
**CHINA–NIGERIA TRADE RELATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A DEPENDENCY THEORY
PERSPECTIVE****Abbas Ayodele Taiwo**

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ABSTRACT

Amid Nigeria's growing economic engagement with China, concerns have emerged about the long-term implications of this partnership for sustainable economic development. This study analysed the dynamics of China–Nigeria trade relations, anchored on dependency theory. A quantitative methodology was adopted, utilizing data from the UN Comtrade Database, Chinese Customs Authority, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and peer-reviewed academic literature. Descriptive statistical methods, including trend analysis and import-export ratios, were employed to assess bilateral trade flows between Nigeria and China from 1999 to 2023. The findings revealed a consistent upward trajectory in trade volume over the 24 years, alongside a deepening asymmetry. The study also revealed that Nigeria exported \$0.6 billion worth of goods to China in 1999 compared to \$1.2 billion in imports. By 2023, exports had increased modestly to \$1.61 billion, while imports surged to \$18.99 billion, resulting in a trade deficit of \$17.38 billion. This persistent imbalance, coupled with Nigeria's continued export of raw materials, confirms a structural dependency in the trade relationship and constrains sustainable economic development. The study recommended that Nigeria should implement a strategic export diversification plan by incentivizing non-oil sectors such as agro-processing, solid minerals beneficiation, and light manufacturing. Bilateral trade agreements with China should also be revised to improve market access for Nigerian products. Furthermore, the government should establish an industrial policy council to integrate trade, investment, and education strategies in support of long-term industrialization.

Keywords: *Bilateral Trade, China-Nigeria Trade Relations, Technology Transfer, Dependency Theory and Sustainable Development*

1. Introduction

China and Nigeria officially established diplomatic ties in 1971, initiating a multifaceted and evolving alliance that includes trade, investment, political discussions, and cultural exchanges (Idrees, 2024). Over the last fifty years, this bilateral relationship has grown considerably, especially in terms of economic collaboration. While China has established strategic trade and investment relationships across continents including Latin America, Asia, and Europe its foreign policy in recent decades has placed increased emphasis on Africa, pursuing strategic partnerships and securing access to crucial natural resources in Nigeria, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Tanzania, Angola and so forth (Alden, 2007). Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa and one of the continent's largest economies, has become a key component of China's strategy towards Africa (Taylor, 2009).

Currently, China is one of Nigeria's leading trading partners, with two-way trade approximating \$22.6 billion in 2023, based on reports from the Chinese Customs Authority (Egole, 2024). This rising interaction highlights China's expanding economic presence in Nigeria, particularly within essential sectors such as oil and gas, infrastructure, telecommunications, and manufacturing. The relationship has been further formalized through initiatives like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and various bilateral agreements that encourage investment and technical collaboration (Ige & Akingbesote, 2018; Taylor, 2006).

Nigeria's appeal for partnerships with China is influenced by China's policy of non-interference in domestic affairs and its proven ability to rapidly mobilize financial resources and technical expertise (Iyasu, 2017). This non-conditional approach sharply contrasts with that of many Western development partners, who typically tie aid and investment to governance reforms, transparency, and human rights commitments. China's emphasis on state sovereignty and its unconditional cooperation model resonates with several African governments, including Nigeria (Mechanix, 2022). Furthermore, China's strategic investments in large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, seaports, railways, and energy systems closely align with Nigeria's development priorities (Ezeani & Ngoka, 2022).

Nevertheless, in spite of these strategic partnerships, Nigeria's trade engagement with China presents challenges that warrant critical investigation. One of the most pressing concerns is the persistent and widening trade imbalance. In 2023 alone, Nigeria recorded a total bilateral trade volume of \$20.6 billion with China, comprising \$18.99 billion in Chinese exports to Nigeria and only \$1.61 billion in Nigerian exports to China resulting in a trade deficit of \$17.38 billion (UN Comtrade Database, 2024). This imbalance underscores Nigeria's dependence on the export of low-value raw materials while heavily relying on the import of manufactured Chinese

goods such as electronics, machinery, textiles, and synthetic fabrics. The influx of low-cost and, in many cases, substandard goods can reduced competitiveness of domestic industries, and de-industrialization. Additionally, there are growing lack of adequate technology transfer or meaningful local capacity development. These challenges raise serious questions about the sustainability and fairness of the China-Nigeria trade partnership, thereby justifying the need for a critical assessment (Ugwu *et al.*, 2022). This paper analyzed China-Nigeria trade relations through the perspective of dependency theory. It examined trade volumes, and the implications for Nigeria's sustainable economic development. The study provided actionable policy suggestions to enhance balance, fairness, and long-term sustainability within this strategic partnership.

To achieve these objectives, the study has been structured into six (6) sections with the introduction as section one. Section two is the literature review. Section three is the methodology of the study and section four is the data analysis. While section five discusses the findings of the study, section six forms the conclusion and policy recommendations of the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Consideration

Trade is generally understood as the voluntary exchange of goods, services, and capital among individuals, businesses, or nations. At an international level, trade enables countries to exploit comparative and absolute advantages, enhance resource allocation, and attain improved economic efficiency (Krugman *et al.*, 2018). It encourages specialization, increases consumer choices, fosters competition, and stimulates economic growth by allowing countries to obtain goods and services that might not be produced efficiently at home. Moreover, trade is vital for facilitating the transfer of technology, innovation, and knowledge across borders, which can fast-track development and industrialization in less-developed nations.

However, engaging in trade also brings forth numerous challenges. Disparities in trade relationships, especially between advanced and developing countries, often lead to structural trade imbalances, excessive dependency on imports, and increased vulnerability to external economic fluctuations (Bhagwati, 2004). These factors can weaken local industries, widen developmental disparities, and intensify economic dependency particularly when trade focuses on primary commodities that offer minimal value addition (Rodrik, 2007).

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development refers to a type of development that addresses the current needs without compromising future generations' abilities to satisfy their own needs

(WCED, 1987). It combines three essential dimensions: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.

Sustainable development in trade relations emphasizes the importance of equitable economic arrangements that prevent dependency and exploitation (UNCTAD, 2022). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2023) highlights that commodity dependence is often linked to underdevelopment, which can perpetuate economic disparities and hinder progress toward sustainable development goals. Additionally, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) has explored vulnerabilities related to critical trade dependencies, noting that such dependencies can pose significant economic and societal risks, underscoring the need for balanced trade relationships. Thus, an evaluation of Nigeria's trade relationship with China is essential to assess if the current path fosters mutual benefits or deepens structural inequalities.

2.2 Empirical Review

A number of empirical studies have investigated the intricate dynamics of China-Nigeria trade relations. Nabine (2009) utilized secondary data to evaluate the long-term prospects of trade between China and Nigeria. The findings suggested that, although trade with China did not directly foster immediate economic growth in Nigeria, it provided developmental opportunities through investments in infrastructure and capital inflows.

Garba (2025) employed secondary data to identify key opportunities for Nigeria, including the transfer of technology, growth of industries, and access to financial resources. Nonetheless, the research also pointed out adverse effects such as environmental damage and the displacement of local businesses due to an influx of competitive products from China. Appleyard *et al.* (2006) leveraged secondary data to investigate how China's economic growth impacted Nigeria's trade performance. Their results indicated a widespread belief that China's expansion had negative implications for its African trading partners, causing trade imbalances and constraining local industrial capabilities.

Halidu and Atnadu (2022) utilized secondary data to analyze Nigeria-China trade from 2010 to 2019, revealing ongoing trade imbalances and Nigeria's growing reliance on Chinese manufactured goods. Ibrahim (2019) examined secondary trade data from 1992 to 2016, noting a substantial increase in the volume of bilateral trade, which heightened concerns regarding Nigeria's increasing trade deficit. Shibayan (2024) applied secondary methods to examine Nigeria-China relations, focusing on a \$1.2 billion agreement between the Nigerian government and the China National Chemical Engineering Corporation (CNCEC) for the rehabilitation of a gas processing facility. The study suggested that this project could strengthen Nigeria's

energy security and enhance industrial production, though it cautioned against excessive dependence on foreign investment.

Ugwu *et al.* (2022) carried out a qualitative content analysis of trade policy documents relating to Nigeria and China. Their findings indicated that the arrival of Chinese products had led to de-industrialization, hampered local innovation, and increased Nigeria's economic dependency. Chiedozie *et al.* (2024) analyzed secondary data spanning from 1999 to 2023, concluding that while the economic outcomes of China-Nigeria trade predominantly benefited China, socio-political interactions, including cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges, had yielded mutual benefits. Despite the valuable empirical contributions of these studies, none sufficiently examined the relationship between China-Nigeria trade and sustainable development from a dependency theory viewpoint. This study addresses that crucial gap.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This research employed dependency theory as its primary analytical framework to examine the developing dynamics of China-Nigeria trade relations. This theory, which emerged from the structuralist thought in Latin America during the 1960s and was articulated by notable scholars such as Raúl Prebisch, Andre Gunder Frank, and Theotonio Dos Santos, posited that the underdevelopment of peripheral (developing) countries is not a mere transitional phase, but a structural condition perpetuated by the global capitalist system (Frank, 1967). It asserted that the economic success of the 'core' (developed nations) is fundamentally built on the exploitation and dependency of the 'periphery,' particularly through mechanisms such as imbalanced trade relations, exploitative financial flows, and technological subordination (Dos Santos, 1970).

Relevance of Dependency Theory to the Study

In the context of China-Nigeria relations, dependency theory provides a valuable framework for comprehending how Nigeria's growing dependence on Chinese imports, concessional loans, and infrastructure projects perpetuate a new form of dependency. China's model of development financing in Nigeria, which features minimal conditionality and swift project implementation, can promote infrastructural advancement. However, this model has also raised fears of "resource-backed dependency," in which Nigeria trades strategic assets and policy space for short-term financial relief and access to technology (Landry, 2018). Such a dynamic may impede local industrialization, restrict sustainable technology transfer, and worsen trade deficits. Moreover, the existing trade structure where Nigeria mainly exports raw materials, particularly crude oil, and imports high-value manufactured goods from China reinforces the centre-periphery logic inherent in dependency theory.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative method to evaluate Nigeria-China trade relations and their implications for Nigeria's economic sustainability. This approach was considered appropriate given the availability of numerical trade data and the study's focus on measuring trends, imbalances, and structural patterns over time.

Data Sources

The research relied on data, gathered from verifiable and reputable institutions. These included Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Chinese Customs Authority, UN Comtrade Database, International Trade Centre (ITC), Published peer-reviewed journal articles. These sources provided comprehensive time-series data on bilateral trade volumes, import and export values, and trade balances between Nigeria and China. A 20-year data window (1999–2023) was used to analyse trade volume, to achieve the study's objectives. Criteria for inclusion included data availability, thematic alignment with the research problem, credibility of the data source, and coverage of key trade indicators such as annual trade volumes, import-export ratios, and trade balances.

4. Data Analysis

Nigeria-China Trade Relations (1999-2023)

Table 1: China-Nigeria Bilateral Trade Summary (2023, Values in USD Millions)

Category	Details
Total Bilateral Trade Volume	\$22.6 billion
China's Ranking (Global)	Top global trading partner for Nigeria
Nigeria's Ranking (Africa)	Third-largest African trading partner for China
Key Chinese Exports to Nigeria (Nov. 2023) values in U.S. dollars (USD)	
Synthetic filament yarn woven fabric	\$160 million
Pesticides	\$84.1 million
Non-knit women's suits	\$81.5 million
Mobile telephone devices	\$67.2 million
Artificial hair	\$59 million
Key Nigerian Exports to China (Nov. 2023) values in U.S. dollars (USD)	
Petroleum gas	\$95.8 million
Crude petroleum	\$71.5 million
Niobium, tantalum, vanadium, zirconium ore	\$13.5 million
Zinc ore	\$13.1 million
Raw aluminum	\$12.6 million

Source: Chinese Customs Authority; Egole (2024). <https://punchng.com/nigeria-china-trade-hits-23bnsays-envoy/>

This study employed descriptive statistical methods to analyse bilateral trade flows between Nigeria and China over 25 years (1999–2023). Specifically, trend analysis and import-export ratio calculations were used to assess trade patterns and structural imbalances. The data were obtained from reputable sources, including the UN Comtrade Database, the Chinese Customs Authority. The summary in Table 1 presents key trade indicators for the year 2023. Table 1 illustrates the persistence of a trade imbalance, with Nigeria predominantly exporting low-value raw materials while importing high-value manufactured goods.

To trace the evolution of trade flows over time, this study analysed longitudinal trade data between Nigeria and China from 1999 to 2023. The aim was to capture trends in total trade volumes, export and import values, and the resulting trade balances. Table 2 presents a time-series summary of bilateral trade statistics, highlighting the persistent trade imbalance and the structural nature of the relationship over the 25 years.

Table 2: Bilateral Trade Statistics between Nigeria and China from 1999 to 2023

Years	Total trade in Billions (US Dollars)	China's Exports to Nigeria (In Billion)	China's Imports from Nigeria (Nigeria's Export)
2023	20.6	18.99	1.61
2022	22.9	21.4	1.52
2021	19.9	17.4	3.4
2020	12.8	9.9	2.9
2019	19.2	15.9	3.3
2018	18.9	15.7	3.2
2017	14.9	11.9	3
2016	11.1	8.3	2.8
2015	13.8	11.1	2.7
2014	14.3	11.2	3.1
2013	14.6	11.3	3.3
2012	14.3	11.3	3
2011	12.3	9.3	3
2010	10.9	8.2	2.7
2009	7.7	5.7	2
2008	8.3	5.6	3.1
2007	7.1	4.7	2.4
2006	6.7	4.5	2.2
2005	5.1	3.4	1.7
2004	3.3	2.1	1.2
2003	2.2	1.5	0.7325
2002	1.7	1	0.67
2001	1.1	0.72	0.42
2000	1.1	0.71	0.41
1999	0.93	0.56	0.37

Source: Adapted from UN Comtrade Database (2024); International Trade Center (2024).

Table 2 illustrates the evolving trajectory of China-Nigeria trade from 1999 to 2023, highlighting a significant and persistent trade imbalance in China’s favour, growing trade volumes, and Nigeria’s continued reliance on raw commodity exports. This is further illustrated by Figure 1.

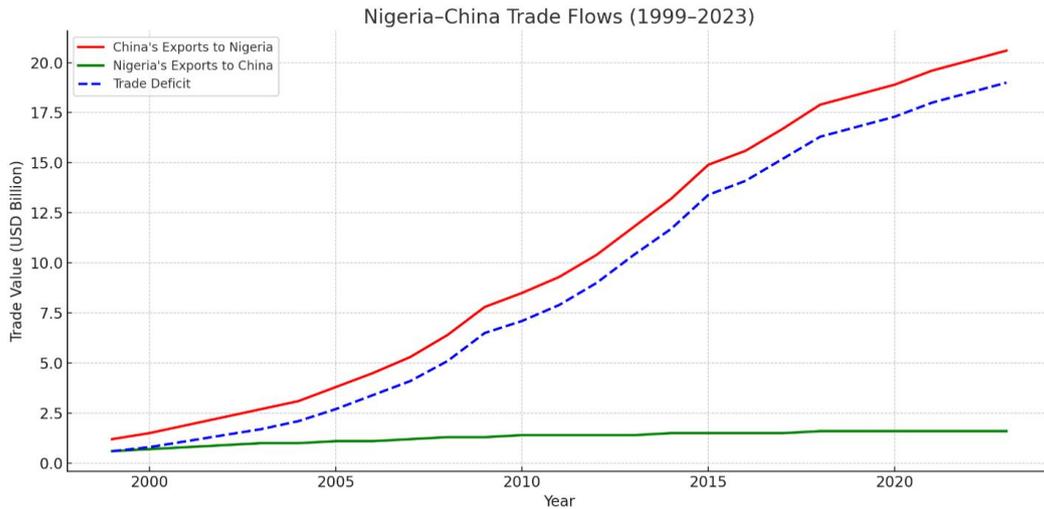


Figure 1: Nigeria–China Trade Trend (1999–2023)

Figure 1 shows trade volume growth, import-export imbalance between Nigeria and China. Beyond trade, China’s economic engagement with Nigeria has expanded significantly into infrastructure financing, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Between 2012 and 2023, Chinese firms funded and executed numerous large-scale projects across critical sectors such as transportation, energy, and logistics. Table 3 summarizes key Chinese-funded infrastructure initiatives in Nigeria during this period, detailing the nature of each project, investment value, implementation timeline, and strategic relevance to Nigeria’s development objectives.

Table 3: Summary of Chinese-Funded Infrastructure Projects in Nigeria (2012–2023)

Project/ Initiative	Description/Details	Investment Value (USD)	Year/Status	Sources
BRI Contracts (Cumulative)	175 contracts awarded to Chinese firms across sectors	\$17 billion (est.)	2018	Egbunike (2021)
BRI Funding (2018–2021)	Funding for rail, port, airport, road, power projects	\$4.08 billion	2018–2021	Reuters (2025)
Lekki Deep Sea Port	2.5M TEU port, China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC)	\$1.5 billion	Operational, 2023	Asadu (2023; AlAli, 2022)
Kano–Kaduna Railway	203 km line; China Development Bank loan	\$255 million (loan)	Underway	Reuters (2025)
Lagos–Ibadan Railway	156–157 km line, built by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation	\$1.53–1.6 billion	Contract awarded 2012	Reuters (2025)
Lekki Free Trade Zone	Industrial zone; 175+ companies, significant import/export volume	\$200 million (investment)	Operational since 2023	Belt and Road Portal (2023)
Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Plant	700 MW; funded via Chinese export credit	\$1.293 billion	Nearing completion	Shiwei (2023)

Source: Compiled by author from Egbunike (2021); Reuters (2025); Asadu (2023); AlAli, (2022); Falolu (2021); Belt and Road Portal (2023); Shiwei (2023).

Table 3 illustrates major Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Nigeria under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2018–2023. This is further illustrated by Figure 2.

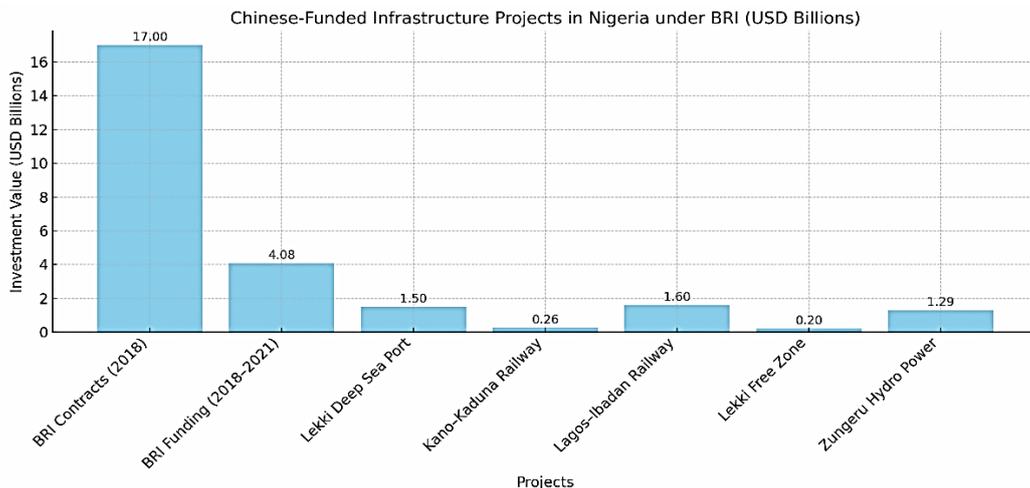


Figure 2: Major Chinese Infrastructure Investment in Nigeria (2018–2023)

Source: Compiled by author from Egbunike (2021); Reuters (2025); AlAli (2022); Asadu (2023); Falolu (2021); Belt and Road Portal (2023); Shiwei (2023).

Key Findings from Trade Data Analysis

The key findings from the trade data analysis include the following:

- i. The statistical trend reveals a widening trade imbalance. China's exports to Nigeria grew from \$1.2 billion in 1999 to over \$20 billion in 2023, while Nigeria's exports to China increased only modestly, from \$0.6 billion to just over \$1.6 billion. This growing disparity reflects a persistent structural imbalance in the trade relationship.
- ii. China mainly exports high-value manufactured and industrial goods such as electronics, machinery, synthetic fabrics, and mobile devices, while Nigeria exports primarily crude petroleum, natural gas, and unprocessed mineral ores. This commodity-based export pattern highlights Nigeria's limited value addition and reinforces its dependency on foreign technology and finished goods.
- iii. This study reveals that between 2018 and 2023, China significantly expanded its infrastructure footprint in Nigeria, committing over \$4.08 billion to strategic projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Prominent investments such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port (\$1.5 billion) and the Lagos-Ibadan Railway (\$1.6 billion) illustrate both the scale and sectoral concentration of Chinese financing in transportation, energy, and logistics. While these projects have supported infrastructure development, they have also deepened Nigeria's financial and technological dependency on China.

5. Discussion of Findings

The trade data analysed in this research indicates that China has become one of Nigeria's key trading partners over the last twenty years; however, this relationship has been marked by a persistent and growing trade deficit. In 2023, Nigeria recorded a bilateral trade volume of \$20.6 billion with China, which included \$18.99 billion in imports from China and only \$1.61 billion in exports to China. This resulted in a significant trade deficit of \$17.38 billion. Historical trade statistics from 1999 to 2023 demonstrate that this imbalance is not a new issue but rather part of a long-standing structural trend where Nigeria continually imports more than it exports in the bilateral relationship. This disparity highlights the unequal nature of trade exchange between the two nations and indicates a fundamental economic vulnerability for Nigeria.

Further analysis of the types of commodities shows that Nigeria's exports to China are mainly raw materials. In 2023, petroleum gas and crude oil made up most of the export revenue, along with smaller quantities of metal ores and raw agricultural products like sesame seeds and cassia. These exports demonstrate a focus on primary commodities, with little value addition or industrial processing. In contrast, China's exports to Nigeria include manufactured and industrial goods, such as synthetic fabrics, pesticides, electronics, household items, and heavy machinery. For instance,

synthetic filament yarn woven fabric alone accounted for \$160 million of China's exports to Nigeria in 2023. The dominance of value-added products from China in Nigeria's imports reflects a common dependency pattern, where industrialized nations supply finished goods, while developing countries export raw materials.

This structural arrangement has significant implications for Nigeria's economic sustainability. Firstly, heavy reliance on imported manufactured goods undermines domestic industries, small and medium enterprises that struggle to compete with the pricing and scale of Chinese products. Secondly, the rising volume of imports strains Nigeria's foreign exchange reserves, especially as export revenues remain relatively stagnant or fluctuate with global commodity prices. Moreover, the increasing trade imbalance indicates limited prospects for forward and backward industrial linkages. Instead of exporting processed goods or engaging in industrial subcontracting that could boost local production and innovation, Nigeria remains heavily dependent on Chinese products for both consumer and industrial use. This structural dependence hampers knowledge transfer, restricts capacity building, and delays technological self-sufficiency all of which are vital for achieving long-term development goals. This aligns with Ugwu *et al.* (2022) assertion that Chinese products have caused de-industrialization, hampered local innovation, and heightened Nigeria's economic dependency.

Moreover, the lack of diversification in Nigeria's export portfolio poses a significant threat to sustainable development. The country's dependence on crude oil exports, with minimal engagement in refining, petrochemical production, or technology-driven trade, hampers the creation of decent employment opportunities and inclusive economic growth. This scenario is inconsistent with key aspects of sustainable development, particularly those outlined in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and 9, which stress the importance of inclusive industrialization and sustainable economic advancement. While Chinese investments in Nigeria's transport, energy, and industrial sectors have contributed to modernization, the overarching trade relationship remains skewed in favour of China.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study has examined the dynamics of China-Nigeria trade relations through the lens of dependency theory, focusing on trade volumes, structure, and the implications for Nigeria's economic sustainability. Using quantitative data from 1999 to 2023, the research revealed a consistent and widening trade imbalance, with Nigeria importing significantly more from China than it exports. While China has become one of Nigeria's largest import partners and a key source of infrastructure financing, the structure of trade remains largely unequal. Nigeria predominantly exports low-value raw materials such as crude oil and mineral ores, while importing a wide array of

Chinese manufactured goods including electronics, textiles, and machinery. The broader trade framework continues to favour China in terms of economic gains.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered to the Nigerian government to address the structural trade imbalance with China and to promote sustainable economic development:

- i. Nigerian government should implement a strategic export diversification plan by incentivizing non-oil sectors such as agro-processing, solid minerals beneficiation, and light manufacturing.
- ii. Bilateral trade agreements should be revised to secure better market access for Nigerian products in China.
- iii. Nigerian government should introduce phased import substitution policies targeting high-volume imports from China, such as textiles, pesticides, and low-tech electronics.
- iv. The Nigerian government should establish an industrial policy council that integrates trade, investment, and education strategies to support long-term industrialization.
- v. Nigerian government should review all Chinese-funded infrastructure agreements to include clauses for local labour utilization, Nigerian subcontractors, and domestic material sourcing.

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