



**EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL OF FOREIGN POLICY ON
NIGERIA -CHINA RELATIONS: A STUDY OF THE BUHARI ADMINISTRATION
(2015-2023)**

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Abstract

Diplomacy with China opened doors for roads, rails, and power works, it also raised fear of debt-trap. China gave vast loans, but with high stake in key works and raw goods. Nigeria's debt to China grew year by year, sparking worry that such funds were less a gift of growth and more a yoke of rule. The objectives is to assess the nature, outcomes, and challenges of diplomacy within this bilateral framework. Drawing from relevant theories, the study adopted realism and liberalism theories as the guiding theoretical frameworks. A qualitative data collection method was employed in this study through interviews conducted with twelve key informants. Respondents rated Nigeria's diplomatic approach as moderately effective but highlighted debt



dependency, transparency deficits, and poor negotiation capacity as key challenges. Qualitative insights revealed further that Buhari's diplomacy was pragmatic and development-oriented but constrained by weak institutional coordination and policy inconsistency. The study concluded that diplomacy served as an effective catalyst for infrastructure and trade growth but was uneven in impact. The study therefore recommended stronger institutional coordination, transparency in bilateral agreements, and diversification of foreign partnerships to ensure sustainable and equitable development outcomes.

Keywords: *Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Bilateral relation, Economic dependency.*

Introduction

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria Africa's most populous nation has pursued an active foreign policy grounded in regional leadership, anti-colonial solidarity, and South-South cooperation. Diplomacy has historically served as Nigeria's tool for building alliances, promoting African unity, defending sovereignty, and attracting investment. In the post-Cold War era, however, Nigeria's foreign policy increasingly shifted toward economic diplomacy and global economic integration, especially with emerging powers like China (Onyeama, 2023). Nigeria established diplomatic relations with China in 1971, gradually expanding the partnership into one involving trade, infrastructure financing, and security cooperation. By 2023, China had become Nigeria's largest bilateral creditor, holding over US\$4 billion about 85% of Nigeria's bilateral debt mainly through concessional infrastructure loans (Dauda, 2018; Agah & Ikenga, 2023; Reuters, 2025).

Under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), economic diplomacy became central to Nigeria's foreign policy as the administration sought external funding to address infrastructural deficits, unemployment, and declining oil revenues (Africanews, 2018; Agah & Ikenga, 2023). Buhari strengthened ties with China through FOCAC engagements, loan agreements, currency swap deals, and state visits (Dauda, Adie & Nwokedi, 2018; Buhari, 2018). This period saw increased Chinese involvement in Nigeria's railways, airports, power projects, and



telecommunications, aligning with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Ogbonnaya, 2020; Oni & Falade, 2021). Key Chinese-funded projects included the Abuja–Kaduna standard gauge railway and new airport terminals, widely celebrated as vital infrastructure (Buhari, 2018; AP News, 2024). However, Nigeria–China relations also generated significant debate. Critics raised concerns over transparency of loan terms, sovereignty clauses, limited technology transfer, and long-term debt sustainability (Okeke-Uzodike & Uche, 2019; Egbula & Zheng, 2011; Vanguard, 2022). Allegations of opaque contracting, exclusion of local labour, and trade imbalances further deepened skepticism (Orovwuje, 2020; Tribune Online, 2021; Ejiroghene, 2022; Obikaeze, 2023).

Meanwhile, some scholars reject claims of “debt-trap diplomacy,” arguing that Nigeria negotiated mutually beneficial terms and that Western narratives exaggerate the risks (Vanguard, 2025; Guardian, 2025). This divide reflects broader debates about whether Nigeria’s diplomacy under Buhari strengthened national interests or deepened dependency on China. Given these contrasting interpretations, Nigeria–China relations under Buhari offer a critical case for evaluating the effectiveness of diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy. This study therefore investigates how diplomatic strategies shaped economic, political, and infrastructural outcomes between both states and assesses the broader implications for Nigeria’s foreign policy trajectory.

Statement of the Problem

Foreign policy is the way a land deals with others, and diplomacy is the main tool by which such dealing is done. For Nigeria, a state with multi-ethnic group and strong need for growth, diplomacy is not mere choice but a must. Under the administration of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), ties with China grew wide and deep. These ties were built on loans, trade, and works of stone and steel. Yet, while many hailed such bonds as a path to wealth and growth, others saw them as chains that could bind Nigeria to fresh debts and weak hands. Here lies the heart of the problem. First, though diplomacy with China opened doors for roads, rails, and power works, it also raised fear of debt-trap. China gave vast loans, but with high stake in key



works and raw goods. Nigeria's debt to China grew year by year, sparking worry that such funds were less a gift of growth and more a yoke of rule. This leads us to ask: did Buhari's diplomacy seek true gain for Nigeria, or did it trade short-term growth for long-term economic dependency?

Second, the model of Nigeria–China ties under Buhari showed much imbalance. China came with set aims: to seek oil, gas, and markets for its goods, while Nigeria sought cash, skill, and tools. Yet, the flow was not even. Chinese firms led in building key works, while local firms and hands were left weak. This sharp bias shows a flaw in the way diplomacy was used; the deals may have met China's goals more than Nigeria's.

Objective of Study

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy in Nigeria, using Nigeria-China relations during the Buhari administration as a case study. The temporal focus is 2015–2023 which aligned with Buhari's presidency. The study focuses on Nigeria-China diplomatic relations from 2015 to 2023, covering the period of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey and semi-structured interview approaches. The descriptive component allowed for analysis of respondents' views through deeper insights through interviews with key informants directly involved in or knowledgeable about Nigeria–China diplomatic relations. 12 key informants were selected purposively for semi-structured interviews, including senior foreign affairs officers, university scholars, and international relations experts. The interviews were conducted to gather qualitative insights from purposively selected informants who possess relevant expertise or experience.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conceptual clarifications offer the analytical foundation for understanding the central ideas of this study. For research on Nigeria's diplomatic engagement with China under the Buhari



administration, it is important to define core terms such as diplomacy and foreign policy. These concepts guide the examination of how Nigeria formulated and implemented its international strategies during the period. By clarifying them, the study ensures precision and provides a coherent basis for analysis.

1. The Concept of Diplomacy

Diplomacy is the craft through which states communicate, negotiate, and manage relations an age-old tool of peace, conflict management, and strategic bargaining. While historically practiced by kings and envoys, its scope has expanded to include trade, health, climate, and human rights. Scholars note that this evolution has broadened diplomacy beyond traditional state actors. Rana (2015) argues that diplomacy has shifted from an elite activity to an arena shaped by embassies, global corporations, civil society, and individuals who influence global opinion. Bjola and Kornprobst (2018) further highlight the rise of “digital diplomacy,” where social media platforms shape diplomatic messaging. They emphasize that digital tools empower weaker states to project influence but also increase risks, as fast-paced online communication can threaten trust and escalate tension. Some scholars also link diplomacy more directly to economic needs and multilateral cooperation. Okpevra (2022) contends that African states especially Nigeria must view diplomacy as a driver of economic growth through trade deals, loans, and foreign investment. Under this lens, diplomats are judged by the markets they open and the development gains they secure. Meanwhile, Talibu and Abdurashheed (2025) stressed the importance of multilateral diplomacy, showing how Nigeria uses regional bodies like ECOWAS to enhance security and influence. Their work highlights that collective action strengthens states with limited individual reach and that modern diplomacy increasingly depends on building trust and shared strength within regional groups.

2. The Concept of Foreign Policy



Foreign policy refers to the plans, decisions, and actions through which a state manages its relations with the outside world, seeking security, economic growth, and international influence. Hill (2016) notes that foreign policy extends beyond wars, alliances, and treaties to include everyday interactions such as trade, migration, and cultural exchange. In this sense, foreign policy is a continuous process shaped by daily choices rather than isolated high-level events. Okpevra and Usiemure (2023) further emphasize that foreign policy is rooted in domestic conditions: a country's constitutional framework, institutional strength, and internal political stability determine what it can achieve abroad. For Nigeria, internal weaknesses such as fragile institutions or unclear legal structures often limit its foreign policy effectiveness, reinforcing the close link between domestic politics and external action. Contemporary debates also highlight the importance of regional and value-driven diplomacy. Talibu and Abdulrasheed (2025) argues that African states increasingly rely on multilateral bodies such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and the UN to pursue security and strategic interests, with Nigeria frequently using ECOWAS to influence regional peace and stability. Ahmed and Najimu (2025) also add that foreign policy is shaped not only by strategic needs but also by national values, pointing to Nigeria's Afrocentric orientation that places Africa at the center of its external engagements. This perspective suggests that Nigeria's foreign policy is driven by both material interests and a normative commitment to regional leadership and solidarity.

Literature Review

The literature review provides a structured exploration of existing scholarly works and perspectives relevant to the study. It organizes the review around key themes that are central to understanding the impact of diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy, particularly in relation to China under the Buhari administration as follows:

1. Nigeria–China Relations under the Buhari Administration (2015–2023)

Under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), Nigeria–China relations deepened more than at any other time, expanding into infrastructure development, trade, investment, and security



cooperation. As China's leading African trading partner, Nigeria became central to Beijing's Africa strategy, while Buhari made economic diplomacy with China a core element of foreign policy through alignment with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Numerous bilateral agreements were signed across infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and education. Notably, Nigeria secured a \$6 billion Chinese loan in 2016 to finance major projects such as the Abuja–Kaduna railway (Adebajo, 2020). Trade volumes surged, and China became Nigeria's largest import source. However, scholars also raised concerns about rising debt exposure and the long-term implications for Nigeria's sovereignty and policy autonomy (Okonkwo, 2021). Despite these concerns, diplomatic exchanges intensified through high-level visits, technical cooperation, and expanded project financing. Analysts like Adeniran (2021) contend that Buhari's tenure marked a period of pragmatic, interest-driven diplomacy aimed at maximizing economic benefits while navigating geopolitical pressures. This review evaluates the key dimensions, achievements, and challenges of Nigeria–China relations under Buhari's administration.

Firstly, under strategic diplomatic engagement during Muhammadu Buhari Administration, Nigeria–China relations experienced significant deepening, marked by intensified high-level visits, expanded bilateral agreements, and stronger institutional cooperation. Buhari's 2016 state visit to Beijing was pivotal, yielding over \$6 billion in infrastructure-focused agreements and reinforcing China's support for Nigeria's railways, power sector, and agriculture (The Nation, 2016). China framed the partnership around mutual respect, non-interference, and development cooperation, a point highlighted by Ogunsanwo (2021). Equally, Chinese Ambassador; Cui Jianchun described the Buhari era as a "golden period" of China–Nigeria cooperation (Daily Trust, 2021). Nigeria reaffirmed its commitment to the One China policy and strengthened collaboration through platforms such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where Nigeria emerged as a key African participant. The 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit provided additional financial packages that supported Nigeria's major road, rail, and energy projects (Eze, 2020). Institutional engagement also grew. Buhari's 2016 visit led to renewed cooperation commitments under the BRI, with President Xi Jinping



emphasizing the need to boost political trust and deepen development partnerships (Brautigam, 2020; The Guardian, 2016). High-level exchanges became frequent, underscoring the strategic importance both countries attached to the relationship.

Secondly, on infrastructure and development finance, China emerged as Nigeria's largest bilateral creditor under Buhari, funding multiple infrastructure projects critical to Buhari's economic recovery plan. The most prominent Chinese-funded projects include:

- i. The Abuja–Kaduna railway, inaugurated in 2016, with financing from China's Export–Import (Exim) Bank and executed by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC).
- ii. The Lagos–Ibadan standard gauge railway, which commenced operations in 2021, also funded by Exim Bank and built by CCECC.
- iii. The Zungeru hydropower project, supported by China's Sinohydro Corporation and designed to boost Nigeria's power generation capacity.

According to Adegbite and Aduloju (2021), Chinese loans provided through concessional terms were critical in addressing Nigeria's infrastructure deficit. However, critics like Nwankwo (2022) cautioned against over-reliance on Chinese credit, warning that Nigeria's rising debt-to-GDP ratio poses long-term sustainability risks. Despite these concerns, the Buhari government defended the loans, stating that they came with low interest rates, long tenors, and grace periods, which were preferable to Western commercial loans (Federal Ministry of Finance, 2020).

Thirdly, with respect to trade and economic exchange during Buhari's tenure, trade between Nigeria and China expanded significantly. China remained Nigeria's largest import source, accounting for 30% of total imports in 2021 (NBS, 2022). Imports included electronics, machinery, construction materials, and pharmaceuticals. Nigeria, on the other hand, exported mainly crude oil and solid minerals to China. While trade volume increased, the balance remained highly skewed in favor of China, leading to criticisms of trade dependency and local industry suppression. As Okonkwo (2021) observes, the influx of cheap Chinese goods adversely affected Nigerian manufacturers, leading to job losses and factory closures. Nevertheless, China



supported the establishment of free trade zones such as the Lekki Free Trade Zone in Lagos, which hosts Chinese industrial investors. Chinese companies also contributed to Nigeria's digital economy, with Huawei and ZTE supporting telecom infrastructure and training Nigerian engineers.

In terms of trade, China became Nigeria's leading import partner. Nigerian exports to China included crude oil and solid minerals, while imports consisted of machinery, electronics, and textiles. The trade volume between the two nations surpassed \$19 billion in 2022, although heavily skewed in China's favor. Chinese companies such as CCECC, Huawei, and Sinohydro gained dominant roles in Nigeria's infrastructure and telecommunications sectors (Umejei, 2020; Vanguard, 2022). However, critics raised several concerns. Firstly, the debt burden increased significantly. By 2023, Chinese loans constituted over 70% of Nigeria's total bilateral debt. Although Nigerian officials maintained that the loans were concessional and manageable, watchdog organizations such as Transparency International (2022), BudgIT (2021), and Amnesty International (2021) cautioned about potential debt distress and lack of transparency in contractual obligations.

In the area of military and security cooperation, China–Nigeria security collaboration expanded under Buhari, particularly in counter-terrorism and defense procurement. In 2018, Nigeria received military hardware, including combat aircraft and armored vehicles, from China to support the fight against Boko Haram (Vanguard, 2018). The China–Africa Defense and Security Forum served as a key platform for Nigeria to deepen defense ties with Beijing. The Chinese government provided training for Nigerian security personnel and shared intelligence technology to improve surveillance operations in the Northeast. According to Oche (2021), this aspect of cooperation demonstrated China's growing influence in Nigeria's national security architecture. Furthermore, Nigeria signed a mutual legal assistance treaty with China in criminal matters, aimed at tackling transnational crimes such as cybercrime, counterfeiting, and narcotics trafficking (The Guardian, 2020).



Furthermore, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 further underscored the closeness of Nigeria–China relations. China was among the first countries to provide medical assistance to Nigeria, including testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE), and technical support. A team of Chinese medical experts arrived in Abuja in April 2020 to support Nigerian efforts to contain the virus (Channels TV, 2020). Although, this assistance was appreciated by Nigerian authorities, it attracted backlash from local medical unions and civil society groups who questioned the transparency of the initiative and raised fears of espionage. Nonetheless, China’s vaccine diplomacy later included Nigeria in its Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccine donations, reinforcing its soft power in Africa.

Finally, in the area of cultural and educational exchange, it noteworthy to state that cultural diplomacy flourished during Buhari’s administration. In fact, China expanded its Confucius Institutes in Nigerian universities, promoting Chinese language and cultural education. As of 2023, Confucius Institutes had been established in the University of Lagos, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and Ahmadu Bello University (Eze, 2022). Scholarship programs and academic exchanges also increased, with thousands of Nigerian students studying in China under full or partial sponsorship. The cultural relationship helped foster people-to-people connectivity and enhanced mutual understanding, although concerns about limited reciprocal opportunities for Nigerian culture in China persisted.

Despite many achievements, Buhari’s China policy faced criticism from scholars, civil society, and foreign observers. Notable among them were:

- i. Debt-trap diplomacy fears: Critics, including some Western diplomats, argued that China was using loans to gain leverage over Nigeria’s critical infrastructure (Adebajo, 2021).
- ii. Poor project quality and transparency: Complaints about substandard roads and lack of competitive bidding in Chinese projects raised corruption and accountability issues (Punch, 2022).



- iii. Neglect of local contractors and labor: Many Chinese firms brought in expatriate labor, marginalizing Nigerian workers and violating local content laws.

Nonetheless, defenders of the relationship, such as Nigeria's former ambassador to China, Aminu Wali, contended that Chinese assistance had filled crucial gaps left by Western disengagement (Daily Trust, 2020).

2. The Impact of Diplomacy as a Tool of Nigeria's Foreign Policy during the Buhari Administration (2015–2023)

Diplomacy remains one of the most potent tools for implementing foreign policy in any sovereign state. Under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), Nigeria used diplomacy as a strategic mechanism to address domestic and international challenges, including economic recession, insecurity, global image decline, and infrastructure deficits. As Akinboye (2021) observes, Buhari adopted a pragmatic and functionalist diplomatic approach, prioritizing engagements that would yield tangible national benefits. This section evaluates the impact of diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy under Buhari, focusing on security cooperation, economic diplomacy, global image, multilateral leadership, and diaspora engagement.

One major impact of Buhari's diplomacy was the enhancement of national security through regional and global partnerships, especially in combating Boko Haram and other insurgent groups. Buhari strengthened Nigeria's role in regional security mechanisms such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin (Ikelegbe, 2017). His administration also expanded bilateral security cooperation with the United States, United Kingdom, China, and France to access intelligence, equipment, and training support. Diplomatic channels facilitated significant acquisitions, including the U.S. sale of 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft previously stalled due to human rights concerns (Obi, 2020). Defense cooperation with China also yielded military hardware and troop training, boosting Nigeria's counterinsurgency capacity (Oche, 2021). Additionally, Nigeria played a stabilizing diplomatic role in West Africa. The ECOWAS-led intervention backed by Nigeria restored democratic rule



in The Gambia in 2017 after Yahya Jammeh refused to relinquish power, strengthening Nigeria's image as a regional stabilizer (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2018).

Diplomacy was also central to reviving Nigeria's economy through strategic economic engagement. Following the 2016 recession, Buhari prioritized economic diplomacy, undertaking foreign visits to secure investments, attract loans, and expand trade. Relations with China deepened significantly, making China Nigeria's largest creditor and key infrastructure partner. Infrastructure diplomacy produced major projects such as the Lagos–Ibadan railway, Abuja–Kaduna railway, and the Zungeru hydropower plant (Adegbite & Aduloju, 2021). Nigeria also advanced economic integration within Africa by signing and ratifying the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2020, reflecting a shift toward proactive regional economic diplomacy (Obi, 2021). Rebranding Nigeria's global image was another critical outcome of Buhari's diplomacy. Faced with international concerns about corruption and insecurity, Buhari projected anti-corruption as a diplomatic theme. His efforts earned him recognition as the African Union's Anti-Corruption Champion in 2018 (Eze, 2020). Nigeria strengthened cooperation with the UAE, Switzerland, and the UK through mutual legal assistance treaties, enabling the recovery of looted assets, including Abacha-era funds (Nwoke, 2019). Nigeria's active participation in the UN General Assembly, G7 outreach meetings, and the World Economic Forum contributed to improved global perception. According to Adeniran (2020), these engagements restored international respect and enhanced investor confidence.

Diplomacy under Buhari also reinforced Nigeria's influence in multilateral organizations. Nigeria maintained active participation in the AU, ECOWAS, UN, and OIC. Buhari championed democratic stability in West Africa, intervening in crises in The Gambia, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau (Saliu, 2022). He also advocated UN Security Council reform to secure permanent African representation, with Nigeria as a leading candidate. Despite domestic security challenges, Nigeria continued contributing to UN peacekeeping missions, bolstering its global peace and security credentials (Akinyemi, 2017). Another dimension was the expansion of citizen



diplomacy. Buhari established the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) in 2019 to institutionalize diaspora engagement. His administration addressed crises involving Nigerians in South Africa, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, and launched the Nigeria Diaspora Investment Summit to attract diaspora contributions. Remittances exceeded \$20 billion annually, becoming a key foreign exchange source (Ogunsanwo, 2021). However, consular services remained weak and underfunded.

Despite achievements, Buhari's diplomacy faced criticisms. Analysts argue that it lacked coordination, was overly centralized, and depended heavily on China, raising debt and trade imbalance concerns (Nwankwo, 2022). Human rights issues, including the fallout from the EndSARS protests, also affected Nigeria's image. Furthermore, follow-up on diplomatic agreements was often weak (Saliu, 2022). Overall, diplomacy proved a vital tool of foreign policy under Buhari, though strategic and implementation gaps persisted. Notably, few studies have holistically examined diplomacy as a foreign policy tool within the Nigeria–China bilateral framework during this period, especially amid evolving geopolitical and domestic challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guides the study by explaining Nigeria's diplomatic behaviour with China under Buhari. Using Realism and Liberalism, the study interprets diplomacy as a foreign-policy tool shaped by national interests, power needs, and economic cooperation. Realism explains Nigeria's pursuit of security and strategic gains, while Liberalism highlights institutional cooperation, trade, and mutually beneficial partnerships between both states as further buttresses as follows;

1. Realism

Realism, rooted in the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau, which viewed the international system as anarchic and states as rational actors driven by power, security, and



national interest (Morgenthau, 1948). Diplomacy, from this perspective, is a strategic tool for maximizing advantages, not a moral enterprise. Nigeria's diplomacy with China under Buhari reflects realist logic, as the administration sought economic survival, infrastructure development, and security support amid recession, insurgency, and capacity deficits. Turning to China for loans, military hardware, and strategic partnerships aligned with realist imperatives of power balancing and national capability enhancement (Ikelegbe, 2017). Buhari's deepening ties with China despite Western criticism demonstrate pragmatic non-alignment, consistent with Nigeria's long-standing realist foreign-policy posture (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2018). Nigeria's refusal to confront China on ideological issues and its leadership in ECOWAS peacekeeping interventions in The Gambia and Mali further illustrate realist goals of preserving sovereignty, regional stability, and hegemonic influence (Adebajo, 2020).

2. Liberalism

Liberalism viewed international relations through cooperation, interdependence, and the role of institutions in promoting peace and mutual benefit (Keohane & Nye, 1977). It emphasizes that states pursue economic growth, shared values, and rule-based engagement. Nigeria's diplomacy with China under Buhari aligns with liberal principles through participation in institutional frameworks such as FOCAC, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and AfCFTA, which facilitated trade, development financing, and technical cooperation. Soft-power tools including Confucius Institutes, cultural exchanges, and scholarships reflect liberal notions of people-to-people diplomacy (Eze, 2020). Buhari's vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19, conducted through cooperation with China, WHO, and GAVI, further demonstrates multilateral liberal engagement (Obi, 2021). Additionally, institutions like NIDCOM and Nigeria's active role in the UN and AU highlight liberalism's multi-actor and cooperative approach to foreign policy.

This study adopts the two theories for the work because no single framework fully explains Nigeria's diplomatic behaviour under Buhari (2015–2023). Realism and liberalism provide the



clearest understanding of Nigeria's foreign policy choices. While realism explains Buhari's security-driven engagement with China, where partnerships in defence, counterterrorism, and infrastructure financing were guided by the need to strengthen state survival, sovereignty, and national capability, liberalism, in contrast, highlights Nigeria's reliance on multilateral cooperation, economic diplomacy, and interdependence. Buhari's pursuit of foreign investment, participation in international institutions, and development-oriented cooperation with China aligns with liberal expectations of mutual benefits and cooperative international relations. Using both theories allows for a balanced evaluation of Nigeria's foreign policy outcomes, including gains in infrastructure and international visibility as well as challenges such as debt risks and unequal trade. As Saliu (2022) notes, combining theoretical perspectives enhances analysis of Nigeria's external relations.

Analysis, Findings and Discussion

The study presents, analyses, and interprets the qualitative data generated from twelve participants, each offering unique but complementary perspectives on Nigeria–China relations under the Buhari administration. The study's Respondents comprises of five diplomats- a senior foreign service officer, a chief diplomatic officer at the Nigerian embassy in Beijing, a deputy director for Asian affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a director of protocol, and a diplomat serving at a China–Africa multilateral forum capturing institutional foreign policy dynamics. Additional views came from a trader (importer and exporter) of goods (to and fro) China, a policy analyst, and a media correspondent, two federal civil servants from the Ministries of Finance and Trade and Investment, an academia and a civil society advocate. Their responses were organized and analyzed for the study under the following themes:

I. Foreign Policy Goals under the Buhari Administration

Respondents consistently described Nigeria's foreign policy under Buhari as strongly oriented toward economic diplomacy, security cooperation, and great-power engagement for national



development. Respondent 1 (a MOFA diplomat) noted that the administration prioritized economic diversification, regional integration, and attracting investment. Respondent 6 (a policy analyst) added that diplomacy shifted from political symbolism to a “diplomacy of yield,” requiring tangible domestic returns. Respondent 7 (a civil society advocate) emphasized expectations that Nigeria–China relations would deliver infrastructure and jobs. From the business perspective, Respondent 8 (a trader) observed expanded trade with China and greater openness to investment partnerships. Despite the economic focus, respondents stressed security as a key driver; Respondent 4 (MOFA diplomat) highlighted how insurgency and regional threats shaped external engagements. Overall, the study infers that Buhari’s diplomacy sought development-oriented outcomes but faced gaps between ambition and institutional capacity.

II. Nigeria’s Diplomatic Approach toward China

Nigeria’s diplomatic approach toward China under Buhari emphasized economic pragmatism, high-level engagement, and outcome-oriented bilateral mechanisms. Respondent 3 (MOFA diplomat) noted a shift from cordial relations to a development-focused partnership, asking, “What can China bring that advances our development?” Respondent 1 highlighted that major Chinese visits were used as negotiation platforms for infrastructure, trade, and technical cooperation, making diplomacy an instrument of measurable outcomes. Respondent 4 (MOFA diplomat) added that state visits, memoranda of understanding, joint commissions, and technical missions activated comprehensive bilateral engagement, bringing together ministries, departments, and agencies. From the financial perspective, Respondent 11 (Ministry of Finance) emphasized that Nigeria engaged China as a source of finance, infrastructure, and industrial support, using loans and concessional funding to centralize infrastructure negotiations. However, critiques emerged: Respondent 6 (policy analyst) observed weak institutional coordination, with ministries often acting separately, while Respondent 3 noted that despite multiple MOUs, tracking, monitoring, and follow-up were inconsistent diplomacy initiated deals, but domestic systems struggled with implementation.

III. Bilateral Cooperation



Respondents identified infrastructure, trade and investment, education and culture, agriculture, and security as key areas of Nigeria–China cooperation under Buhari. Respondent 2 (Beijing-based diplomat) highlighted infrastructure, noting China’s role in rail networks, airports, ports, power, and free-trade zones as central to Nigeria’s agenda. Respondent 10 (Ministry of Trade & Investment) emphasized trade, stating diplomacy aimed to attract Chinese investment and co-production, while Respondent 8 (Trader) added that improved relations eased sourcing and negotiating supply chains, though challenges remained.

In education and culture, Respondent 5 (Diplomat in Hong Kong) noted scholarships, staff exchanges, and people-to-people ties, which Respondent 9 (Academia) said enhanced human capital through language skills, technical exposure, and networks. Regarding agriculture, Respondent 7 (CSO Advocate) observed that demonstration zones and technology centers were established with China, though scale was modest. In security, Respondent 3 noted collaboration in counter-terrorism support and peacekeeping training. Overall, cooperation spanned multiple sectors, with infrastructure and trade at the core, supported by education, agriculture, and security. Diplomacy directly linked to these areas, with agreements often preceding or accompanying project initiation. However, several respondents, including Respondent 6 (Policy Analyst), noted Nigeria’s limited domestic absorption of benefits, as local industry participation, technology transfer, and project monitoring often lagged. Thus, while bilateral cooperation aligned with Nigeria’s developmental ambitions, gaps remained between commitments and actual domestic value realization.

IV. Effectiveness of Diplomacy as a Tool of Foreign Policy

Most respondents agreed that diplomacy was Nigeria’s strongest instrument for advancing national interests under Buhari, though its effectiveness varied with context, institutional capacity, and policy goals. Respondent 1 (Diplomat, MOFA) noted that “Buhari’s diplomacy with China was not about grand speeches; it was about what could be brought back home,” reflecting a shift toward pragmatic, development-focused diplomacy, consistent with Ezeani and Ngoka (2022). Respondent 2 (consular staff, Beijing) emphasized that embassies shifted from



protocol to economic negotiations, expecting measurable outputs such as agreements, investments, or training exchanges. Respondent 3 (Diplomat, MOFA) added that “Foreign policy became a function of national development plans,” aligning with Adewumi and Ayomola (2024), who describe Nigeria’s China policy as developmental diplomacy aimed at economic transformation. However, several interviewees highlighted institutional weaknesses undermining effectiveness. Respondent 4 (Diplomat) observed that while infrastructure projects were realized, domestic follow-up was inconsistent; Respondent 5 (Diplomat, MOFA) added that monitoring ambitious deals was challenging, echoing Oghuvbu (2022) on bureaucratic fragmentation and lack of inter-agency synergy. Despite these issues, most respondents rated Nigeria’s diplomacy with China as effective symbolically. Respondent 2 noted that Nigeria’s consistent FOCAC participation improved its image, though “diplomacy only opened the door; domestic governance determines how far we could walk through it.” Respondent 9 (Academia) summarized: “Diplomacy provided the architecture, but implementation provided the bricks,” confirming Toogood (2022) that sustainability depended on Nigeria’s ability to absorb and regulate Chinese engagement.

V. Economic and Trade Perspectives

Data gathered from the interview responses revealed that economic diplomacy was unanimously described by respondents as the “core” of Nigeria–China relations. For instance, ten of the twelve interviewees emphasized that bilateral ties revolved around trade, investment, and infrastructure financing. Respondent no 1 explained that “Buhari’s foreign policy was about diversify Nigeria’s economy through China’s capital and technology.” Second respondent described it as “development diplomacy that bring physical results, and not just communiqués.” According to another respondent (a official of Ministry of Finance) “diplomatic relation with china became an avenue for financing the rail and power sectors.” This view reflects Nigeria’s broader use of diplomacy to access concessional loans and development financing for infrastructure projects, such as the Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan railways. Ezeani and Ngoka (2022) confirmed that Chinese investment in Nigeria’s transport and energy sectors



accelerated between 2016 and 2020, making China the country’s largest source of bilateral infrastructure funding.

Furthermore, Respondent no 6 (a Policy Analyst) observed that diplomacy was “visible in the field.” And added that: “If you travel along the Lagos–Ibadan expressway or the new rail line, you can see the fingerprints of foreign policy decisions.” Though, the Respondent cautioned that “economic diplomacy should not end with construction that it should promote local employment and technology transfer.” Looking at it from a private-sector perspective: respondent no 8 (a trader dealing with china products) said “For us traders, the embassy made things easier visa processing, supplier verification, and business fairs improved. The Respondent however submitted that customs officers at port and foreign exchange instability constitute a major challenge.” Similarly, respondent no 3 (a Diplomat) highlighted that while trade volume increased, “imports far outweighed exports as Nigeria sells crude oil and bought finished goods from China. The work of Samuel, Oladimeji, and Ovuete (2024) confirmed this imbalance, showing that China became Nigeria’s dominant trading partner between 2015 and 2020, as the trade relationship remained heavily skewed in China’s favor.

From a governance perspective, Respondent no 4 (a Diplomat) submitted that “Nigeria needed a national strategy for managing the debt and ensuring that infrastructure built with Chinese loans served productive ends.” In the same view, Respondent no 7 (Civil Society Advocate) echoed this and argued that “the problem in Nigeria – china relation is not diplomacy it’s transparency. The Respondent submitted that Citizens hardly see the contracts.” These submissions aligned with Oghuvbu (2022), who stresses that the absence of clear disclosure frameworks has hindered public accountability in Nigeria–China economic agreements. Additionally, Respondent no 10 (a Trade and Investment Official) added that Nigeria attempted to use diplomacy to attract Chinese manufacturers into its free-trade and industrial zones. Through negotiation with Chinese firms to produce goods in Nigeria localize, but many of these Chinese firms preferred to import more goods to Nigeria rather than build industries in Nigeria.” Toogood (2022) confronted this by affirming that such outcomes are typical in Africa’s economic diplomacy with China, where



trade facilitation often outweighs industrial deepening. Despite these criticism, Respondent no 9 (an Academia) maintained that the economic dimension of diplomacy with china “brought Nigeria closer to global value chain and expanded the country’s bargaining capacity in Asia.” However, the respondent cautioned that “diplomacy must evolve from infrastructure-seeking to innovation-seeking. This align with the position of Adewumi and Ayomola (2024) who averred that Nigeria’s foreign policy will only achieve sustainability when its economic diplomacy promotes domestic industrial competence, not just external financing.

VI. Challenges hampering effective use of diplomacy as foreign policy tools in Nigeria-China relations

Interview responses shows that major obstacles facing Nigeria–China diplomacy under the Buhari administration revolves around four recurring themes namely: debt sustainability; transparency and accountability; policy inconsistency; and unequal partnership dynamics as revealed as follows;

- a. Debt Sustainability: The issue of growing external debt is the most cited challenges. In fact respondent no 1 (a Diplomat at MOFA) admitted that “Nigeria engagement with China gave us infrastructure, but it also multiplied our debt repayment obligations.” Also, respondent 11 (a staff of FMOF) acknowledged that “China’s loans were concessional, yet it added pressure to Nigeria’s debt portfolio.” This correlated to the study by, Ezeani and Ngoka (2022) which confirm that by 2020, Chinese loans accounted for over 10% of Nigeria’s bilateral debt, sparking public concern over fiscal sustainability.
- b. Transparency and Accountability: Respondents 7 (Civil Society Advocate) described a “culture of opacity” surrounding many bilateral agreements as Citizens cannot access the details of the deals. The Respondents submitted further that even the National Assembly who was expected to do oversight even struggles to get the full loan documents. This observation was further amplified by Oghuvbu (2022), who noted that secrecy in contract negotiations undermines democratic oversight and erodes public trust. Respondent no 4 (a Diplomat)



added that “transparency is not a Chinese problem it is a Nigerian one.as Nigerians simply do not insist on disclosure.”

- c. Policy Inconsistency and Institutional Weakness: Respondent no 3 (a Diplomat) that highlighted the lack of policy coordination across Nigerian ministries, department and agencies of government as each ministry sometimes negotiated separate MOUs with China without harmonizing goals. This made Nigeria appear fragmented.” Respondent no 6 (a policy Analyst) called this “silo diplomacy,” where ministries act independently without an overarching national framework. This lack of institutional collaboration, according to Adewumi and Ayomola (2024), limits Nigeria’s ability to extract maximum benefit from external partnerships because implementation is inconsistent.
- d. Unequal Partnership Dynamics: Several Respondents expressed concern about Nigeria’s relative low bargaining power. From example. Respondent no 5 (a Diplomat) stated that “China often comes to the table with a clear agenda such as industrial exports, market access, and influence while Nigeria negotiates on short-term needs.” The Respondent elaborated further that “Diplomacy cannot substitute for domestic production. Nigeria must have something valuable to exchange.” This structural inequality is well documented by Samuel et al. (2024), who argued that China’s dominance in trade and finance creates an asymmetric interdependence that African states have yet to balance effectively.

Further to the foregoing, some Respondents echoed this sentiment at a more practical level in the course of the held work, the study visited some Chinese factories which they have Nigerian buyers lined up. But when Chinese investors come here, we don’t have matching industrial infrastructure to receive them.” Toogood (2022) in their work also observed that without sustained investment in local production, African states remain at the receiving end of the China–Africa partnership. Nonetheless, some Respondents called for caution against excessive pessimism. Respondent no 2 (a Diplomat) specifically stated that “every relationship between unequal economies starts asymmetrically and that diplomacy is about managing that imbalance intelligently.” Also Respondent no 11 (an official of FMOF) added: “China offers what the West no longer does long-term financing and patient capital. It’s



Nigeria to us to negotiate better.” The main lesson drawn from the Respondents submission was that effective diplomacy must be anchored on transparency, policy coherence, and domestic economic strength. This was the crux of Ezeani and Ngoka (2022) is conclusion that Nigeria’s diplomatic future with China will depend not merely on negotiation skill, but on the country’s internal governance and capacity to use foreign partnerships for self-sustaining growth.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Nigeria’s diplomacy with China during Buhari Administration (2015–2023) was primarily driven by developmental needs, securing capital, technology, and expertise for infrastructure in transport and energy. Diplomacy proved effective when guided by clear goals and supported by strong institutions, as seen in major infrastructure projects and increased trade under Buhari Administration. However, concerns about debt sustainability, project oversight, and equitable benefit distribution remained key major challenges. Nigeria’s approach shifted from traditional political diplomacy to pragmatic, results-oriented engagement, but its long-term success depends on transparent agreement management, local industry development, and avoiding overdependence on external partners. The Nigeria–China experience during Buhari Administration shows that diplomacy yields lasting gains only with strong domestic institutions, coordinated policies, and effective implementation.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings and conclusion, the study recommends the following to strengthen Nigeria’s use of diplomacy as a tool for foreign policy:

1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should coordinate all ministries and agencies involved in bilateral relations to prevent policy overlap and ensure consistent project monitoring.
2. Diplomats should receive ongoing training in negotiation, project finance, and economic policy to strengthen Nigeria’s bargaining power.



3. All bilateral agreements, especially loans and investments, should be publicly disclosed, with parliamentary and civil-society oversight to enhance transparency and public trust.
4. Nigeria should use its China partnership to attract manufacturing investments and technology transfer, prioritizing domestic production and skills development over import dependence.
5. Diplomatic projects must undergo environmental and social impact assessments, align with national development plans, and ensure equitable regional participation.
6. While maintaining strong ties with China, Nigeria should diversify its foreign policy by engaging other emerging economies and regional partners to reduce overreliance and enhance strategic flexibility.

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