

China's Partnership with West Africa and Its Implications for Economic Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examined China's expanding influence in West Africa, considering five key states, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Mali, to assess the implications on economic sovereignty. The objectives are to critically assess the implications of China's expanding influence in West Africa and the implications on economic sovereignty of the sub-region; examine the nature and extent of China's economic engagement in West African states; and analyse how Chinese investments and infrastructure enhance or undermine the economic sovereignty of West Africa. Adopting a qualitative research design, the paper interrogates how Chinese loans, trade, and infrastructure investments reshape political economy dynamics and strategic dependencies across the sub-region. The method adopted for the study is the historical method relying on the Marxist imperialism and the dependency theories, which revealed a contemporary form of economic imperialism wherein capital accumulation benefits the dominant power while constraining the fiscal and policy autonomy of peripheral states. It was revealed that there is a shift from transactional partnerships to structural influence, positioning China as a development financier stakeholder in the sub-region. Chinese loans and investments have bridged critical infrastructural gaps, especially in energy, transport, and telecommunications. However, these projects are loan-driven and mainly executed by Chinese firms, thereby reinforcing the financial subordination of West African states, especially through capital export for surplus extraction. Multi-polarity has produced a competitive dependency where states oscillate between Chinese, Western, and multilateral financiers without achieving autonomy. West African sovereignty is being redefined, nominally independent but materially constrained as the region becomes a site of accumulation within the global capitalist order dominated by emerging powers like China. The study recommended that ECOWAS must be strategically reinforced to enable collective bargaining with China on major projects. West African governments must aggressively pursue diversification strategies, focusing industrial policy on high-value-added exports rather than raw materials.

Keywords: *China's partnership; West Africa; economic sovereignty; Marxist imperialism; dependency theory*

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the literature on China–Africa relations and West African political economy in four major ways. First, it adopts a comparative sub-regional approach by examining five key West African countries, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Mali, rather than focusing on a single country or the African continent as a whole. This provides a broader understanding of how Chinese engagement affects economic sovereignty across the sub-region. Second, it strengthens theoretical debates by applying Marxist imperialism and dependency theories to interpret China's involvement as a contemporary form of economic imperialism rooted in capital export, surplus extraction, and structural dependency, moving beyond the common “win–win” narrative. Finally, the study offers practical policy insights by recommending regional collective bargaining and export diversification, linking critical political economy analysis with concrete development strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Countries coexist and that coexistence brings about interconnectedness and relationship. Such relationships are political, economic, social and even military. The African continent is rich in major natural resources, maritime trade routes and also, a consumer population. All these attributes have attracted other nations in Europe, America, Africa and Asia to it for investment purposes and this has led to Africa's relations with Europe, America and Asia. China is the second largest industrial nation closely chasing after the United States of America. That push has caused China to consider its fate in the multi-polar system which is now defined by the astronomical industrial growth of nations. China has spread its economic, political and military tentacles to Africa compared with that of the U.S. as China has become Africa's biggest partner in trade and source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). This could be seen in the seventh Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in September, 2018 where the Chinese President, Xi Jinping pledged \$60 billion to finance Chinese companies in investing nothing less than \$10 billion over three years (Shepherd, 2018). It was noted that African leaders who attended the UN General Assembly in New York few weeks later were twice the number who attended the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Dahir, 2018). Apparently, there are enormous benefits for African states with their relations with China.

The foundation of the strong contemporary Sino-African economic relationship was laid in the early 2000s, catalysed by China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. While political ties between the PRC and several African nations date back to the Mao Zedong era, it was China's economic growth take-off and WTO entry that triggered the rapid surge in economic interactions (Chen, et al., 2024). This period saw Africa becoming a primary destination for Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure, resource extraction, and manufacturing, effectively filling a gap where Western companies had been reducing their exposure (Oluwatimilehin & Cortez, 2025). The initial phase of engagement was characterized by robust state-backed lending and massive infrastructure development projects designed primarily to secure raw materials needed for China's rapid industrialization.

The subsequent pivot was marked by a significant scaling back in Chinese lending activities. This shift was driven by a combination of factors, including China's own economic slowdown, heightened risk aversion regarding debt sustainability across Africa, and the dwindling fiscal space available for African sovereigns to responsibly absorb new debt (Gyude, 2025). Concurrently, the strategic focus began to shift towards perceived sustainability, risk mitigation, and new sectors. While infrastructure remains central, recent policy announcements indicate a greater emphasis on green and digital infrastructure, channelled increasingly through commercial Chinese lenders rather than solely through policy banks (Chen, et al., 2024). Despite the recent moderation in lending volumes, China's economic gravitational pull remains immense. China is Africa's largest individual country trading partner, with total goods trade reaching \$240 billion in 2023, vastly eclipsing the \$47 billion reported for U.S.-Africa trade in the same year. The majority of this economic activity is mediated, in part, by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The overwhelming acceptance of the BRI across Africa with only Eswatini and Mauritius yet to join, underscores its systemic importance to regional infrastructure development and economic life. Engagement focuses particularly on mineral and oil producing countries, including specific West African nations like Nigeria. This enduring economic gravity provides the critical leverage that Beijing is now translating into strategic security influence across the region (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

China's role in addressing Africa's massive infrastructure deficit is undeniable. Chinese-funded projects account for approximately 30% of Africa's major infrastructure investments since the turn of the century. This scale of investment, mostly concentrated in transport and power sectors, is fundamentally transforming the physical and economic landscape of West African nations, easing transportation bottlenecks and facilitating regional trade connectivity. The BRI is popular across the developing world because almost all countries face chronic infrastructure deficiencies, and China provides access to non-Western-backed capital (Congressional Research Service, 2025). The impact of Chinese infrastructure financing highly varies, depending heavily on the recipient country's existing governance quality and macroeconomic stability. The general criticism that Chinese lending is universally predatory is challenged by cases within West Africa. For instance, the experience of Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates that in relatively well-governed and economically robust states which have averaged 6.4 percent GDP growth over the past decade, Chinese investment and lending can be highly constructive. China is a large creditor to Côte d'Ivoire, with loans totalling \$3.6 billion since 2000, representing the third-largest Chinese commitment in West Africa. This positive outcome validates the academic hypothesis that the quality of African agency and regulatory governance is a crucial mediating factor in determining whether Chinese engagement leads to mutual benefit or structural vulnerability (Renwick, Gu, & Hong, 2018).

Western partners struggle to match China's speed, cost efficiency, and ability to rapidly mobilize state-linked companies for infrastructure delivery. Furthermore, Western efforts often rely heavily on mobilizing risk-averse private capital for planned public-private partnerships, leading to slow uptake and a lack of specific projects. Consequently, despite the ongoing criticism of the BRI's lack of transparency and associated risks, the absence of a formidable, reliable, and swift alternative risks creating unwarranted dependence on Chinese financing for critical West African infrastructure. One of the most persistent and politically charged debates concerning China's economic footprint revolves around the accusation of 'debt-trap diplomacy'. Critics allege that

Beijing deliberately lures poor, developing countries into agreeing to unsustainable infrastructure loans so that, upon financial difficulty, China can seize the strategic asset, thereby extending its military or strategic reach (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). However, scholarly analysis and empirical data challenge the universal applicability of this narrative. While twenty-two low-income African countries are in or at high risk of debt distress, data indicates that Chinese lenders accounted for only 12% of Africa's total external debt of \$696 billion in 2020. This demonstrates that China did not cause African debt distress in most cases, though it remains a major player to finding a solution. The primary drivers of the recent surge in debt distress are multifaceted, relating instead to global economic shocks, the sharp rise in interest rates following the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and internal weaknesses in domestic financial management. Furthermore, the empirical evidence suggests that fears of "debt-trap diplomacy" are often over-blown, particularly when assessing countries with reasonable financial health (Dollar, 2020).

Paradoxically, the ongoing debt scrutiny has led to a significant shift in Chinese state-backed lending. The volume of new Chinese loans to African governments plummeted from a peak of \$28.4 billion in 2016 to \$8.2 billion in 2019, falling further to just \$1.9 billion in 2020 (reflecting pandemic circumstances) and dropping below \$1 billion in 2022 (only \$995.5 million) (Vines et al. 2022). This severe contraction demonstrates a high degree of risk aversion in Beijing and a growing emphasis on debt sustainability (Gyude, 2025). Future state-backed lending is expected to remain at lower levels, be better coordinated among Chinese lending institutions, and place greater emphasis on encouraging commercial engagement in profitable sectors like digital infrastructure.

It is pertinent to say that, these deep relations of China with some African states, is part of its foreign policy particularly in West Africa and in line with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was launched in 2013, with its main objective to enhance connectivity and trade across, Asia, Europe and Africa. China has sufficiently gained access into West Africa's economy through major infrastructural projects such as railways, telecommunications, mining, roads, and ports for oil extraction. Also, Chinese companies most times are supported by state funding in countries of West Africa like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Guinea (Chen, Dollar, & Tang, 2018). The Asian nation has also financed big projects like the Abuja-Kaduna rail in Nigeria, Bui Dam in Ghana and road infrastructure in Coted'Ivoire (Brautigam, 2020).

There is a deep concern that West African states may fall into the web of imperialism or dependency with China through a debt trap form of diplomacy which could compromise states control of strategic assets. Although, China has denied this allegation, the seizure of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port brings this fear to bare (Kinyondo & Mjema, 2019) probably due to unclear loans and risks such as resource dependency and discouragement of local industries and the vulnerable security complexities.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of China's influence in West Africa has become worrisome amidst the rapid increase of Chinese owned companies. The disturbing China's presence in West Africa has raised concerns about the economic autonomy of states, dependency on debt reliefs and militarizing of parts in West African countries which aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The issue of debt-trapping is another fear that critiques have raised due to unclear contract agreements. In the last two decades and more, China increased its investments in Africa from \$75 million in 2003 to \$5 billion in 2021

(Vinicius de Freitas, 2023). This sharp increase in debt is alarming and could lead to serious dependency and further neocolonialism or worse case, seizure of assets. There is no doubt that Africa has never received such huge infrastructural development from any of its colonisers in the past or aids from the West before. Africa is in dire need of development. Hence, the opportunity from China is grabbed. However, there is a need to pause and take another look at the contracts and the reasons for China's rapid growth in West Africa rather than get carried away with the enticement of China.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to critically examine the implications of China's partnership with West Africa on economic sovereignty of the sub-region. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the nature and extent of China's economic engagement in West Africa and;
- ii. analyse how Chinese investments and infrastructure enhance or undermine the economic sovereignty of West Africa.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 The new scramble for Africa

The phrase "Scramble for Africa" originally described the aggressive colonization of the African continent by European powers during the late 19th century, culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. However, contemporary scholars and policymakers have increasingly invoked the notion of a "New Scramble for Africa" to capture the renewed global competition for the continent's strategic resources, markets, and geopolitical influence in the 21st century (Carmody & Taylor 2016). This modern iteration of geopolitical contestation differs from its colonial predecessor in form and actors, but parallels persist in terms of external exploitation, marginalization of African agency, and the securitization of economic relations. The major forces in the new scramble remain the great powers of Western Europe and North America, including their transnational corporations and multilateral institutions that were involved in the initial scramble. While, another group of major forces are the emerging countries of Asia, including China, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and others (Nwoke, 2010). Despite the involvement of these new emerging states, the essence and impact of the new scramble for Africa will not be substantially different from that of the initial scramble. While the imperial nature and intentions of the great powers are clear, there might be some doubts about the imperial intentions of the emerging Asian countries. However, the ultimate goal of the Asians and great powers are the same: to secure sources of critical raw materials at cheap cost and lucrative markets for their goods and services (Nwoke, 2010).

At the heart of this renewed contest is Africa's abundance of natural resources, burgeoning markets, and youthful population, which render it an attractive frontier for global powers seeking energy security, investment opportunities, and diplomatic alliances. Scholars like Klare (2001) and Meagher (2016) argue that the continent's energy reserves particularly oil, gas, and critical minerals have reignited international interest, especially among non-traditional actors such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States. While some analyses emphasize mutual benefit in South-South cooperation, others warn that these engagements replicate neo-colonial patterns of resource extraction and dependency (Obi, 2020; Bond, 2006). Besides, the impact that colonialism left behind, led to a lapse in the neocolonial circumstances which have been

taken advantage of. For instance, the already existence of the ready-made comprador groups who do the bidding of these actors like China in this case, to achieve their purpose in Africa which is ready-made market. Most of the Asian countries are known to be notorious for their racism, domestic human rights abusers, sharp business practices, and offensive work conditions in Africa. China, for example, while threatening the European textile market, is known for churning out fake Nigerian textiles. They even have their little 'China towns' in Lagos where all manner of contraband goods are sold.

China's activities especially its business in Nigeria, amounted to \$2.83 billion in 2005. Nigeria's diplomatic relationship with China over the years has always been majorly more favourable to China in terms of importation. Nigeria imports more from China than Nigeria exportation to China. After the negotiation that got Nigeria off the debt with Paris Club, Nigeria got a bilateral loan contract of \$2.6 billion bilateral from China, including several grants, for sundry projects, which also includes the rehabilitation of the comatose Nigeria Railway Corporation. In addition, China was granted the use and function of four oil blocks and was to take over the failing Kaduna refinery, alongside constructing a major power generating plant in the country (Nwoke, 2010). Furthermore, in the same vein, Nigeria negotiated to purchase fifteen F-7NI multipurpose combat and trainer aircraft from China, which is also into major construction works, vehicle assembly, satellite, telecommunications, etc. Lots of made-in-China motorcycles have been imported into the Nigerian market and of course the Indian tricycles, popularly known as keke as well. In fact, the diplomatic and bilateral relations between Nigeria and China can easily be understood as senior and junior, with China as senior partner and Nigeria assuming the role of junior partner (Nwoke, 2010). China's involvement, characterized by infrastructure diplomacy, resource-for-loan agreements, and non-interference principles, has been praised for offering alternatives to Western conditionalities (Brautigam, 2009; Alden, 2007). Yet, critical literature highlights risks of debt dependency, environmental degradation, and elite capture, particularly in resource-rich but institutionally weak states such as Guinea, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Lee, 2018). These concerns echo dependency theorists like Frank (1967) and Amin (1976), who emphasize the structural constraints facing peripheral economies in the global capitalist system.

Furthermore, there is an emerging non-state actors involvement which includes multinational corporations, philanthropic foundations, and private military contractors as new agents shaping Africa's political economy. The expansion of agribusiness, real estate, and digital infrastructure by foreign companies raises questions about land sovereignty, labour rights, and technological dependency (Zoomers, 2010; Gadzala, 2015).

Critically, there is a growing call within African scholarship to decolonize the narrative around the New Scramble. Scholars like Mbembe (2017) advocate for frameworks that center African epistemologies, agency, and resistance rather than viewing the continent solely through the prism of external interest. This shift is echoed in the rise of pan-African economic initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aim to promote intra-African trade and reduce dependence on external actors (UNECA, 2019). There are diverse opinions on the New Scramble for Africa and they are contested. While some authors view the renewed global interest as a developmental opportunity, others caution against reproducing historical patterns of exploitation under new guises. The current scholarship reflects a tension between strategic autonomy and structural dependency, and underscores the urgency of interrogating how African states can navigate global power shifts to secure equitable and

sustainable futures. In all of this, the West, North America and Europe have expressed concerns over China's strategic growing influence in Africa and its rapid developmental growth internationally got from the natural resources of Africa. It can be observed that it is more of an economic and military might competition between China and the others.

1.3.2 Economic Sovereignty and the Challenge of Globalization

With the concept of economic sovereignty as a nation's capacity to independently formulate and implement economic policies, control its resources, and regulate its financial and trade systems (Krasner, 2020), the advent and deepening of globalization since the late 20th century have posed substantial challenges to the traditional notions of sovereignty. In the postcolonial context, scholars have argued that economic sovereignty is particularly salient in developing countries striving to reduce dependency on former colonial powers and global capitalist arrangements (Ake, 2019). Therefore, it will be more objective to look at economic sovereignty in the context of globalization, highlighting theoretical perspectives, empirical insights, and contemporary debates. Liberal scholars tend to emphasize the benefits of globalization, asserting that economic integration promotes efficiency, innovation, and growth. According to Ohmae (2018), open markets and free trade serve to reinforce sovereignty by allowing nations to specialize and engage independently within the global economy.

However, even proponents like Fridman (2025) acknowledge that such openness involves a compromise of sovereignty, as states must often adhere to international rules and norms. Contrastingly, many critical scholars argue that globalization erodes sovereignty, especially over economic policymaking. Giddens (2019) posits that global capital flows and transnational corporations (TNCs) have gained disproportionate influence over national economies, diminishing the policymaking space of governments. Harvey (2024) contends that globalization functions as a form of "structural adjustment" that constrains state capacity, often at the expense of economic sovereignty, especially in developing countries. Constructivist and institutionalist scholars, such as Risse (2021), view economic sovereignty as a construct that evolves through international norms and institutions. These perspectives suggest that states can maintain or even enhance sovereignty via participation in global governance structures, which redefine sovereignty as a shared rather than absolute concept. For example, the European Union exemplifies a hybrid model where sovereignty is pooled among member states to achieve collective economic stability (Simpson, 2022).

Evidence shows that economic sovereignty has been challenged by the financial market integration. For instance, Schindler (2023) demonstrates that capital mobility enables rapid movement of assets across borders, making national monetary and fiscal policies more susceptible to external shocks and market sentiment. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis highlighted the interconnectedness of global markets and reduced the ability of national authorities to implement independent monetary policies without spillover effects, especially in emerging markets (Yilmaz & Liu, 2023). Trade liberalization policies, championed by the World Trade Organization (WTO), have further constrained sovereignty in regulating domestic industries. Bown (2022) argues that compulsory dispute resolutions and tariff commitments limit states' policy options, often forcing them into trade-offs between sovereignty and economic obligations. The rise of multinational corporations (MNCs) has further complicated sovereignty, particularly in resource-rich countries. Lebard (2021) illustrates that foreign direct investment (FDI) often comes with conditions that influence domestic economic policies, thereby weakening state control. Empirical analyses in Africa, for example,

demonstrate how resource exploitation by foreign firms impacts national sovereignty over strategic sectors (Obi & Tchuban, 2022).

Reconfiguration of sovereignty in the era of globalization also points to a digitalization era which needs interconnectedness to function appropriately. However, there are countries today that have explored digitalization without the assistance of other nations such as North Korea that has refused to allow the use of the internet to a very large extent amongst its citizens and these internet services for instance, are strictly monitored and censored. There are various forms of digital sovereignty and some of them include hybrid and networked sovereignty, digital and data sovereignty, dependency and policy autonomy. Scholars like Keohane and Nye (2018) suggest that sovereignty is increasingly understood as a "hybrid" or "networked" arrangement, where states function within multilevel governance systems that require sharing or ceding some aspects of sovereignty (Zhou & Liang, 2024).

The European Union represents a practical example, where sovereignty is pooled in economic and monetary union frameworks, reflecting a form of sovereignty that is both retained and relinquished (Fang & Liu, 2023). Also, recent debates stress the implications of the digital economy on sovereignty. The control over data flows, digital infrastructure, and cyber security constitute new domains where sovereignty is contested (Ferguson & Zhang, 2024). Countries such as China and the United States have sought to assert digital sovereignty through regulation and data localization laws, exemplifying a shift from traditional to digital sovereignty paradigms. Furthermore, critics argue that globalization fosters dependency, especially for developing nations, which may face "policy capture" where external actors influence domestic policy to serve their interests (Rodrik, 2019). This dependency can constrain the policy space needed for autonomous development, thus challenging the legitimacy and practicality of sovereignty (Acheampong & Aasim, 2024).

Recent literature underscores ongoing debates about whether sovereignty can be preserved amid globalization's forces. Balancing sovereignty with economic interdependence remains a core challenge. Krasner (2020) depicts the paradox of sovereignty in an interconnected world where states must cooperate to thrive while safeguarding their autonomy. Also, the post COVID-19 pandemic intensified discussions on sovereignty, exposing vulnerabilities related to dependence on global supply chains and external aid. As Pomeranz (2024) noted, the pandemic prompted calls for greater self-sufficiency, highlighting the need for a reassertion of economic sovereignty in national security frameworks.

These debates summarily illustrate that globalization significantly challenges traditional notions of economic sovereignty. While some perspectives suggest that sovereignty is inherently eroded by global interconnectedness, others advocate for a reconceptualization in terms of shared, flexible, or networked sovereignty. Empirical evidence confirms that financial integration, trade liberalization, and the rise of multinational corporations have curtailed state autonomy, especially for developing countries. However, the evolving digital economy introduces new dimensions, where digital sovereignty becomes a vital frontier. Ultimately, the debate underscores that sovereignty is not static but a contested, negotiated, and pluralistic concept adapted continuously in response to global political and economic transformations. Understanding this complex, dynamic interplay remains crucial for policymakers and scholars seeking to navigate the implications of an increasingly interconnected world.

1.3.3 The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, is a global development strategy aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and fostering economic cooperation across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. Although originally centered on the historical Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, Africa has emerged as a significant component of the BRI. As of 2023, over 50 African countries have signed cooperation agreements under the BRI framework (Yu, 2023). Through this initiative, China has become a key infrastructure partner and financier across the continent, reshaping Africa's economic landscape. While the BRI presents opportunities for development, it also raises questions regarding debt sustainability, sovereignty, environmental impact, and governance.

China's interest in Africa under the BRI is driven by several strategic imperatives like securing access to natural resources. One of the main reasons is that Africa has vast reserves in critical natural minerals and energy resources which are found mainly in countries like Angola, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo where Chinese has investments to ensure stable energy supplies and access to raw materials (Sun, 2014). Also, with rising production overcapacity in China, African countries offer a growing market for Chinese manufactured goods and services and so infrastructural projects such as roads, railways, and ports, facilitate market expansion and reduce transportation costs (Brautigam, 2020). Furthermore, by enhancing bilateral ties through infrastructure diplomacy, China strengthens its political influence in Africa. This includes securing support in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and reinforcing the "One China Policy" (Alden & Jiang, 2019). The BRI reflects China's vision of state-led development and South-South cooperation. It offers African countries an alternative to Western aid paradigms often conditioned on governance reforms and human rights (Chin, 2021).

In Africa, BRI-linked projects span multiple sectors, with emphasis on transportation, energy, and telecommunications. Transportation infrastructural flagship BRI projects include the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway in Ethiopia, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, and the Lagos-Ibadan Railway in Nigeria. These projects aim to link landlocked areas to seaports, boosting intra-African trade and reducing logistics costs (Chen & Landry, 2018). China is also investing heavily in Africa's energy infrastructure, by constructing hydropower stations for example, the Zungeru Dam in Nigeria, coal-fired plants, and renewable energy projects such as solar farms in Kenya and Egypt (Power *et al.*, 2022). Through the "Digital Silk Road" component of the BRI, Chinese tech firms like Huawei and ZTE are building data centres, fibre optic cables, and 5G infrastructure in Africa. Ethiopia, South Africa, and Egypt have emerged as major digital cooperation hubs (Gagliardone, 2019).

A number of implications of the BRI have been spotted. For instance, the investments in Africa are primarily financed through state-backed loans, concessional financing, and Export-Import Bank credit lines. Between 2000 and 2020, China extended over \$150 billion in loans to African governments and state-owned enterprises (Sidiropoulos, 2020). While this financing has accelerated infrastructure development, it has also raised concerns about debt sustainability. Critics point to the possibility of a "debt trap," whereby African countries incur unsustainable debts that could lead to asset seizures or loss of policy autonomy. The case of Zambia, which defaulted on Eurobond payments in 2020 amid significant Chinese debt obligations, is frequently cited in this context (Green, 2021). However, scholars like Deborah Brautigam (2020) caution against generalizations. Her research shows that Chinese lending is often diversified, and that African countries borrow from a wide array of lenders, with Chinese loans

accounting for only a portion of their total external debt. Moreover, in some cases, China has restructured or forgiven debts, as seen in Angola and Ethiopia.

The BRI's implementation in Africa has exposed several governance challenges. Many BRI projects have been criticized for lack of transparency, corruption, and elite capture. For instance, the Kenyan SGR project was marred by allegations of inflated costs and opaque procurement processes (Bosshard, 2020). Additionally, Chinese-financed projects are often executed by Chinese firms using Chinese labour and materials, raising questions about the initiative's contribution to local capacity building and employment. Although some countries have negotiated local labour quotas, enforcement has been inconsistent.

We cannot overlook the environment as it can be seen from several BRI infrastructure projects that intersect with ecologically sensitive areas. For instance, the Lamu Port project in Kenya has sparked opposition from environmentalists and indigenous communities due to threats to marine ecosystems (Bosshard, 2020).

Another implication is the African strategic engagements in shaping BRI outcomes where governments in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria have been active in negotiating loan terms, setting development priorities, and leveraging Chinese competition for better deals (Obi, 2020). The African Union (AU) has also sought to align BRI projects with continental development frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In 2019, the AU and China signed a cooperation agreement to integrate BRI with continental infrastructure programs (AU, 2019). The uneven capacity of African states to negotiate, monitor, and enforce project agreements means that outcomes vary significantly across countries. Strengthening institutional oversight and civil society participation is crucial for ensuring accountability and sustainability.

China's growing footprint in Africa also has security implications. In 2017 for instance, China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, ostensibly to protect Chinese interests and support anti-piracy missions. However, it also signals a shift in China's military posture and long-term strategic ambitions on the continent (Tonchev, 2018). China has also participated in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and provided security training and equipment to African militaries. While these actions enhance regional stability, they also raise concerns about potential militarization of development initiatives. China has signaled a "greener" and more sustainable BRI, pledging in 2021 to stop financing coal projects abroad and invest more in renewables (Xinhua, 2021). This shift could align with Africa's climate resilience agenda, though implementation remains to be seen.

The Belt and Road Initiative represents both a strategic opportunity and a policy challenge for Africa. It has provided much-needed infrastructure financing, expanded digital and transport networks, and elevated Africa-China relations to a strategic level. At the same time, it has exposed African countries to new risks; financial, political, and environmental. The future of the BRI in Africa will therefore, depend on several factors: how African governments assert agency in negotiations; how China adapts its practices to address criticism; and how regional institutions like the African Union integrate BRI activities into broader development agendas. Ultimately, a more transparent, inclusive, and accountable approach to BRI implementation can ensure that the initiative delivers on its promise of "win-win cooperation" for Africa and China.

1.3.4 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 in Beijing to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and development ties between China and African countries. The forum brings together Chinese and African leaders to discuss cooperation and mutual development strategies. In December, 2015 at the Summit held in Johannesburg, South Africa, China and Africa adopted an Action Plan (2016-2018) where the Chinese government offered to help Africa in ten cooperation areas including industrialization, agricultural modernization, infrastructure, green development, trade facilitation and investment, poverty reduction, public health, as well as cultural and educational facilities. The Chinese government pledged to provide the sum of US\$60 billion to achieve these (Shehu, 2018).

In Nigeria for instance, the FOCAC priority projects for financing are as outlined in the table below:

Table 1: Priority Projects for Financing under FOCAC

	Project	Amount in USD
I	Nigerian Railway Modernisation project (Lagos-Kano) Lagos-Ibadan	1,264,614,832.60
Ii	Nigerian Railway Modernisation project (Lagos-Kano) Kaduna-Kano	1,296,845,000.00
Iii	Nigerian Coastal Railway Project Lagos-Calabar	9,498,554,263.48
Iv	Mambilla Hydro Electric Power Project	4,873,050,000.00
V	Dualisation of Niger Delta East-West Road	2,480,250,766.56
vi	Presidential Initiative for the North East (PINE)	Not available
	Total	19,413,314,862.64

Source: Ogunsanwo, 2020 (Figures represent official requests by the Nigerian government for China’s assistance)

1.3.5 Preferential Loans from China

The Federal Ministry of Finance and Debt Management Office have negotiated and obtained some preferential loans from China Export Import Bank (Exim Bank). The following soft medium- and long-term loans have been granted to Nigeria to develop relevant projects as seen in the table below as adopted from Ogunsanwo, 2020 in Nigeria’s Foreign Policy Under the Administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2019); a Nigerian Institute of International Affairs publication:

Table 2: Preferential Loans to Nigeria from China

	Project	Year	Amount (USD\$)
I	Placing in orbit of NigComSat-1 (Nigeria Communication Satellite) by China Aerospace Corporation and the Great Wall Corporation	2006	200,000,000.00
Ii	National Security Communications System Project	December, 2010	500,000,000.00
Iii	Concessional loans for the Abuja-Kaduna Railway Modernisation Project	December, 2010	400,000,000.00

Iv	Concessional loans for the construction of Abuja Light Rail Project	July, 2012	500,000,000.00
V	Concessional loans for the development of the Galaxy Backbone Project	July, 2012	100,000,000.00
Vi	Preferential-Buyer Credit loan for the development of four Airport Terminals Expansion Project	July, 2013	500,000,000.00
Vii	Concessional loans for the development of the Zungeru Hydropower project	September, 2013	984,000,000.00
Viii	Sellers credit to STARCOMS		22,950,000.00
Ix	Seller credit to Western Metal Promotion Company for a Steel Rolling Project		50,000,000.00
X	Mambila Hydropower project (was stalled and negotiated for completion)		
Xi	Lagos-Kano Railway project		
Xii	Lagos-Calabar Coastal Railway		4,923,000,000.00

Source: Ogunsanwo, 2020

There are already many Chinese-funded projects in Nigeria. In December 2011, \$362 million was spent on the NigComSat 1-R project, a space satellite which serves as backbone for large parts of Nigeria's telecommunications infrastructure. Between 2014 and 2015, the sum of \$399 million was expended on the installation of 2000 CCTV cameras for Abuja and Lagos while the Abuja-Kaduna rail project received about \$500 million in July 2016. Also, the Abuja light rail project phase I, which commenced in November 2012, received \$500 million for its completion (Gyude, 2025).

The Galaxy Backbone project loan agreement signed in January 2013 has been completed after receiving an initial amount of \$117 million with a counterpart funding of \$17 million provided by the federal government. The \$984 million loan agreement for the Zungeru hydropower plant project, expected to be completed in 2020, was signed for four airports terminal expansions in Abuja, Port Harcourt, Lagos and Kano. The initial funding was \$500 million with a counterpart fund of \$100 million provided by the federal government (Shehu, 2018).

The Lagos-Ibadan railway project has received \$1.26 billion. The loan agreement was signed on August 18, 2017 while that of the Greater Abuja water supply project costing \$460 million was signed on 29th May, 2018. On the same day, an agreement for the supply of rolling stock and depot equipment for the Abuja light rail phase 1 project worth \$165 million was signed alongside the upgrading and rehabilitation of Keffi-Akwanga-Lafia road project, worth \$460 million.

Other loan agreements that are currently undergoing due diligence at the Chinese Exim Bank include the Ibadan-Kaduna segment of Lagos-Kano railway modernization project worth \$5.389 billion; the Kano-Kaduna segment worth \$1.355 billion; the coastal railway project worth \$12.421 billion; the Galaxy Backbone phase II project worth \$1.252 billion; the four airports terminal expansion project phase II, worth \$209 million as well as the ancillary works on four airports terminal expansion, worth \$184 million. The sum of \$846 million has already been earmarked for the dualisation of 9th Mile (Enugu)-Otikpo-Makurdi road section II of Keffi-Akwanga-Lafia-Makurdi aside the approval for the sum of \$800 million for the Niger Delta east-west road. Also, the sum of \$1.063 billion will go to the Gurara II multi-purpose project while NTA digitalization project which is awaiting the federal government approval is worth \$500 million along with the power transmission project worth another \$500 million. Others in the pipelines:

The Akwanga-Jos-Bauchi-Gombe carriageway project worth \$1.333 billion; the Kano urban light rail project (Phase I) that will cost \$673.2 million; the e-border solution project costing \$175.5 million with an additional \$127.45 million for the e-prison project and \$81.7 million for the e-post project of NIPOST (Ogunsanwo, 2020).

Furthermore, there are also financial expectations from the Chinese Exim Bank for the construction of the Gelele River Port in Edo State at \$371 million while the Oyo State light project will cost \$275 million. From all of these, Nigeria would not have been able to execute these projects and more without assistance from developing countries. Hence, there is no doubt that these loans have helped to develop the country to this extent however, there are concerns that the assistance has not translated to alleviation of poverty especially amongst the youths through job allocations but we cannot ignore the fact that jobs have been created. Also, there is fear of a very long-term indebtedness to China which could lead to confiscation of Nigerian owned companies and infrastructures thereby causing the country to be one hundred percent reliable to China and losing all.

1.3.6 Theoretical Framework

The growing presence of China in West Africa demands a precise theoretical engagement that captures the dynamics of power, economic interests, and strategic imperatives. This study draws on Marxist imperialism theory, and dependency theory to China's activities in the region.

i. Dependency Theory

Dependency theory became influential in Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among governments and intellectuals seeking alternatives to capitalist development models. It became popular basically as a reaction to modernization theory and free trade policies which was from the West. The proponents of dependency theory felt that modernization theory was ahistorical in approach and failed to account for the importance of the role of global economic and political structures.

Dependency refers to a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of the other to which the former is subjected (Dos Santos, 2002). In global trade terms, the relationship of interdependence between two or more economies takes the form of dependence when some countries (dominant ones like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France) can expand and be self-sustaining, while other countries (dependent ones especially in Africa) can only do so as a reflection of expansion, which can have either a negative or positive effect on their immediate development (Santos, 1970). Dependence is a conditioning circumstance in which one group of countries' economies, or between such economies are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. It is an interdependent relationship between two or more economies and the global trading system (Chuka, 2018). This becomes a dependent relationship when certain countries can expand on their own while others being reliant, can only expand as a mirror of the dominating countries' expansion, which may have positive or negative consequences on their immediate development. The dominant countries have a technological, commercial, capital, and socio-political advantage over the dependent countries. Dependence is then built on an international division of labour that allows for industrial development in some nations while constraining others, whose growth is conditioned by and subject to the world's power centres (Chuka, 2018).

In the case of China-West Africa relations, China assumes the role of the "new core," deepening the peripheral status of West African states through trade imbalances, resource dependency, and technological inferiority. For example, West Africa primarily exports raw materials (e.g., crude oil, minerals) to China and imports manufactured goods, reinforcing a classic dependent trade structure. In 2021, Nigeria exported over 90% of its products to China as raw commodities, while importing machinery and electronics (UNCTAD, 2022). This trade pattern undermines domestic industrialization and locks West African economies into low-value global chains.

Additionally, dependency theory explains how external financial inflows especially concessional loans and grants from China limit the policy space of African states. Countries like Ghana and Mali increasingly prioritize Chinese interests in their national development plans due to their reliance on Chinese funding, thereby weakening their economic sovereignty (Obi, 2020).

Dependency theorists caution that such external reliance creates a new form of "technocratic dependency," where states lack autonomy in planning and implementing independent development agendas (Amin, 1976). In many cases, Chinese-funded projects are executed by Chinese companies using Chinese labour, marginalizing local expertise and undermining knowledge transfer (Brautigam, 2020).

ii. Marxist Imperialism Theory

China exports capital in the form of concessional loans, grants, and investments, primarily directed at large-scale infrastructure and resource extraction projects. Countries like Ghana and Nigeria have become focal points of this expansion. In Ghana, the \$2 billion Sinohydro infrastructure deal, a resource-for-infrastructure agreement where China receives access to bauxite in exchange for financing roads and bridges exemplifies this model of capital export (Obi, 2020). While this arrangement ostensibly supports development, it binds Ghana's strategic mineral wealth to China's industrial agenda, limiting the country's capacity to determine how its resources are utilized.

In Nigeria, China's involvement spans oil extraction, rail construction, and port development. The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) has built multiple rail lines, such as the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan railways, funded by loans from China Exim Bank. Though these infrastructures contribute to Nigeria's development goals, the repayment conditions, preferential hiring of Chinese labour, and technological dependence reflect Lenin's notion of imperialist exploitation via capital export and subordinate integration of peripheries into the global capitalist system (Harvey, 2003).

Marxist theory views imperialism not just as political control, but as economic domination through unequal exchange. This is evident in Guinea, one of the world's largest producers of bauxite, a mineral critical to China's aluminium industry. Chinese firms like the Aluminium Corporation of China (Chalco) and Hongqiao Group dominate bauxite extraction and export operations in Guinea. The Simandou iron ore deposit, one of the world's richest, is another site of intense Chinese interest and investment. Although these projects promise revenue and employment, the terms overwhelmingly favour Chinese companies, which often control logistics, transport, and refining, leaving Guinea in a subordinate role within the value chain (Lee, 2018).

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, China has invested in mining operations and port development, including the Tonkolili iron ore mine. After the withdrawal of Western firms, Chinese companies quickly moved in, obtaining favourable concessions. Marxist theorists argue that such engagements exemplify the continued extraction of surplus

from peripheral economies to feed the accumulation needs of advanced capitalist states in this case, China (Amin, 1976). Even where host governments gain revenue, it is often offset by environmental degradation, labour exploitation, and dependency on Chinese capital and expertise.

Perhaps the most critical mechanism of imperial domination is the debt dependence trap, through which states cede economic sovereignty. Lenin emphasized how finance capital becomes a means of subjugation, and this is evident in West Africa's increasing indebtedness to China. According to the World Bank, several West African countries such as Ghana and Sierra Leone, have accumulated significant debts to China under opaque conditions, often collateralized with strategic resources. For example, Ghana's bauxite-for-infrastructure deal effectively mortgages its mineral wealth to repay Chinese loans, restricting future policy choices and budget flexibility (Carmody & Taylor, 2016). When repayment becomes challenging, countries risk losing control over key assets a phenomenon, critics call "debt-trap diplomacy". Although this term is contested, the structural consequence is clear: economic sovereignty is eroded, and policy space is constrained, consistent with Marxist analyses of imperialism as the financial subordination of weaker states (Bond, 2006).

Marxist imperialism theory also highlights the transformation of class relations and the marginalization of local labour in favour of foreign capital. In many Chinese-funded projects, including those in Nigeria and Guinea, Chinese firms import labour, thereby excluding local workers from employment benefits and suppressing wage growth. This leads to the creation of a comprador class, local elites who collaborate with foreign capital in exchange for political and economic rents.

The resulting class structure reflects classic imperial patterns: the enrichment of a local elite, the exploitation of workers, and the extraction of surplus value by foreign investors. Local resistance such as mining protests in Guinea or anti-Chinese sentiments in Ghana, emerge as reactions to these exploitative dynamics, highlighting the underlying class contradictions (Obi, 2020; Lee, 2018).

Marxist imperialism theory offers a robust framework for analysing China's engagement in West Africa. Far from being a neutral or benign development partner, China reproduces key features of imperialist domination: capital export, resource control, debt dependence, and militarized influence. While West African states gain infrastructural improvements and short-term financing, they do so at the cost of long-term sovereignty and self-determination. The cases of Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Mali all underscore how China, as a rising capitalist power, behaves in ways that align with classical imperial strategies, albeit under a new geopolitical banner. This theoretical framing is crucial for understanding not just the economic impact of China's footprint in West Africa, but its structural, political, and class-based implications.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a historical design to examine China's partnership with West Africa by investigating archival records, official reports and documents, media reports and scholarly analyses. This design enabled a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and peculiar dynamics of China's economic infrastructural and diplomatic engagements in the region. By tracing the historical trajectory of China's investments, loans, and development projects, the study reveals the activities within a broader process of globalisation and the changing geopolitical alignments. Some sources such as government treaties, corporate reports, and policy statements provide important and necessary data to reconstruct patterns of interaction by highlighting China's strategic

interests and the corresponding responses from West African states and regional organisations.

This study used the qualitative method which involves collecting non-numerical, rich descriptive data to understand meanings, experiences, and social contexts. The method of data collection for this study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data which involved analysing of existing data from archival documents, online databases, and previously published studies from various journals. These sources include a wide range of academic publications, government and institutional reports, policy briefs, official statements, and reputable news articles. Secondary data was sourced from updated databases such as UNCTAD, EXIM bank, AidData, FOCAC declarations, independent databases like the China Global Investment Tracker (Heritage Foundation), etc, digital archives, and verified online platforms documenting China's economic projects, investments trends, and diplomatic activities in West Africa. The media and some NGO reports which include investigative journalism, watchdog reports, and publications from think tanks such as the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) were used as well. These materials provided detailed insights into infrastructure developments, such as ports and energy projects, as well as China's role in digital transformation and industrialisation in the selected West African states (AIIAfrica, 2025).

The use of secondary data also enabled a critical historical analysis of China's evolving role in shaping West Africa's economic sovereignty and regional security. By analysing reports from Chinese government agencies, African regional bodies, and international organisations, the study relates China's investments within broader geopolitical and economic frameworks. For example, the study reviews China's Belt and Road Initiative projects, and digital infrastructure deployments alongside concerns about governance, political autonomy, and security risks related to dependency and external influence. Furthermore, ethical considerations in data collection were carefully observed by relying on publicly accessible, credible sources, ensuring accurate citation and representation of data. The analytical process involved referencing data from different sources to verify facts and reduce bias, enabling a comprehensive account that is aligned with qualitative and historical research design and approach (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

The main technique of data collection is content analysis. This method involved a critical review of texts and media that detail China's political, and economic engagements with West Africa. The documents examined include; investment contracts and resource-for-infrastructure deals; reports on loan conditions, debt repayment, and policy implications; statements from local officials, Chinese firms, and regional institutions; NGO publications and investigative journalism on issues of labour, environment, and governance.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research established that China's engagement, while instrumental in bridging West Africa's infrastructure deficit and driving economic growth, has created a dual-edged relationship defined by both development and systemic vulnerability. The primary threat to economic sovereignty stems from the compositional trap the exchange of raw, unprocessed commodities (oil, bauxite, minerals) for manufactured goods and high-value machinery. This persistent structural imbalance generates predictable trade deficits and acute import dependency for countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Guinea (all relying on China for over 30% of imports). This reliance makes West African nations structurally vulnerable to China's slowing domestic economic growth, which reduces

commodity demand and leads to deteriorating terms of trade. The dependency risk is heterogeneous across West Africa; for countries in debt distress, such as Ghana, sovereignty erosion is immediate, manifested in the need to comply with multilateral conditionalities (e.g., austerity) driven by debt restructuring negotiations, in which China is now a key participant and for resource-rich states like Nigeria and Guinea, sovereignty is eroded through the hypothecation of future resource revenues and long-term concessions tied to infrastructure financing, which limits future fiscal flexibility and autonomous resource management.

3.1 Discussion of Findings

1. China's engagement has evolved from trade and infrastructure investments to a comprehensive strategy integrating economic and technological dimensions. There is a shift from transactional partnerships to structural influence, positioning China as a development financier stakeholder in the sub-region.
2. Chinese loans and investments have bridged critical infrastructural gaps, especially in energy, transport, and telecommunications. However, these projects are loan-driven and mainly executed by Chinese firms, thereby reinforcing the financial subordination of West African states, especially through capital export for surplus extraction, where Chinese firms accumulate profits and repatriate capital, leaving the host states burdened with debt, technology, finance, and expertise that remain externally controlled by China.

The bilateral approach of China to West African states undermines collective regional agency, particularly within ECOWAS. Multipolarity has produced a competitive dependency where states oscillate between Chinese, Western, and multilateral financiers without achieving autonomy. West African sovereignty is being redefined, nominally independent but materially constrained as the region becomes a site of accumulation within the global capitalist order dominated by emerging powers like China.

4. CONCLUSION

This study critically examined China's expanding influence in West Africa, focusing on Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Mali, to assess its implications for economic sovereignty in the sub-region. The findings reveal that while Chinese engagement has significantly contributed to bridging infrastructural deficits, particularly in energy, transportation, and telecommunications, it has simultaneously deepened structural and financial dependencies. Chinese loans and investments, largely executed by Chinese firms and financed through debt arrangements, reinforce patterns of capital export and surplus extraction consistent with dependency dynamics.

The study demonstrates that China's role has evolved beyond transactional trade partnerships into a form of structural influence, positioning it as a central development financier and strategic stakeholder in West Africa. Within the context of emerging multipolarity, West African states face what this research conceptualizes as "competitive dependency," oscillating between Chinese, Western, and multilateral actors without achieving substantive economic autonomy. Consequently, sovereignty in the sub-region remains formally intact but materially constrained by external financial and policy pressures. Overall, the study concludes that without deliberate regional coordination, economic diversification, and stronger bargaining capacity, West Africa risks further

entrenchment within the global capitalist accumulation system, limiting its prospects for genuine economic independence and sustainable development. Based on the analysis, the following policy recommendations are essential for West Africa and regional bodies to mitigate dependency risks and enhance economic sovereignty:

1. ECOWAS must be strategically reinforced to enable collective bargaining with China on major projects. This regional approach should prioritize securing favourable terms that include technology transfer and demand transparency in resource-backed loan agreements.
2. West African governments must aggressively pursue diversification strategies, focusing industrial policy on high-value-added exports rather than raw materials. Complementary reforms should eliminate policy barriers that inhibit African high-value-added products from competing in Chinese and Asian markets.

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