings with China.

Keywords: Nigeria, Africa, China, aids, loans, imperialism

Introduction

Modern China owes its origins to the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. It took six years afterwards, in 1955, for the PRC to establish relations with a number of African countries through the Bandung Conference of 1955. For many years, however, the PRC struggled to gain global recognition, especially within the United Nations because of its 'one China policy' which pitted herself against Taiwan (another political entity claiming to be the original China), with the latter being internationally recognized as the legitimate Chinese state. This situation did not change until 1971 when the PRC was admitted into the United Nations and seen by the global society to be legitimate. African countries, however, were individual states seeking political and economic support during this period. African countries, including Nigeria, therefore, had a strategic importance in the international political arena that China, which sought international recognition—particularly before the 1970s—could profit from. Because of these constitutive goals

both China and African countries perceive themselves as sharing similar experiences and today facing related challenges in the global economy. These have made them always sympathize and support each other.

China's economic strength has increased geometrically since the 1980s/1990s. The period also coincides with the demise of the Soviet Union as a global superpower. China's deepening integration into the global economy and emergence as Superpower saw its influence expand into Africa, reshaping the political and economic relationships on the continent. By virtue of her new economic and political position it has also emerged as the most credible power that can in this age challenge the dominance and hegemony of the U.S in the international arena. China also has a unique position in the global community. As a result of her humble beginnings in the mid-20th century and her astronomical rise in the 21st century, it is able to straddle both the developed and the developing world. Already trade between Africa and China has grown at a breathtaking pace. China is currently Africa's largest trading partner, having surpassed the US in 2009 (Ighobor, 2013). China's foreign policy seeks to continue the expansion of this wealth and power; it also attempts to promote its benign intention of a "peaceful rise." This aspect of China's foreign policy is called "soft power," in international relations parlance. The tools that China uses to promote its soft power, particularly in Africa, are typically public diplomacy, its growing international aid, and trade.

Nigeria's position among the many African countries China deals with is distinctively important for both economic and political reasons. Firstly, Nigeria has been the largest oil producing and exporting nation on the continent since 1960, and—as we will find out—oil is germane to China's external relations. Also, like China, the world's most populated country, Nigeria is a densely peopled nation constituting about a quarter of the continent's sub-Saharan population. It follows therefore that Sino-Nigerian relations is one that is at the heart of successive Chinese governments as well as those of Nigeria since China emerged as a global economic superpower.

There is evidence of material gains on both sides, and such gains have been well espoused by scholars like Kurlantzick (2009), Suzuki (2009), Utomi (2009) and Cheng and Shi (2009). They argue that the interactions that exist between the two entities are mutually beneficial and thus extol the virtues of cooperation. Utomi (2009, p.40), for instance, argue that local businessmen benefit from the willingness of many Chinese partners to arrange financing for their projects. And that another incentive for doing business with the Chinese is the willingness of Chinese expatriates to accept the same living conditions offered to local workers. Thus, for Utomi, the reduced costs of hiring Chinese expatriates made Nigerians more competitive with large Western multinational corporations.

On the other side of the divide are scholars like Jiang (2009) Ofodile (2009), Ding (2008), Holslag (2006) and Ekanade (2012). They opine that China's insatiable appetite for African natural resources and energy has led to an increasingly neocolonialist relationship with Africa that is not genuinely responsible and mutually beneficial. There is also the claim that this relationship has raised brows in the West. Tull (2006, p. 463), for example, argues that China's relationship with Africa has made it a constant target of Western criticism which stresses that Chinese economic aid has supported dictatorial elites in Africa, helping them legitimize and consolidate their corrupt rule while augmenting their personal wealth at the costs of good governance and human rights protection. This paper attempts to critically assess Sino-Nigerian relations since independence. In doing so it attempts a critical appraisal of such relations, identifying the extent to which they have been mutually beneficial, and the dangers attached to such benefits.

Sino-Nigeria Relations before 1991

China has many reasons to prioritize Nigeria in its dealings with Africa. Firstly, there is the natural advantage it has in terms of population, which makes it the largest market in Africa with a population of about 180 million in 2016. Added to this is the fact that Nigeria exports the largest quantity of oil in Africa (about 2.5 million barrels per day). Being the country with the largest concentration of blacks in the world, Nigeria is also seen by China as its platform for forming solidarity with the black community globally. This section of the essay seeks to demonstrate that while Nigeria is central to China's Africa policy, Beijing's engagement with Abuja mirrors China's general economic and political dealings with Africa, which—despite aiding its development to an extent—is essentially geared towards serving Chinese interest.

The first official link between Nigeria and the PRC was in 1960 when the latter was invited to witness the former's independence celebration. Having gained membership of the UN, by virtue of her independence, Nigeria reciprocated Chinese gesture by supporting PRC's membership of the United Nations (Owoeye, 1987, p. 294). The pair, however, had their first clash when in 1962 Tafawa Balewa, the Nigerian Prime Minister, tagged China the aggressors in the China-Indian border clash of the same year (Alkali, 1996, p. 67). The fact that the PRC also had the grand standing of a communist state made Balewa to distance himself from China since his government had been distinctively pro-West. The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) that started a year after Balewa's ouster also did not help matters as China brazenly supported the Biafran cause. The PRC had been sympathetic towards the secessionist because the Soviet Union, China's foe, had backed the Nigerian federal troops and because, out of the four African countries that recognized Biafra as an independent state, two were heavy beneficiaries of Chinese patronage: Tanzania and Zambia (Bell, 2001, pp. 450-451).

At the war's end, General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria's Military Head of state chose to forgive countries that had supported Biafra. It was, therefore, not surprising that shortly after the war, in early 1971, Nigeria established ties with the PRC. By April 6 of the same year China had opened its mission in Lagos, while Nigeria waited until October 1971 before establishing theirs in Beijing (Nigeria Tribune, September 5, 2001, p. 12). It was that same month that the PRC was recognized at the UN General Assembly as the 'true China' at the expense of Taiwan' ROC. Indeed, Dr. Arikpo Okoi—the then Minister of External Affairs—and the Federal Military Government were commended for their instrumentality in PRC's admission into the UN (Daily Express, October 28, 1971, p. 2). The events of 1971 also triggered an economic relationship that was made manifest in 1972 when Fang Yi, China's foreign Economic affairs minister visited Nigeria. The visit provided an opportunity for the signing of an economic, technical cooperation and trade agreement (Akinterinwa, 1994, p. 140). Between 1972 and the late 1980s there were a number of diplomatic exchanges between the two nations. This, however, did not amount into any significant political or economic development as the period was marked by the tradition of modesty and measured encounter on the part of both countries (Ekanade, 2012, p. 65).

Nigeria and China since 1991

From the 1990s, things became remarkably different between the two nations. The most remarkable aspect of this new relationship had to do with trade. By 1991, for example, trade between Nigeria and China amounted to \$35m, a \$10m increase from what it had been in 1987 (Akinterinwa, 1994, p. 140). It dramatically increased to \$97m in 1992 and \$210m in 1993 (Akinterinwa, 1994, p. 140). By 1996 volume of trade had increased to \$330m, and \$850m by the turn of the century in 2000 (Nigeria Tribune, September 5, 2001, p. 12). This is suggestive of the fact that trade between both nations had geometrically increased throughout the 1990s. Such rise in trade volume is on account of China's unprecedented economic growth, which saw the country record a 9 percent growth rate from the 1980s through the 90s (Shalmon, 2008, p. 110). It is also not surprising, therefore, that there was a noticeable trade imbalance between the two countries with Chinese export to Nigeria placed at \$436.2m while imports from the same country was \$266.94m as of 2000 (Ekanade, 2012, p. 66).

An overwhelming percentage of Chinese import from Nigeria during the period was oil and this is reflective of Chinese wider engagement with the African continent. Energy was critical to servicing China's economic growth. This was made necessary by the remarkable increase in motor vehicle sales and modal shifts in the movement of freight from railroads to trucks increased oil demand beyond China's limited domestic supply, forcing China to rely on an ever-growing volume of

imported oil. PRC's need for oil continued to increase in the 2000s with its consumption of oil growing at an annual rate of 7-10% till 2010; this also represents a 70% increase in consumption since 1990 (Ekanade, 2012, p. 68). As previously mentioned China is increasingly gravitating towards Africa for its oil supplies and Nigeria — being the continent's largest exporters of oil—becomes an attractive proposition. In 2006, therefore, the PRC got four drilling licenses from Nigeria through her oil companies, Sinopec and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) (Taylor, 2007, p. 636). In exchange, China was expected to invest \$4 billion worth of investment in Nigeria's infrastructure (The Vanguard, April 27, 2006, p. 1). Additionally, both nations signed seven development agreements in which Nigeria was granted an export credit of \$500m (The Vanguard, April 27, 2006, p. 1). Beijing also agreed to repair the Kaduna Refining and Petrochemicals Company among other investment projects like the building of a hydropower plant in Mambila, Plateau State. Nigeria in return allowed China exercise 'the right of first refusal' on oil blocs (Taylor, 2007, p. 636). Added to the deal also is the Akpo oil field, which was discovered in 2000 and opened operations in 2009.

Indeed, in exchange for oil privileges in Nigeria the PRC invested heavily in the country's infrastructure. Starting from the 1990s when Beijing became attracted to the nation's oil there were signs of infrastructural commitment from the Asian country. For example, in December of 1995, Gen. Abacha signed a landmark contract with China, valued at \$528.60m, for the rehabilitation of the Nigerian railway system, which was to be carried out by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCEC) (Ekanade, 2012, p. 69). This was, however, nothing compared to the \$2.5 billion loan China granted Nigeria in October 2006 for the further development of Nigeria's railway system (Taylor, 2007, p. 636). In 2014 also, a state-owned Chinese company signed a \$12 billion agreement, China's single largest overseas contract, to build a railway along Nigeria's coastal cities (Vanguard, November 20, 2014, n.d.). Implementation of this deal commenced July 2016.

Away from infrastructure, China was able to provide technical assistance in a number of areas including agriculture and education. For example, between 2003 and 2007, Beijing dispatched 524 agriculture experts and technical personnel to work in Nigeria. They were to provide technical knowhow, guidance, technical services and assist local areas to set up small scale pilot projects (Thisday, October 1, 2003, p. 1). There is also a cultural and educational cooperation agreement between the two countries. Although this kind of cooperation was first initiated in 1982, it has been renewed constantly and the benefits accruing from them to Nigeria have continually soared. Subsumed under these agreements are mutual activities that have been carried out by both countries. Some of these are Chinese donation of computers to various Nigerian Universities and annual scholarships for Nigerian students to study in China. Through the Bilateral Education Agreement (BEA) scholarships, China also sponsors

at least 40 Nigerians annually to study in its country (Vanguard (Online), January 19, 2016, n.d.). This is not to mention the number of Nigerian pupils that the Chinese government sponsor to attend primary and secondary schools in Nigeria (Daily Trust (Online), November 16, 2016, n.d.).

In view of the aforementioned, we can safely say there has been a symbiotic relationship between both countries, with Nigeria having some material gains to show for its romance with China. The fact remains, however, that the relationship cannot be considered even. For example, there persists a significant trade imbalance between the two nations that is so brazen that it was highlighted in 2001 by ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo, who told his host in China, President Zhu Ronji, that 'the trade imbalance witnessed was not in the interest of good friendship' (The Comet 11th September, 2001, p. 3). Besides, there might be more pressing implications of relations between both countries that can be considered as part of the broader China-Africa policy. There is, for instance, China's disregard for the credibility of the governments it relates with vis-à-vis corruption and human rights records, among other related matters. It is for this reason that African countries, including Nigeria, find China very attractive compared to partners in the West that are usually more finicky with such matters. There are also the issues of Chinese environmental and business ethics in their dealings with Africa. It is to such issues that we now turn.

Flipside to Sino-Nigeria Relations

Having seen the nature of China's relationship with Nigeria, it is important to discuss the negative effects of such a relationship. This will be carried out in this section by subjecting Nigeria's experience with China within the wider context of Chinese engagement with Africa in general. It is only through this lens that one is able to appreciate that Sino-Nigerian relations is just an aspect of a grand design for Chinese imperialism of Africa as a continent. In the area of trade, for instance, there are growing concerns that the imbalance or asymmetry in trade – with Africans as consumers of Chinese value added goods and Africa as an exporter of raw materials – will have adverse effects on Africa and African producers. Tull (2006, p. 464) has rightly observed that 90 percent of Africa's exports to China consist of raw materials and the extraction of these resources is depleting Africa's natural supply without developing its economies which remain dependent on this extraction. Ogunsanwo (2008, p.192) has also argued that the Increased trade imbalances between both countries is exploitative to Nigeria, and indicates that as a result, Nigeria's economy became known as a 'cargo economy' with ships laden with containers docking at Nigeria's ports and returning almost empty to their places of origin, as Nigeria does not have much to export. There also remains the persistent influx of cheap Chinese products which threaten the operations and survival of local companies. For example, textiles and garments are China's major export items to Nigeria, accounting for 15%

of China's total exports to Nigeria, but this has led to a situation where the Chinese are being held responsible for shrinking the Nigerian textile industries (Institute of Development and Education for Africa, 2005).

In addition, there has been mounting evidence that Chinese labour conditions are intolerable. China is unique to other countries engaging with African states in the way they explicitly export Chinese labour into African countries rather than employing local hands. A popular argument among Africans is that when the Chinese enter their country they bring in their own workforce, leaving the domestic African workforce no better off than they were prior to the arrival of the Chinese. The few Nigerians that are lucky to be engaged in these Chinese companies usually face 'casualization', which is a sort of "precarious employment" and "non-standard jobs." Workers that fall into this category do not receive pensions, are qualified for less housing, education and medical allowances. Nigerian workers also experience poor safety standards, and poor pay particularly in the textiles, copper and coal mining industry. It is Chinese standard practice, for example, to lock the workers in while on duty. Such a policy occasioned the death of a number of Nigerians at a Chinese company in Ikorodu, Lagos State on February 15, 2007 (This Day 15 February, 2007, n.d., p. 1).

As pointed out, China has also helped African countries with a number of credit facilities. While these loans issued by Chinese governments to African countries for the purpose of infrastructural development might appear attractive, the policy might ultimately hinder the sustainable development of these countries. This is because China's stepped-up lending to African countries risks saddling them with additional debt, just as African states are trying to ease their debt burden through the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and other strategies. For example, Nigeria's debt profile as of September 2016 was about N16.29 trillion (roughly \$33 billion) (Daily Post 21 September, 2016, n.d.); and the nation kept incurring loans from China on a regular basis. It is true that Chinese terms in issuing loans are not as stringent as Western counterparts since their conditions for loans as well as interests rates are generally low, but the fact remains that these debts keep piling at a rate that is unsustainable. In the interest of true friendship, therefore, Beijing should perhaps channel more efforts to grants and technical assistance rather than just loans.

China's activities in Africa have also left a negative environmental footprint. One of the reasons for this is that China's investment in oil and gas exploration, mining, hydropower and timber extraction are sectors that are environmentally sensitive. Secondly, compared to other technologically advanced nations, China's environmental ethics when it comes to industrial commerce is poor. They are therefore usually willing to deal in areas that are not suitable for exploration. An example of the creation of a dam that turned out to have severe social and environmental impacts on locals was the Merowe Dam built in Sudan in 2008

(Langan, 2012, p. 12). France's official export credit agency (COFACE) had refused to support the project because of its environmental and social impacts. Yet in 2002 the China Exim Bank agreed to fund the project with the support of \$520 million. Although the Sudanese president claimed the project would end poverty in the country, the dam displaced up to 70,000 Sudanese (Langan, 2012, p. 12). The Chinese have also been accused of similar environmental negligence in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Another emerging phenomenon which has the possibility of intensifying cracks in Sino-Nigerian relations is the problem of migration and treatment of migrant communities. Population movements between China and Africa have increased steadily since the 1990s. While the estimated 900 thousand Chinese migrant workers in Africa invade jobs ranging from agriculture to industry, it is a different situation for Nigerians in China. These Nigerians who live under the constant fear of deportation are subjected to color prejudice in the job market where teaching is their only respectable option. To keep such jobs is one of the biggest challenges facing Nigerian migrant workers in a country where "native speakers" are preferred irrespective of academic or professional qualifications. Furthermore, obtaining and renewing work visas for Nigerians remains an arduous task. For many of these educated Nigerians, therefore, driven from home by harsh poverty and uncertainty, and wandering in a wilderness of thorny discrimination, Sino-Nigerian cooperation remains a farce.

Perhaps the most telling— but least heralded—of the negative implications of Sino-African relations is the Chinese disinterestedness in the quality of governance in the African countries they deal with. China prides herself in not attaching the conditions that Western countries attach to loans and aids like good human rights record, democracy, transparent government and such other criteria. Instead, China has expressed a '*don't ask, don't tell*' policy which states that as long as China has access to resources, they will not criticize or involve themselves in the domestic affairs of African states (Rich & Recker, 2013, p. 71). Of course, oppressive and underperforming African leaders find this non-interference very comforting. It is no surprise therefore that Angola, Sudan, and Congo-Brazzaville, who all had grim human rights records, accounted for a good percentage of China's crude-oil supply in Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s (Langan, 2012, p. 7). In defense of such a policy, the Chinese Ambassador of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Xuexian in 1998 claimed that, "human rights such as economic rights and rights of subsistence are the main priority of developing nations and take precedence over personal, individual rights as conceptualized in the West" (Langan, 2012, p. 7). He Wenping, the director of the African Studies Section at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing further argued that Africa and China share the belief that human rights should not stand above sovereignty (Langan, 2012, p. 7). This partly explains, also,

why China did not display any cold shoulders towards Gen. Abacha when it signed a landmark railway contract with Nigeria in 1995, at a time when the Nigerian Head of State was heavily vilified by the international community. Another example is China serving as the sole superpower supporter and weapon producer to Sudan during the Darfur crisis (Langan, 2012, p. 8). Similar Chinese dealings could be found with Zimbabwe, Congo Brazzaville and Angola. This brazen show of disregard for good governance by China is not in the interest of sustainable development of African nations.

Conclusion

With the case study of Nigeria, the essay has tried to demonstrate the implementation of China's Africa policy over the years: the evolution from a third-world partnership in the cold war era to one of mutually dependency since the 1990s. A cursory assessment will suggest that the Sino-Nigerian relationship is not just a mutually beneficial one but one that is made in heaven, particularly for the African continent in the face of increased hostilities from Western powers. However, a more critical assessment has shown that this is a facade. China's relationship with Africa is not in any way different from that which exists between Western powers during and after the colonial period; one which is targeted at politically, economically and socially enriching the colonial (super) power at whatever consequence to the colonized state. The perquisites that the African nations seem to enjoy in this interaction are merely an allure to gravitate them towards China as opposed to the West. It is also to fulfill China's energy needs and provide cheap markets for their inferior products. Additionally, the long term implications of this relationship for Africa are unsavory. Apart from the aid of autocratic governments and the debt and environmental unsustainability, Africa has made herself largely dependent on China. As a country becomes accustomed to the potential gains from exports to more powerful countries (like China), breaking relations with them becomes more politically and economically costly. This is similar to how many African governments became dependent on their ties with international financial institutions (IFIs).

Does this mean Africa should totally distance herself from China? I suggest not. In a world where African countries are so economically disadvantaged foreign privileges would always be attractive. The terms of engagement, however, have to be different. It is brazenly clear that China is the party dictating the terms of this relationship mostly to the detriment of these African countries who find themselves in a neocolonial relationship with China. Nigerians need to exert their influence more. It is for example intolerable that the Chinese would import labor to carry out constructions in different parts of the continent. An example of a prominent figure that tried to check the excesses of China was Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa who was one of the leading figures in African diplomacy. He was one of the

many Africans to raise concerns about unguided optimism in Sino-African relations. He is considered as the most prominent case of African "push-back" when it comes to dealing with China, especially in the area of trade. As proof of his determination to restrain China's unbridled trade advances, Mbeki's government imposed quotas for Chinese textiles in an effort to revive and protect South Africa's staggering garment industry which was threatened by cheap Chinese textiles (Holslag, 2006, p. 140). Mbeki's move was a warning signal to China and a lesson for the rest of Africans about cheap Chinese textiles, and a lesson for the rest of Africa on how to deal with China. The prognosis of this relationship however is bleak. Most African countries remain corrupt and insincere. Given the no-strings-attached policy of China, Africans know they do not have to review their municipal policies before they can attract aids and support. Therefore, the status quo is likely going to remain the same. In fact there is every chance that the Sino-African relations would deepen and the neocolonial tendencies it breeds will worsen.

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