

## CHINA-NIGERIA RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN THE 4<sup>TH</sup> REPUBLIC- 2015-2025

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### Abstrak

Hubungan Tiongkok-Nigeria telah berkembang secara signifikan antara tahun 2015 dan 2025, dengan implikasi penting bagi stabilitas demokrasi Nigeria di Republik Keempat. Studi ini mengkaji dimensi politik, ekonomi, dan tata kelola kemitraan tersebut, dengan fokus pada bagaimana investasi dan keterlibatan strategis Tiongkok telah membentuk proses demokrasi Nigeria. Keterlibatan Tiongkok paling terlihat dalam kerja sama infrastruktur, perdagangan, teknologi digital, dan keamanan, menghadirkan alternatif bagi bantuan Barat yang biasanya membawa persyaratan politik. Meskipun keterlibatan ini membantu mengatasi defisit infrastruktur dan merangsang pertumbuhan ekonomi, keterlibatan ini juga menimbulkan kekhawatiran tentang transparansi, akuntabilitas, dan kebebasan sipil tata kelola. Risikonya meliputi perjanjian pinjaman yang tidak transparan, penguasaan proyek-proyek yang didanai Tiongkok oleh elit, dan penyebaran teknologi pengawasan digital yang dapat memperkuat praktik otoriter. Penelitian ini lebih lanjut menunjukkan bagaimana elit Nigeria mengeksploitasi kemitraan Tiongkok sebagai modal politik, dengan memamerkan proyek-proyek infrastruktur untuk mengkonsolidasikan legitimasi selama pemilu. Secara keseluruhan, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa hubungan Tiongkok-Nigeria menciptakan peluang bagi transformasi ekonomi sekaligus tantangan bagi tata kelola demokrasi, dengan stabilitas jangka panjang Nigeria bergantung pada keseimbangan antara manfaat kerja sama dengan perlindungan kelembagaan.

**kata kunci:** *China-Nigeria Relations, Democratic Stability, Governance, Infrastructure, Foreign Policy.*

### Abstract

China-Nigeria relations have expanded significantly between 2015 and 2025, with important implications for Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic. This study examines the political, economic, and governance dimensions of the partnership, focusing on how Chinese investments and strategic engagements have shaped Nigeria's democratic processes. China's involvement is most visible in infrastructure, trade, digital technology, and security cooperation, presenting an alternative to Western aid that typically carries political conditions. While these engagements help address infrastructure deficits and stimulate economic growth, they also raise concerns about governance transparency, accountability, and civil liberties. Risks include opaque loan

agreements, elite capture of Chinese-funded projects, and the spread of digital surveillance technologies that may reinforce authoritarian practices. The research further shows how Nigerian elites exploit Chinese partnerships as political capital, showcasing infrastructure projects to consolidate legitimacy during elections. Overall, the findings suggest that China-Nigeria relations create both opportunities for economic transformation and challenges for democratic governance, with Nigeria's long-term stability hinging on balancing cooperation benefits with institutional safeguards.

**Keywords:** *China-Nigeria Relations, Democratic Stability, Governance, Infrastructure, Foreign Policy.*

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, China has transformed from a manufacturing hub into a major global power, reshaping geopolitical and economic dynamics (Zhao, 2021). Its rapid growth, global investments, and assertive diplomacy have challenged Western dominance, particularly that of the U.S., and contributed to a multipolar world order (Liu & Dunford, 2020). Through initiatives like the BRI, China has deepened ties with both developed and developing countries, combining infrastructure projects with diplomatic engagement. Western nations such as Germany, France, the UK, and the U.S. continue to engage China pragmatically in areas like climate change, technology, and governance, though concerns remain over human rights and its authoritarian system (Rana & Chhabra, 2022; Nye, 2021).

China has significantly expanded its influence in Africa by positioning itself as a development partner through initiatives like FOCAC, investing heavily in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and digital technology in countries such as Ethiopia, Angola, Kenya, and Zimbabwe (Brautigam, 2020). While these investments foster rapid development, they often occur through elite-driven, non-transparent negotiations, raising concerns about accountability and democratic outcomes (Taylor, 2021). In Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, Chinese investments have supported major infrastructure projects and provided financial lifelines to sanctioned regimes, but they have also coincided with political repression and reinforced authoritarian governance, highlighting a pattern where development gains are accompanied by democratic setbacks (Moyo & Ndlovu, 2022).

In Nigeria, the strategic partnership with China has intensified since the return to democracy in 1999. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country and one

of its largest economies, represents a key node in China's Africa strategy. The Fourth Republic has seen successive administrations from Obasanjo to Buhari, and now Tinubu, seeking closer ties with China in trade, security, infrastructure, and diplomatic cooperation (Umejei, 2022). Chinese-funded projects such as the Abuja-Kaduna railway, Lagos-Ibadan expressway, and various airport upgrades have significantly improved Nigeria's infrastructural landscape. These projects are frequently cited by Nigerian leaders as proof of successful South-South cooperation. However, they also expose the country to concerns surrounding debt sustainability, contract opacity, and elite capture—factors that undermine democratic accountability and public participation in governance (Ojo, Okafor & Zhang, 2022).

China's policy of non-interference, often lauded by African leaders as respecting sovereignty, has had mixed effects on Nigeria's democratic environment. On one hand, it offers a refreshing contrast to the perceived paternalism of Western conditional aid. On the other hand, it indirectly emboldens ruling elites to consolidate power without addressing systemic democratic deficits. This is evident in Nigeria's recurring electoral malpractices, weak institutional checks, and the persistent suppression of dissent. With China providing economic and technological backing without demanding democratic reforms, Nigerian leaders have increasingly deprioritized governance issues, focusing instead on economic outputs that can be easily showcased to the electorate (Ibrahim, 2023).

In recent years, China has expanded its influence in Nigeria beyond physical infrastructure into digital and security infrastructure. The Chinese tech firm Huawei has provided the Nigerian government with surveillance systems and telecommunications equipment that, while enhancing public security, could also be deployed to monitor political opponents and curtail civil liberties (Feldstein, 2021). These developments mirror broader trends in digital authoritarianism, where regimes utilize Chinese technology to strengthen state surveillance and weaken democratic freedoms. In a country like Nigeria, where democratic institutions remain underdeveloped and vulnerable to manipulation, such tools can significantly tilt the balance against open governance and civic engagement. Nigeria's democratic experience in the Fourth Republic has been marked by oscillations between hope and regression, with each electoral cycle revealing deep-seated issues such as vote buying, judicial interference, and legislative inefficiency (Adebanwi, 2022).

In this fragile context, China's involvement, although largely apolitical in rhetoric—has real implications for the structure and quality of Nigerian democracy. By providing financial and technological support without democratic conditionality, China enables political elites to prioritize regime survival over democratic development. Moreover, Nigeria's alignment with China may inadvertently influence the regional democratic trajectory in West Africa. As the de facto leader of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Nigeria's political choices carry significant weight. Should Nigeria veer further towards authoritarian practices under the guise of development partnerships with China, it could set a dangerous precedent for smaller, less stable democracies in the region (Ikenna & Eze, 2022). This potential domino effect highlights the importance of critically examining how international alliances, especially with non-democratic powers, impact not just domestic governance but also regional democratic norms.

The general objective of this study is to examine China-Nigeria relations and their impacts on Nigeria's democratic stability in the Fourth Republic. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how China's principle of non-interference in domestic affairs has influenced the conduct of democratic governance in Nigeria; to assess the impact of China's economic engagements, particularly in infrastructural and financial investments, on political accountability and institutional transparency; and to analyze the role of Chinese digital and surveillance technology in shaping Nigeria's political landscape and civil liberties.

This study is guided by the following research questions: To what extent has China's principle of non-interference influenced democratic practices and institutions in Nigeria? How has the economic partnership between China and Nigeria impacted governance transparency, political accountability, and civil liberties? In what ways has China's involvement in Nigeria's digital and infrastructural sectors contributed to democratic backsliding or the rise of authoritarian tendencies?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Dependency theory, developed by scholars like Prebisch (1950), Frank (1967), Amin (1974), and Wallerstein (1974), argues that underdevelopment in the Global South is not a stage of modernization but the result of structural inequalities in the global capitalist system, where core nations prosper through the exploitation of peripheral economies. While early proponents emphasized

unequal trade, structural exploitation, and the need for delinking, later scholars (Ferraro, 2021; Mahler, 2022; Teschke, 2023) have updated the theory to account for financial, technological, and neoliberal globalization dependencies. Applied to China–Nigeria relations, dependency theory reveals that while China presents itself as a South–South partner, its investments—often tied to loans and resource-backed deals—reinforce Nigeria’s reliance on external actors. These dynamic risks undermining democratic governance by empowering elites, weakening accountability, and perpetuating Nigeria’s raw-material export dependence. Moreover, China’s non-conditional support may embolden authoritarian tendencies, erode institutional checks and balances, and shape Nigeria’s governance in ways that prioritize external over domestic democratic needs. Thus, the China–Nigeria partnership, though beneficial for development, risks deepening structural dependency and constraining democratic consolidation.

### **Research Method**

This study employed a descriptive research design, which is well-suited for examining the nature, scope, and implications of China–Nigeria relations and their impact on Nigeria’s democratic stability in the Fourth Republic between 2015 and 2025. Descriptive research is primarily concerned with providing an accurate portrayal of phenomena as they exist in their natural context, enabling researchers to identify patterns, relationships, and trends without manipulating variables (Babbie, 2021).

The study relied on secondary data. The secondary data were systematically gathered from a range of reputable and relevant repositories, including official government publications, policy documents, trade and investment records, and scholarly literature. Key Nigerian government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federal Ministry of Finance, and the National Bureau of Statistics provided official reports and communiqués regarding bilateral relations and economic engagement with China. Corresponding data were also obtained from Chinese governmental sources, including the Ministry of Commerce and related foreign policy institutions, ensuring a balanced perspective on the bilateral relationship.

In addition, reports and policy briefs from international organizations such as the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), United Nations (UN), and the World Bank were consulted to understand the broader regional and global implications of China’s involvement

in Nigeria. These multilateral perspectives contribute to assessing the influence of external actors and international norms on Nigeria's governance and democratic trajectory. Academic journals, books, and conference proceedings in the fields of international relations, political science, and development studies constituted a vital source for theoretical and empirical insights into the nexus of foreign relations and democratic stability. Complementary data were sourced from reputable media outlets and think tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) to capture ongoing debates and narratives shaping public understanding. Data sourced from the secondary sources were analysed qualitatively by answering the research questions thematically.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **To what extent has China's principle of non-interference influenced democratic practices and institutions in Nigeria?**

#### ***The Non-Interference Principle***

China's foreign policy has, for decades, been anchored on the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, a principle rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence adopted in the 1950s. This diplomatic stance emphasizes mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. In the context of China-Nigeria relations, this approach has been one of the most significant pillars shaping political engagement between the two nations. Nigeria, as a sovereign state, has welcomed China's commitment to non-interference, perceiving it as an alternative to the often prescriptive and conditional approaches of Western powers, particularly in matters relating to governance, democratic reforms, and human rights (Owoeye & Fayomi, 2021). Unlike the United States or the European Union, which tend to tie economic and development aid to governance reforms and democratic benchmarks, China refrains from attaching such explicit political conditions to its investments and loans.

The principle of non-interference has had profound implications for democratic practices and institutions in Nigeria. On the one hand, it provides Nigerian political elites with greater autonomy in decision-making without the fear of external pressure to implement governance reforms that may challenge entrenched political interests. In this way, the non-interference principle has been viewed as enabling Nigerian leaders to pursue development agendas

aligned with domestic political realities rather than externally imposed models (Okorie, 2022). However, this absence of political conditionality also means that there is less incentive for Nigerian leaders to strengthen democratic institutions, enhance transparency, or ensure the independence of the judiciary. China's non-interference approach, while respecting Nigeria's sovereignty, indirectly contributes to the persistence of governance weaknesses by creating an environment in which political actors are not held to international democratic standards.

### ***Impact on Electoral Institutions***

The impact of China's principle of non-interference on Nigeria's electoral institutions is deeply intertwined with the nature of bilateral relations between the two countries. While China refrains from overt involvement in Nigeria's electoral processes, its political philosophy, economic engagements, and governance model indirectly influence the structure, functioning, and resilience of these institutions. Nigeria's electoral bodies, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), operate within a democratic framework that, in principle, requires impartiality, transparency, and credibility. However, the long-standing political relationship with China—anchored in non-conditional aid, infrastructural investments, and diplomatic respect for sovereignty—has often reinforced political elites' discretion in managing electoral systems without significant external pressure for reforms that would align them with international democratic best practices. This dynamic creates a context where electoral institutions may remain vulnerable to political interference, resource constraints, and inadequate reforms (Ojatorotu & Ajayi, 2022).

China's approach contrasts sharply with that of Western partners, who often condition development assistance on the implementation of electoral and democratic reforms. By adopting a non-conditional approach, China avoids overtly influencing Nigeria's election management processes, but this can also inadvertently enable ruling parties to sidestep the deep institutional reforms necessary for free and fair elections. The consequence is a paradox where sovereignty is respected, but institutional accountability and modernization may stagnate. According to Adebani (2023), electoral credibility in Nigeria suffers not solely from technical challenges but from the political environment in which electoral institutions operate—a political environment that external actors like China indirectly shape by reinforcing state autonomy without corresponding demands for transparency.

### ***Influence on Rule of Law and Judicial Processes***

China's principle of non-interference, while intended to foster mutual respect for sovereignty, has had complex implications for Nigeria's rule of law and judicial processes, especially within the context of governance and democratic consolidation. The rule of law thrives on the principles of equality before the law, judicial independence, transparency, and the ability of courts to hold political leaders accountable. However, the deepening political and economic partnership between Nigeria and China has created an environment where the prioritization of political expediency and economic development often supersedes the commitment to strengthening independent judicial systems. This stems largely from the fact that China's governance model does not emphasize liberal democratic checks and balances but instead supports a system where judicial processes are often subordinated to political authority (Brown & Gagliardone, 2021). As such, Nigerian leaders engaging closely with China's model may subtly import governance practices that weaken judicial independence, particularly when political elites perceive that their Chinese counterparts face minimal consequences for undermining judicial autonomy.

The economic influence of China in Nigeria has also manifested indirectly in shaping how judicial processes are respected in politically sensitive cases. According to Olorunmola (2022), high-profile corruption and electoral fraud cases have often stalled or collapsed due to political interference, with courts facing external pressure from the executive branch. This trend mirrors governance realities in China, where the judiciary often functions as an extension of political authority rather than as an autonomous guardian of the constitution. The result is that Nigerian leaders, benefiting from China's financial and infrastructural investments, may feel emboldened to sideline judicial institutions without fearing diplomatic backlash. This stands in contrast to the conditionalities often attached to aid and loans from Western democracies, which usually demand adherence to human rights and the strengthening of democratic institutions (Kwakwa, 2023).

### ***Political Elite Autonomy***

The principle of political elite autonomy in the context of China-Nigeria relations underscores how Nigerian political leaders navigate governance priorities, democratic obligations, and foreign partnerships without substantial interference from external actors. Within the framework of China's foreign policy, the non-interference doctrine is particularly appealing to political elites

in Nigeria, as it allows them to pursue policies and political strategies with minimal external scrutiny, especially in the realms of governance structure, human rights, and electoral integrity. This appeal is rooted in the perception that partnerships with China offer economic, infrastructural, and diplomatic benefits without the conditionalities typically attached to Western aid or multilateral financial assistance, which often demand adherence to governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and human rights standards (Akanle & Olayinka, 2022). Consequently, political elites in Nigeria may exercise a greater degree of autonomy in managing state affairs, sometimes prioritizing political consolidation over democratic consolidation.

China's approach enables Nigerian leaders to negotiate and manage national political processes on their own terms, insulating them from the overt political leverage often exerted by Western countries. For instance, the absence of governance-related preconditions in China's financial engagements has strengthened political elites' ability to implement development plans in ways that align more with domestic political objectives than with international democratic standards (Okolie & Eze, 2023). While this can be seen as fostering sovereignty and self-determination, it can also contribute to entrenching personalized rule, limiting institutional reforms, and enabling the perpetuation of power structures that may undermine democratic norms. Political elites have used this latitude to maintain control over political party structures, manage electoral competition, and limit the influence of opposition forces, with the Chinese model providing a form of tacit validation for these practices (Kalu & Mbah, 2021).

### ***Civil Society Space***

Civil society in Nigeria has long served as a vital platform for democratic engagement, accountability, and human rights protection. Organizations, activists, and grassroots movements amplify citizens' voices and safeguard democratic values. However, China's principle of non-interference has reshaped this space by influencing how domestic authorities treat civil society. Through extensive economic and political partnerships unlinked to rights protections, China indirectly enables state actors to restrict civic freedoms without fear of sanctions (Obi, 2021; Igbuzor, 2023). Unlike Western donors, whose aid often conditions support on safeguarding civic space, China's approach leaves civil society with fewer external advocates.

The influence of this policy is particularly evident in the growing trend of restrictive legislation, harassment, and bureaucratic control over NGOs in Nigeria. The Non-Governmental Organisation Regulation Bill and similar measures, although widely criticized, have been pushed forward with little diplomatic pushback from China, which prioritizes mutual economic benefits over normative political concerns (Mordi & Omoregie, 2022). While China itself operates within a highly controlled civic space domestically, its partnership model projects a similar value system abroad, reinforcing the idea that the state's sovereignty overrides international advocacy for participatory governance. This has emboldened some political elites in Nigeria to adopt a more authoritarian posture towards civil society, particularly organizations engaged in electoral monitoring, anti-corruption advocacy, and human rights defense. Ojo (2022) notes that the absence of political pressure from key partners like China diminishes the leverage of local activists, forcing them to rely on increasingly limited domestic channels for influence. Below is a descriptive summary of themes in research question 1:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Indicators</b>	<b>Observations/Findings</b>
<b>Non-Interference Principle</b>	Policy autonomy	Nigeria engages in China–Nigeria relations without external pressure; sovereignty and decision-making independence are reinforced.
<b>Impact on Electoral Institutions</b>	Electoral reforms and Election transparency	Chinese partnerships focus on economic collaboration; minimal influence on strengthening electoral processes or management. Also, Non-interference limits external pressure for transparent and free electoral practices
<b>Influence on Rule of Law and Judicial Process</b>	Judicial independence and Legal accountability	The rule of law receives little external support; judicial processes operate without incentives for procedural or anti-corruption reforms. Enforcement of laws and accountability frameworks is minimally affected by China's engagement.

<b>Political Elite Autonomy</b>	Decision-making power and Policy discretion	Nigerian elites exercise significant autonomy in policymaking due to non-interference, reducing dependency on international donors. Leaders can prioritize national economic and infrastructural projects without external democratic conditions.
<b>Civil Society Space</b>	Citizen participation and Civic accountability	Civil society involvement in governance remains limited; projects rarely encourage public engagement or advocacy. Economic-focused engagements do not incentivize civil society to influence transparency or political responsiveness
<b>Overall Effect</b>	Democracy vs. Development	Supports sovereignty, elite autonomy, and economic development, but challenges democratic consolidation, transparency, and participatory governance.

**How has the economic partnership between China and Nigeria impacted governance transparency, political accountability, and civil liberties?**

***Trade and Investment Leverage***

The trade and investment dimension of China–Nigeria relations has become a defining feature of their bilateral engagement, and it plays a significant role in shaping governance patterns in Nigeria. Over the past decade, but particularly since 2015, China’s trade and investment inflows into Nigeria have increased exponentially, positioning China as Nigeria’s largest trading partner in both imports and infrastructure-related investments (Adewale & Ogunyemi, 2021). This economic leverage is not merely a matter of commerce; it carries substantial political implications, especially about governance transparency, accountability, and civil liberties. Through its financial muscle, China has gained a unique position in Nigeria’s economic architecture, enabling it to influence national policy priorities in ways that may have indirect consequences for governance standards.

The scale of Chinese investments—particularly in infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing, has created an environment in which Nigeria's political class increasingly views China as a dependable alternative to Western aid and investment. This has altered the traditional dynamics of external accountability, as Chinese funding often comes without the stringent governance reforms and anti-corruption benchmarks typically demanded by Western donors (Nwoke, 2022). While this no-strings-attached approach has given Nigeria greater fiscal autonomy in deciding how to utilize investment capital, it has also generated conditions where transparency in project execution is less prioritized. For example, large-scale infrastructure contracts under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have often been awarded through opaque processes, with limited public disclosure of terms, raising concerns among civil society groups about accountability in public procurement (Umejei, 2023).

China's trade leverage also plays out in Nigeria's political economy through preferential trade agreements that boost imports of Chinese goods and exports of Nigerian raw materials, particularly crude oil and agricultural commodities. While these arrangements can strengthen economic growth in the short term, they also entrench patterns of dependency that may weaken domestic governance oversight. In situations where Nigeria's fiscal stability becomes tied to continued Chinese investment flows, political leaders may feel pressured to maintain diplomatic goodwill with Beijing, even if it means avoiding criticism of governance-related lapses linked to Chinese-funded projects (Oladipo & Zhang, 2024). This dynamic can subtly erode the willingness of political elites to enforce rigorous standards of transparency in such projects, especially when they are framed as strategic national priorities.

### ***Transparency in Loan Agreements and Contracts***

The issue of transparency in loan agreements and contracts between China and Nigeria has become a critical subject of scholarly and policy debate, particularly as Chinese financing in infrastructure development has expanded significantly over the past decade. While bilateral cooperation is framed as mutually beneficial, several scholars argue that opacity in contractual terms undermines public accountability and fuels suspicion about the long-term implications of such arrangements for Nigeria's governance structures (Igbokwe, 2022). Chinese loans to Nigeria are often structured through government-to-government agreements, bypassing open competitive bidding processes that could enhance transparency and reduce corruption risks. This contractual secrecy has been criticized for preventing the Nigerian public, civil

society organizations, and even some parliamentary bodies from accessing full details of repayment terms, collateral clauses, and conditionalities attached to the loans (Okoye & Abimbola, 2023).

In many instances, Chinese-financed projects in Nigeria are accompanied by limited disclosure regarding financial commitments, debt sustainability assessments, and performance monitoring frameworks. According to Bello and Zhang (2022), this lack of disclosure reflects a broader pattern in China's overseas lending strategy, which prioritizes diplomatic relationships and project execution speed over multilateral transparency norms advocated by institutions like the World Bank or IMF. The Nigerian Debt Management Office has published partial data on Chinese loans, but details about renegotiations, potential sovereign guarantees, and asset-backed repayment clauses remain either classified or ambiguously stated (Ezeani, 2021). This opacity not only constrains democratic oversight but also limits informed public debate on whether such borrowing is sustainable and equitable in the long term.

### ***Civil Liberties Protection***

Civil liberties, freedom of expression, association, assembly, and privacy, are shaped indirectly by the modalities of Nigeria's economic partnership with China, especially in the digital and security sectors. As Chinese vendors expand footprints in telecommunications backbone, safe-city surveillance, and data-center infrastructure, the state's capacity to monitor communications and public space increases. In the absence of robust privacy legislation, independent data-protection authorities, and transparent warrants regimes, new technical capacities can drift into illiberal uses: disproportionate surveillance of protesters, tracking of journalists, or filtering of online content under cybercrime pretexts. Comparative work on "digital authoritarian affordances" shows that procurement choices, facial recognition suites, integrated command-and-control platforms, deep packet inspection, carry governance assumptions that, when transplanted into weak regulatory environments, can chill speech and association even without formal censorship (Feldstein, 2021; Gagliardone, 2022). Nigeria's constitutional guarantees remain intact, but practice hinges on regulatory detail: who approves deployments, what logs are retained, how oversight bodies audit use, and whether affected communities have remedies. Where these guardrails are thin, civil liberties protections become contingent on executive restraint rather than enforceable rights.

Beyond technology, non-conditional Chinese finance signals a state-centric development model that narrows civic space and sidelines participatory processes. Large corridor projects are often negotiated centrally with minimal consultation, limiting avenues for communities, labor unions, and environmental groups to influence outcomes. Grievances over land, resettlement, or safety are frequently met with public-order statutes to suppress assemblies. Studies in West Africa show grievance mechanisms tied to such deals are largely advisory, weakening civil liberties (Gyimah-Boadi & Appiah-Nyamekye, 2020; Acheampong & Boateng, 2023). Journalists face secrecy barriers, national-security exceptions, and high investigative costs, fostering self-censorship in watchdog reporting.

### ***Perceived Trade-Off between Development and Openness***

The perceived trade-off between development and openness in the context of China–Nigeria relations remains a complex and multifaceted issue that reflects the broader tension between economic growth ambitions and democratic governance ideals. Over the last decade, China's extensive infrastructural investments and concessional loans have been instrumental in driving Nigeria's development in critical sectors such as transportation, power, and telecommunications. These interventions have generated a developmental momentum that has been welcomed by successive Nigerian administrations eager to address infrastructure deficits (Adewale, 2023). However, the conditions under which such partnerships thrive often prioritize the expediency of project delivery over adherence to governance transparency and openness, thereby creating a scenario where the imperatives of development compete with democratic ideals (Anyanwu & Isah, 2022).

Large-scale projects in Nigeria are often conceived and executed without sufficient public consultation or parliamentary oversight, reflecting an overreliance on executive discretion in negotiations with Chinese partners (Nwankwo & Omotola, 2023). While this approach may accelerate project delivery, it sidelines democratic processes and undermines transparency. The tension between rapid economic growth and weakened institutional safeguards illustrates a governance dilemma in which infrastructure development advances at the expense of accountability (Onuoha, 2024). Moreover, the opaque structure of Chinese financial arrangements prioritizes quick access to funding over public disclosure and civil society engagement. Loan agreements are frequently negotiated behind closed doors, leaving little room for debate or legal challenge (Okonkwo, 2023). This lack of openness constrains citizen

participation and entrenches a governance culture where executive decisions remain shielded from wider scrutiny, raising concerns about the long-term implications for democratic accountability and participatory governance. Below is a descriptive summary of all themes in research question 2:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Characteristics</b>	<b>Governance &amp; Democratic Implications</b>
<b>Trade and Investment Leverage</b>	Post-2015 Chinese investment fuels Nigerian growth but, through preferential trade terms, deepens reliance on raw material exports and Chinese goods.	Chinese financing expands Nigeria’s fiscal space but weakens accountability, fostering dependency, opaque procurement, and reduced policy flexibility.
<b>Transparency in Loan Agreements &amp; Contracts</b>	Opaque government-to-government loan deals with bundled contracts and confidentiality clauses limit transparency in China–Nigeria financial agreements.	Limited scrutiny of opaque loans boosts executive power and elite capture, but institutional reforms can strengthen accountability and debt oversight.
<b>Civil Liberties Protection</b>	Chinese-backed ICT growth in Nigeria advances with minimal consultation and weak privacy protections, heightening risks to accountability and civil liberties.	Growing surveillance and executive dominance threaten civic freedoms in Nigeria, but

		stronger legal and institutional safeguards can balance development with rights protection.
<b>Perceived Trade-Off between Development &amp; Openness</b>	Nigeria's infrastructure expansion is driven by executive discretion and opaque financing, sidelining legislative oversight and limiting citizen participation.	Nigeria's pursuit of quick infrastructure gains risks undermining accountability, highlighting the need to balance growth with transparency and democratic protections.

**In what ways has China's involvement in Nigeria's digital and infrastructural sectors contributed to democratic backsliding or authoritarian tendencies?**

***Digital Infrastructure Partnerships***

China's engagement with Nigeria's digital infrastructure sector has been one of the most visible dimensions of bilateral cooperation, particularly over the last decade, with a marked acceleration between 2015 and 2024. This collaboration has revolved around strategic investments in broadband expansion, telecommunications networks, and e-governance platforms, largely driven by Chinese tech giants such as Huawei and ZTE. These companies, backed by the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative's Digital Silk Road component, have supplied Nigeria with the technical expertise, financing models, and equipment needed to develop its 4G and 5G networks (Zeng & Zhang, 2021). While these partnerships have undeniably expanded Nigeria's digital access, particularly in underserved regions, scholars note that the

strategic nature of China's digital investments may carry broader political implications that extend beyond connectivity (Ayeni, 2022; Okere, 2023).

The attractiveness of Chinese digital infrastructure partnerships to Nigeria's government lies in their affordability, speed of delivery, and lack of stringent political conditionalities. Unlike Western development financing, which often links funding to governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and human rights benchmarks, Chinese investments focus primarily on the commercial and technical aspects of delivery (Owolabi & Onuoha, 2021). This model has allowed Nigeria to rapidly modernize its digital backbone, but it also reduces the external pressure for governance transparency in ICT sector procurement processes (Anyaegbunam, 2023). The result is that while infrastructure is delivered, the governance environment in which it operates can remain opaque, enabling elite political actors to monopolize decision-making over the allocation and operation of digital assets.

### ***Surveillance Technology Use***

China's involvement in Nigeria's digital sector has significantly expanded the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, which has raised concerns about their implications for democratic governance. The export of Chinese-made surveillance systems, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) networks, facial recognition tools, and data monitoring platforms, has been linked to the broader trend of digital authoritarianism in Africa (Feldstein, 2020). These technologies, often provided under the framework of smart city or public security initiatives, have the potential to enhance crime prevention and urban safety. However, their opaque implementation processes, lack of legal safeguards, and susceptibility to misuse present risks to civil liberties and democratic institutions (Polyakova & Meserole, 2021).

In Nigeria, Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE have supplied surveillance infrastructure through broader ICT and development deals (Igbokwe, 2023). While justified as tools for public safety and counterterrorism, these systems expand state monitoring capacities that can target journalists, activists, and political opponents (Buhaug & Gleditsch, 2022). Lacking robust data protection, surveillance growth has fueled debates on security-privacy trade-offs (Agbaje & Ojo, 2021). Procurement secrecy heightens risks of political misuse, especially during elections or unrest (Oloruntoba & Falade, 2022). Scholars link this trend to "authoritarian learning," with Nigeria adopting Chinese-style governance models (Gyimah-Boadi & Appiah, 2021).

### ***Data Privacy and Freedom of Expression***

The expansion of China–Nigeria cooperation in digital and infrastructural domains has intensified tensions between state security goals and citizens' rights to privacy and free expression. Core data infrastructures—identity systems, broadband backbones, public-safety platforms, and e-government portals—are often procured opaquely and weakly regulated, making technical defaults *de facto* policy. This “infrastructure-as-policy” dynamic shifts constitutional safeguards—what data may be collected, who accesses it, and retention limits—into vendor documents and executive directives with little scrutiny (Akanke, 2022; Makulilo, 2021). In Nigeria, privacy protections exist on paper but remain inconsistently enforced across ministries and agencies managing sensitive information.

Two parallel developments illuminate this contradiction. First, Nigeria's legal framework has improved: the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) of 2019 catalyzed compliance cultures in banking, telecoms, and fintech, and the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) of 2023 established a statutory commission with investigative and sanctioning powers. Second, the state's appetite for data-intensive technologies has grown rapidly, SIM registration and re-registration campaigns, national identity number (NIN) integration across services, CCTV-enabled “safe city” projects, social-media monitoring for cybercrime enforcement, and cloud-based portals for taxation, pensions, and social protection. Where institutional capacity, impact assessments, and independent audits lag behind deployment, the protective promise of NDPA/NDPR is diluted (Arowosegbe & Ojo, 2023). This gap is not unique to Nigeria, but the scale and pace of digitalization, augmented by vendor-financed projects from Chinese firms—magnify the stakes: a single misconfiguration or unlawful access can expose millions of citizens to surveillance, profiling, or data breaches without effective remedies.

### ***Infrastructure as Political Capital***

China's infrastructural investments in Nigeria—ranging from railways and highways to power plants and seaports—have not only reshaped the country's physical landscape but also become significant tools for political capital and legitimacy-building by incumbent leaders. In many cases, these projects are inaugurated close to election cycles, serving as visible evidence of governmental performance and as campaign material to garner voter support (Okoli & Ugochukwu, 2022). The political utility of such infrastructure often

overshadows questions of project sustainability, cost efficiency, and public consultation, as the emphasis shifts toward the immediate political mileage these developments can yield.

The strategic alignment of Chinese-funded projects with the political timelines of Nigerian administrations underscores the symbiotic relationship between external financing and domestic political imperatives. According to Ibrahim and Odubajo (2023), leaders in Nigeria have frequently leveraged large-scale infrastructure delivery as a way to signal development achievements while diverting attention from governance failures in transparency, accountability, and institutional reform. This creates a political narrative in which the state's legitimacy is derived more from the optics of visible infrastructure than from the deeper consolidation of democratic norms.

### ***Authoritarian Learning***

Authoritarian learning refers to the process through which states, particularly those with non-democratic tendencies, observe, adapt, and internalize strategies from other regimes to consolidate political control and weaken democratic institutions. In the context of China–Nigeria relations, this theme becomes relevant because China's political model and governance tools—especially in digital and infrastructural domains—provide subtle but powerful examples for Nigeria's political elite on how to maintain dominance while avoiding outright dictatorship. Authoritarian learning in this partnership does not necessarily involve direct imposition by China; rather, it emerges from the voluntary adoption of governance techniques perceived as effective for regime stability.

China's engagement with Nigeria has been characterized by a pragmatic approach that combines economic cooperation with a hands-off stance on internal politics, allowing Nigerian leaders to selectively borrow political practices that limit dissent while maintaining the appearance of democratic governance. As Levitsky and Way (2022) argue, authoritarian regimes often learn from one another by sharing tools for surveillance, control of public discourse, and manipulation of democratic processes without overtly abolishing them. In Nigeria, the exposure to China's centralized political model, where infrastructure development, economic growth, and state control of information coexist, has influenced governance strategies, particularly in managing elections, civil society engagement, and opposition politics. Below is the descriptive summary of question 3:

Theme	Key Participant Insights	Descriptive Commentary
<p><b>1. Digital Infrastructure Partnerships</b></p>	<p>China provides rapid, affordable ICT infrastructure (broadband, 4G/5G, e-government) through firms like Huawei and ZTE. Benefits include expanded access and modernization, but dependency on Chinese technology and centralized control can limit Nigeria's policy autonomy and transparency.</p>	<p>While these partnerships improve digital connectivity, they also create structural risks: centralized control, limited oversight, and potential for elite monopolization of ICT governance, which may inadvertently support authoritarian tendencies.</p>
<p><b>2. Surveillance Technology Use</b></p>	<p>Deployment of Chinese surveillance systems (CCTV, facial recognition, AI monitoring) enhances security but raises risks of political misuse, targeting of</p>	<p>Surveillance technologies, though framed as security tools, can undermine civil liberties and discourage political participation. Their opaque deployment reinforces a climate of political caution, potentially enabling digital authoritarianism.</p>

	<p>journalists, activists, and dissenters. Implementation often lacks transparency and legal safeguards.</p>	
<p><b>3. Data Privacy and Freedom of Expression</b></p>	<p>Weak enforcement of Nigeria’s data protection laws (NDPR 2019, NDPA 2023) amid Chinese-backed digital systems heightens risks of surveillance, prompting citizen self-censorship and creating chilling effects on civic freedoms.</p>	<p>China-backed digital partnerships enhance efficiency but, amid weak data governance and privacy gaps, also heighten risks of rights violations and restricted expression, underscoring the need for stronger regulatory oversight..</p>
<p><b>4. Infrastructure as Political Capital</b></p>	<p>Chinese-funded infrastructure projects are frequently timed around elections, serving as symbols of government performance, but often</p>	<p>Infrastructure projects are used for short-term political gain, reinforcing centralized authority and performance-based legitimacy that mirrors authoritarian governance models.</p>

	prioritize political legitimacy over transparency, sustainability, and local capacity-building.	
<b>5. Authoritarian Learning</b>	Nigerian elites increasingly emulate China's centralized governance and surveillance practices, with economic and technological dependence reinforcing subtle authoritarian tendencies.	Exposure to China's political model fosters the voluntary adoption of authoritarian practices in Nigeria, gradually weakening democratic institutions and normalizing state control over civic and political spaces.

### Conclusion

This study examined China–Nigeria relations and their impact on democratic stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, highlighting the interplay of economic interests, governance, and democratic norms. It explored China's influence through non-interference, infrastructure, trade, technology, and education. Findings show that while China provides significant economic opportunities, these often undermine transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. Its non-conditional model enables Nigerian elites to consolidate power, weaken institutions, and marginalize civil society, with limited pressure to uphold democratic principles such as human rights, free elections, and the rule of law.

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