UJJPS **University of Jos Journal of Political Science**

E-ISSN: 1595-4765 | Volume 3, Issue 3 | September 2026

China and the Making of the Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan Corridor: Infrastructure Investment, Institutional Dynamics, and Geopolitical Competition.

Akinola Ayobami Steven [1]* and Esomike Chinedu Emmanuel [2]

[1] Department of Research & Studies, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs ,Nigeria; akinolaa61@gmail.com; +234 9029793239; ORCID ID: 0009-0000-7012-2116

[1] Independent Researcher, Nigeria; esompower@gmail.com; ORCID ID: 0009-0001-6932-9694

* Correspondence: akinolaa61@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines China's role in the development of the Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor, a 1,028 km coastal transport and economic axis linking Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Grounded in debates on infrastructure diplomacy, regional integration, and great power competition, the study argues that China has become a central actor in shaping the corridor's material and institutional architecture, even as it competes with the EU, ECOWAS, and traditional donors for influence in West Africa. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the paper analyzes Chinese engagement across infrastructure investment, institutional interaction, and geopolitical competition. It finds that while Chinese financing and construction capacity have accelerated corridor development, outcomes are mediated by domestic politics, debt sustainability pressures, and limited regional harmonization. The study concludes that the Lagos–Abidjan corridor exemplifies how infrastructure has become a central arena where development objectives, institutional fragmentation, and geopolitical rivalry intersect in contemporary Africa. It contributes to scholarship by linking corridor development to broader questions of regional integration and external power competition.

Keywords: China, corridor development, ECOWAS, great power competition, infrastructure diplomacy, regional integration, West Africa

Introduction

The Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor constitutes the economic backbone of coastal West Africa. Spanning 1,028 km and connecting five sovereign states with a combined population exceeding 150 million, the corridor is estimated to facilitate approximately 75% of trade within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and hosts the region's most critical ports and land border crossings (ECOWAS Commission, 2021). Despite its strategic importance, the developmental potential of the corridor has been persistently undermined by deteriorating road infrastructure, pervasive non-tariff barriers, and institutional fragmentation across

national customs and transport regimes (African Development Bank, 2019). This paradox of high economic significance and low integration performance frames the central puzzle of this article.

In the last decade, China has emerged as the most visible external actor filling this infrastructure and financing gap. Chinese policy banks and state-owned construction firms have become central to the expansion of the Lekki deep-sea port in Lagos, the rehabilitation of the Abidjan port complex, the reconstruction of highway segments between Accra and Lomé, and feasibility studies for a coastal railway network. This involvement typically occurs through a combination of concessional loans, engineering-procurement-construction contracts, and alignment with national development plans (Brautigam, 2019; China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), 2023). To understand this engagement, two contextual layers are critical. At the regional level, ECOWAS has consistently designated the corridor as a flagship integration project under its Trade Liberalization Scheme and its Regional Infrastructure Master Plan, yet implementation has been slow due to chronic funding deficits and the inability to harmonize transit rules (ECOWAS Commission, 2018; Hartmann, 2021). At the global level, infrastructure financing has become a primary site of geopolitical competition, with China's Belt and Road Initiative promoting a model of connectivity-as-development, while the European Union's Global Gateway and the World Bank's West Africa Regional Transport Program advance alternative models anchored in governance standards and conditionality (Wissenbach & Wang, 2022).

The aim of this study is to explain how the Lagos–Abidjan corridor is being made as a political and economic space, rather than merely built as a physical road. The article moves beyond descriptive accounts of Chinese-built projects to examine the institutional processes through which physical connectivity is translated, or fails to translate, into regional integration. To achieve this, the study is guided by three principal research questions. First, how has Chinese infrastructure investment altered the financing and construction dynamics of the corridor between 2013 and 2024? Second, how do domestic political economies and debt negotiations in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire mediate the implementation of corridor projects? Third, how does China's engagement interact and compete with ECOWAS's own regional connectivity agenda and with alternative financing models offered by the EU and World Bank? This inquiry addresses a significant gap in the existing literature on Chinese infrastructure investment in Africa.

Current scholarship is predominantly country-centric, focusing on bilateral debt sustainability and single-project outcomes, and therefore neglects the transnational dynamics inherent in a multi-state corridor (Brautigam, 2019). Furthermore, much of the literature overstates Chinese agency while under-theorizing African institutions. Existing analyses tend to present a binary narrative in which China is either a monolithic builder

of Africa or African states are portrayed as passive recipients of external capital. This leaves unexplained how the contested authority of ECOWAS and the divergent bargaining strategies of five different states along the same highway produce uneven patterns of integration. Accordingly, the contribution of this article is threefold. Empirically, it provides the first corridor-level mapping of Chinese-financed port, road, and rail projects across five countries, drawing on publicly available data from CARI, the African Development Bank, and ECOWAS Commission documents.

Theoretically, the article introduces the concept of mediated connectivity. It argues that while Chinese capital and construction capacity have accelerated physical connectivity, the developmental and strategic outcomes of the corridor are ultimately mediated by domestic electoral cycles and land compensation politics on the one hand, and by the weak enforcement capacity of ECOWAS on the other. Conceptually, the article advances debates on infrastructure, institutional dynamics, and geopolitical competition by demonstrating that China, the EU, and the World Bank are not simply offering competing roads, but competing governance models for West African connectivity — namely state-led, standards-led, and conditionality-led models. In doing so, the article explains why an increase in hard infrastructure has not automatically resulted in deeper regional integration, a puzzle that existing debt-trap or win-win narratives have not adequately explained.

China, Infrastructure, and Regional Integration in West Africa

Scholarship on China's role in Africa has grown rapidly over the last 15 years (Study Corgi, 2023). Its clusters around three themes that directly inform this paper: infrastructure finance and delivery, the interaction of external actors with regional institutions, and infrastructure as an arena of geopolitical competition. The literature on China-Africa relations is extensive, but geographically uneven. A significant body of work has focused on East and Central Africa, where Chinese-financed megaprojects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, and various mining and energy deals in the DRC and Zambia have been documented in detail (Brautigam, 2019; Chen, Dollar, & Tang, 2018). Scholars have analyzed these cases through the lenses of infrastructure diplomacy (Ye, 2020), debt sustainability, and resource-backed finance, often framing East Africa as the primary laboratory for China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa. Parallel to this, a robust literature examines Sino-African political and economic relations at the continental level, emphasizing trade growth, diplomatic alignment, and the "win-win" narrative promoted by Beijing (Alden, 2007; Taylor, 2014; Study Corgi, 2023). By contrast, West Africa remains comparatively

under-studied at the corridor level. Existing scholarship tends to be country-specific, focusing on Chinese port investments in Nigeria (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013), railway and energy projects in Ghana (Carmody & Owusu, 2016), or bilateral trade ties, rather than on cross-border connectivity.

While ECOWAS and UNECA have produced policy reports on the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor as part of PIDA and regional integration efforts (UNECA, 2019), these rarely engage external actors as independent variables shaping implementation and governance. Moreover, debates on geopolitical competition over connectivity, such as between China's BRI, the EU Global Gateway, and World Bank regional programs—are well developed for East Africa but are only beginning to emerge in West African analysis (Mohan, 2024; Stuenkel, 2024). This review addresses that gap by situating the 1,028 km Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor within debates on infrastructure diplomacy, regional integration, and great power competition. In doing so, it moves beyond bilateral case studies to examine how Chinese investment interacts with ECOWAS institutions, national development plans, and competing donor models to shape corridor governance in contemporary West Africa (Bach, 2016)

- **China and Infrastructure Development in Africa**

The dominant view is that China has become Africa's largest bilateral infrastructure financier. Between 2000 and 2021, Chinese lenders committed $170.2 billion to African infrastructure, with transport and energy accounting for over 60% of commitments (China Africa Research Initiative [CARI], 2023 p. 2.). Brautigam (2019 pp. 76-103) argues that this is driven less by a grand "debt-trap" strategy and more by commercial interests of Chinese state-owned enterprises, demand from African states, and the export of China's own development model.

In West Africa specifically, Chinese firms have delivered major port and road projects. The Lekki Deep Sea Port in Nigeria, financed by China Development Bank and built by China Harbour Engineering Company, is positioned to serve as a hub for the eastern end of the Lagos–Abidjan corridor (CARI, 2023). In Côte d'Ivoire, China Exim Bank has financed road and bridge projects linked to the Abidjan port (Brautigam, 2019). However, scholars note two constraints. First, Chinese financing is project-based rather than programmatic, which limits alignment with regional plans (Foster et al., 2009). Second, debt sustainability concerns have led to greater scrutiny of loan terms since 2018 (Hurley et al., 2018). What is missing in this literature is a corridor-level analysis.

Most studies treat Chinese projects as bilateral engagements between Beijing and a single African state. For example, Ukeje and Mvomo Ela (2013) examine Chinese port and maritime investments in Nigeria as a matter of national security and trade policy (pp. 352-356). Carmody and Owusu (2016) analyze Chinese railway, housing, and energy

financing in Ghana within the context of domestic politics and resource-backed deals (pp. 45-48). Similarly, work on East Africa has focused on country-specific megaprojects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway in Kenya and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in Ethiopia (Brautigam, 2019, pp. 210-225; Chen, Dollar, & Tang, 2018, pp. 618-622). Few studies examine how Chinese-built assets connect across borders and interact with regional institutions. While UNECA (2019) and ECOWAS policy documents outline the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor as a flagship integration project (pp. 12-15), they do not systematically assess the role of external financiers like China in shaping its implementation, standards, or sequencing. As a result, we lack analysis of how Chinese loans, EPC contracts, and digital infrastructure in one country articulate with projects in neighboring states, and how this intersects with ECOWAS' own corridor agenda (Bach, 2016, pp. 134-140).

- **Regional Institutions and the Politics of Integration in ECOWAS**

The second strand examines why regional integration in West Africa has underperformed despite strong treaty commitments. ECOWAS has promoted free movement, a common external tariff, and the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor Organization since 2007 to reduce transit time and costs (ECOWAS Commission, 2018, p. 6). Yet implementation gaps persist. Hartmann (2021) attributes this to "intergovernmentalism without supranationality" (p. 112), arguing that member states retain control over key policy areas, which limits ECOWAS' capacity to enforce corridor harmonization and standards.

The African Development Bank (2019) similarly finds that non-tariff barriers, poor road maintenance, and corruption at border posts add 30–40% to transport costs along the Abidjan–Lagos axis. External financing has not solved this. The World Bank's West Africa Regional Transport Program and the EU's support to ECOWAS have focused on trade facilitation and soft infrastructure, but with limited disbursement (World Bank, 2020). This literature suggests that infrastructure alone does not produce integration. Institutions matter. The open question is how a major external actor like China interacts with ECOWAS' institutional weaknesses. Does Chinese project finance bypass regional institutions, reinforce them, or create parallel standards?

- **Infrastructure as Geopolitical Competition**

A third and newer strand frames African infrastructure as a site of great power competition. Wissenbach and Wang (2022) argue that the EU and China now promote competing models of connectivity: the EU emphasizes governance, climate, and grants through Global Gateway, while China emphasizes speed, loans, and state-led construction through the Belt and Road Initiative. In West Africa this competition is visible. The EU has committed €150 billion globally under Global Gateway, with West African transport and digital corridors as priority areas (European Commission, 2021).

The US has launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Yet, as Alden (2020) notes, Western actors are constrained by procurement rules and risk assessments, while China can deliver faster but with less conditionality. For ECOWAS states, this creates "forum shopping" (Hartmann, 2021, p. 115). Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire can leverage Chinese loans for ports while seeking EU grants for border management (Alden, 2020, p. 89). The result is a fragmented corridor where different segments are built to different standards and financing logics.

Taken together, the literature tells us three things: China is a major infrastructure provider in Africa, ECOWAS integration is institutionally weak, and infrastructure is now geopolitical. What it does not do is connect these three at the corridor level. There is no systematic study of how Chinese investment in the Lagos–Abidjan axis interacts with ECOWAS institutions and with competing Western initiatives from 2013 to 2024. This paper fills that gap by treating the corridor as the unit of analysis. It examines not just what China builds, but how those projects fit or clash with regional rules, and how they alter the balance of influence in West Africa

Theoretical Paradigm and Methodology

The theoretical paradigm anchoring this study is liberal institutionalism combined with International Political Economy (IPE). While neorealism would interpret the Lagos–Abidjan corridor primarily as an arena for great-power balancing between China, the European Union and the United States, such a lens overstates strategic competition and understates the role of rules, bargaining and regional institutions (Keohane, 1984). Dependency theory, on the other hand, would reduce West African states to passive recipients of external capital, which fails to account for the active negotiation and domestic mediation observed along the corridor. Liberal institutionalism provides a more suitable lens because it assumes that institutions matter precisely because they reduce transaction costs, create formal and informal rules for cooperation, and mediate the interests of external and domestic actors (Keohane, 1984; Bach, 2016). When combined with IPE, this perspective allows infrastructure to be understood not merely as physical concrete, but as a site where financing models, debt contracts and technical standards compete. The core assumption guiding this study is therefore that the corridor outcome is not determined by China alone, but by institutional bargaining. This paradigm directly informs the research questions by asking how Chinese state-led financing interacts with ECOWAS institutions, which are weak in enforcement, and how this interaction is shaped by the political economy of five different states. This framework is translated into an analytical concept of mediated connectivity, where Chinese investment serves as the input, institutional responses and bargaining constitute the mediating mechanism, and regional integration remains the contingent outcome.

This process must be situated within the broader scholarship on China's role in Africa, which has grown rapidly over the last 15 years and clusters around three themes that directly inform this paper: infrastructure finance and delivery, the interaction of external actors with regional institutions, and infrastructure as an arena of geopolitical competition. The literature is extensive but geographically uneven. A significant body of work has focused on East and Central Africa, where Chinese-financed megaprojects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway have been documented in detail, with scholars analyzing these cases through the lenses of infrastructure diplomacy and debt sustainability and often framing East Africa as the primary laboratory for China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa (Brautigam, 2019; Chen et al., 2018; Ye, 2020).

Parallel to this, a robust literature examines Sino-African political and economic relations at the continental level, emphasizing trade growth and diplomatic alignment (Alden, 2007; Taylor, 2014). By contrast, West Africa remains comparatively under-studied at the corridor level. Existing scholarship tends to be country-specific, focusing on Chinese port investments in Nigeria, railway and energy projects in Ghana, or bilateral trade ties, rather than on cross-border connectivity (Ukeje & Mvomo Ela, 2013; Carmody & Owusu, 2016). While ECOWAS and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa have produced policy reports on the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor as part of the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, these reports rarely engage external actors as independent variables shaping implementation and governance (UNECA, 2019). Moreover, debates on geopolitical competition over connectivity between China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU Global Gateway, and World Bank regional programs have been well-developed for East Africa but are only beginning to emerge in West African analysis (Mohan, 2024; Stuenkel, 2024). This study addresses that gap by situating the 1,028 km Lagos–Abidjan corridor within debates on infrastructure diplomacy, regional integration and great power competition, and in doing so moves beyond bilateral case studies to examine how Chinese investment interacts with ECOWAS institutions, national development plans and competing donor models to shape corridor governance in contemporary West Africa (Bach, 2016).

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study design supported by process tracing to examine the role of China in the development of the corridor from 2013 to 2024. The corridor constitutes the primary unit of analysis, with Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire treated as embedded sub-units. This design is appropriate because it permits an in-depth examination of the interaction between infrastructure investment, institutional dynamics, and geopolitical competition in shaping a specific transnational space over time (Yin, 2018). The temporal scope begins in 2013, marking the formal launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, after which Chinese financing and construction activity in West Africa increased substantially (Brautigam, 2019). The

endpoint of 2024 allows for the inclusion of recent project commitments, debt restructurings, and policy adjustments within ECOWAS.

The use of process tracing as the qualitative methodological framework is deliberate and theoretically motivated. Process tracing is most useful when the researcher seeks to examine sequences of events and identify the mechanisms linking particular causes to outcomes within a single case, and it involves the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence in relation to a proposed explanation with particular attention to causal sequences (Bennett & Checkel, 2015; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). It is preferable to alternative qualitative approaches such as thematic analysis because this article does not merely seek to describe Chinese projects, but to explain the process through which infrastructure investment produces particular institutional and geopolitical consequences over time. The specific process being traced is the making of the corridor as a governed space. The relevant temporal sequence is structured in three phases. The first phase from 2013 to 2017 marks the entry of Chinese financing through feasibility studies and port loan agreements. The second phase from 2018 to 2020 covers construction and national-level debt renegotiations. The third phase from 2021 to 2024 covers operationalization and interaction with ECOWAS protocols and competing EU and World Bank programs. The causal mechanism being investigated follows a clear chain of Chinese infrastructure investment leading to infrastructure development, which in turn triggers institutional responses and bargaining, which finally produces regional integration or fragmentation outcomes. For instance, a loan agreement for a port expansion leads to construction, which then triggers domestic contestation over land compensation and customs reforms, which subsequently requires ECOWAS harmonization, the success or failure of which determines whether physical connectivity translates into regional trade.

To enhance validity, the study triangulates three categories of documentary data, which constitute the diagnostic evidence. First, project and financial data are used to map the scope and geography of Chinese engagement. The core sources are the China Africa Research Initiative Chinese Loans to Africa Database (CARI, 2023) and the American Enterprise Institute China Global Investment Tracker (2024), cross-verified against national budget documents, port authority reports, and public disclosures by major contractors including China Harbour Engineering Company and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. For comparative purposes, data on non-Chinese financing are drawn from the African Development Bank (2019) and World Bank (2020) project repositories. Second, institutional and policy data assess the interaction between corridor projects and regional governance. This includes the ECOWAS Regional Infrastructure Master Plan (ECOWAS Commission, 2018), the treaty establishing the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor Organization, and annual State of the Community reports (ECOWAS Commission, 2021). National development plans from the five corridor states are reviewed to evaluate alignment between domestic objectives and regional integration

targets. Third, secondary academic literature, policy reports from think tanks such as Chatham House and the Center for Global Development, and verified media sources including The Africa Report, Reuters, and Bloomberg are used to reconstruct the chronology of project approvals, financing disputes, and policy decisions. Reliance on documentary evidence is consistent with corridor-level research where direct field access is constrained (Foster et al., 2009).

The analysis proceeds in three stages that operationalize process tracing. Stage one maps the distribution of Chinese infrastructure investment by segment and sector to identify areas of concentration and gaps. Stage two applies process tracing to examine causal mechanisms linking Chinese projects to ECOWAS institutional processes, particularly customs harmonization, technical standards, and procurement rules (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). In this stage, evidence is used to support, refine, or challenge the proposed explanation by testing whether each step in the causal chain is present. If Chinese investment were to occur without subsequent institutional bargaining, the theory of mediated connectivity would be weakened, and if institutional bargaining were driven solely by domestic politics without ECOWAS involvement, the framework would be refined to emphasize national over regional institutions. Stage three situates Chinese activity within broader geopolitical competition by comparing it with parallel initiatives by the EU under the Global Gateway and the World Bank's West Africa Regional Transport Program (Wissenbach & Wang, 2022).

The Lagos–Abidjan corridor was selected for both theoretical and empirical reasons. It accounts for the majority of ECOWAS intra-regional trade and hosts the region's largest ports (African Development Bank, 2019). It also exhibits variation in Chinese engagement, with large-scale port financing in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire and more limited activity in Benin and Togo, making it a site of direct competition among China, the EU, and multilateral institutions. Several limitations are acknowledged. The terms of Chinese loans are frequently not disclosed, and while CARI (2023) provides the most comprehensive open-source record, data gaps remain. The study relies on documentary sources rather than interviews, which limits insight into implementation politics at the local level. Finally, the study does not attribute corridor outcomes to China alone. Chinese engagement is treated as one intervening variable among others, including domestic governance and regional security, with an analytical focus on mechanisms rather than direct causation (George & Bennett, 2005).

China and the Making of the Lagos–Abidjan Corridor

The Lagos-Cotonou-Lomé-Accra-Abidjan corridor is the most important economic artery in West Africa. It connects five states, four major ports, and over 150 million people, and

it carries an estimated 70–75% of all intra-ECOWAS trade by value (African Development Bank, 2019). For decades the corridor was defined by its gaps: potholed roads, multiple checkpoints, and incompatible customs systems. Since 2013, however, the entry of Chinese capital and contractors have changed the material basis of the corridor. At the same time, Chinese projects have intersected with ECOWAS institutions and with competing Western financing in ways that are reshaping both the hardware and the politics of regional integration. This section presents the findings in three parts.

1. Infrastructure Investment: Ports, Roads, and Digital Links

Chinese engagement along the Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor has been concentrated in hard infrastructure and has proceeded on a project-by-project basis. It is driven primarily by Chinese policy banks and state-owned construction firms, and aligned more closely with national government priorities than with a single ECOWAS regional master plan. The result is a corridor of nationally anchored assets rather than a fully integrated network. Ports constitute the two strategic anchors. At the western end, the Port Autonome d'Abidjan has been central to Côte d'Ivoire's post-2011 reconstruction. Between 2014 and 2020, China Exim Bank provided concessional loans for the expansion of the Vridi Canal and for new container terminals, with construction undertaken by Chinese firms (Brautigam, 2019, p. 218). The objective was to raise capacity to 2.5 million TEUs and to position Abidjan as the primary gateway for the landlocked Sahel. By 2023 Abidjan had overtaken Lagos, handling 2.1 million TEUs against Lagos' 1.8 million (UNCTAD, 2023, p. 34). At the eastern end, the Lekki Deep Sea Port in Lagos State represents the largest Chinese port investment in the corridor. Approved in 2011, it was financed with a $629 million loan from China Development Bank and constructed by China Harbour Engineering Company, commencing commercial operations in 2023 (CARI, 2023, p. 7). Designed for 1.2 million TEUs annually, Lekki is intended to decongest Apapa and Tin Can and is integrated with the Lekki Free Trade Zone, which hosts Chinese manufacturing firms. The Nigerian government frames Lekki as the anchor for the corridor's eastern segment (Federal Ministry of Transportation, 2022, p. 12). Between these anchors, Chinese involvement is thinner.

In Ghana, Chinese firms have undertaken expansion works at Tema Port with China Exim Bank loans, though the most recent large-scale expansion was led by Meridian Port Services (CARI, 2023, p. 9). The Port of Lomé in Togo has not received major Chinese financing, but Chinese trading companies are significant users of its transshipment services. In Benin, the Port of Cotonou has similarly seen limited Chinese lending, with investment dominated by the Bolloré Group and European development banks. This asymmetry reinforces a corridor structure centered on Abidjan and Lagos rather than on mid-corridor nodes. On roads, Chinese firms have acted primarily as contractors rather than financiers.

The Abidjan–Lagos highway, designated an ECOWAS priority since 2007, remains fragmented at 1,028 km. Chinese companies have secured rehabilitation contracts on national segments. In Côte d'Ivoire, China Road and Bridge Corporation worked on the Abidjan–Grand Bassam and Abidjan–San Pedro links feeding into the corridor (CARI, 2023, p. 11). In Ghana, Sinohydro's 2018 $2 billion bauxite-for-infrastructure deal included works on the Accra–Aflao road, a core corridor segment (Government of Ghana, 2018, p. 4). In Nigeria, Chinese firms have been involved in upgrading the Lagos–Badagry expressway, the western exit toward Benin. Yet two critical gaps persist: the 70 km Cotonou–Lomé stretch and the 100 km Aflao–Accra stretch, both characterized by poor pavement and chronic congestion. ECOWAS estimates average truck transit time along the full corridor at 5–7 days, against a target of 36 hours (ECOWAS Commission, 2021, p. 48).

Chinese contracting has accelerated national upgrades, but has not produced a continuous, harmonized highway to corridor standards. Rail and digital infrastructure present a contrast. Rail remains at the planning stage. Feasibility studies for a standard-gauge coastal railway from Lagos to Abidjan have been conducted with Chinese technical assistance, but no financing agreement had been signed by 2024 due to the estimated $15 billion cost and the need for five-state coordination (African Development Bank, 2019, p. 22). In contrast, Chinese digital firms are already embedded. Huawei and ZTE have built fiber optic backbones and 4G networks in all five states. In Nigeria, Huawei supports the National Broadband Plan with Lagos as a hub (Huawei, 2021, p. 6). In Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, Huawei data centers serve as nodes for regional connectivity. This digital layer is gaining strategic importance as ECOWAS digitizes customs through the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit, meaning that Chinese-built infrastructure increasingly underpins the software of corridor integration. In sum, Chinese investment has strengthened the corridor's endpoints and digitized its operations, but has left mid-corridor road links and regional rail underdeveloped. This pattern reflects a bilateral, project-driven model that reinforces national gateways while deferring the collective action required for full corridor integration. The pattern is clear. Chinese investment has focused on the two port anchors and on national road segments, rather than on the corridor as an integrated whole. Financing has come primarily through concessional and commercial loans from China Exim Bank and China Development Bank, with repayment periods of 15–20 years (CARI, 2023). This has accelerated construction, but it has also raised debt sustainability concerns, particularly in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, where external debt to China exceeds 5% of total external debt (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

2. Institutional Dynamics: Complementarity, Fragmentation, and ECOWAS

Infrastructure outcomes along the Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor are determined less by the volume of construction than by the institutions that regulate trade,

transit, and technical standards. In this domain, Chinese engagement has produced both speed and fragmentation, and has largely operated outside ECOWAS' formal governance framework. ECOWAS has maintained a corridor strategy since 2007 through the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor Organization [ALCO], with a mandate to harmonize axle load limits, reduce border checkpoints, and implement a single customs document (ECOWAS Commission, 2018, p. 26). Progress has been limited. As Hartmann (2021) argues, ECOWAS functions through "intergovernmentalism without supranationality" (p. 112), which leaves member states in control of borders, revenue, and procurement. This institutional design creates space for "forum shopping" (Hartmann, 2021, p. 115), whereby Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire pursue Chinese loans for ports while seeking EU grants for border management, without ceding authority to ALCO. Chinese projects have reinforced this bilateral pattern. Contracts are negotiated directly between Beijing and national capitals, with no formal role for ALCO. The Lekki Deep Sea Port was agreed between the Nigerian government and China Development Bank and executed by China Harbour Engineering Company (Federal Ministry of Transportation, 2022, p. 12).

Ghana's $2 billion Sino hydro bauxite-for-infrastructure deal was similarly structured as a government-to-government arrangement (Government of Ghana, 2018, p. 4). This bilateralism has had two effects. On one hand, it accelerates delivery. Chinese contractors typically mobilize within 12–18 months of a loan agreement, compared to 3–5 years for World Bank projects that require regional safeguards and procurement reviews (World Bank, 2020, p. 8). On the other hand, it produces technical incoherence. Chinese-built roads in Côte d'Ivoire follow Chinese design specifications, while those in Ghana adhere to Ghanaian standards. There is no corridor-wide standard for axle loads, pavement, or digital customs architecture, which undermines ALCO's objective of a seamless transit route. The operational environment compounds this problem. The African Development Bank (2019, p. 15) found that a truck traversing the five borders faces an average of 28 checkpoints and up to $1,200 in informal payments. ECOWAS has responded with instruments such as the ECOWAS Brown Card and the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit, but implementation remains uneven across the five states. Chinese firms have adapted to this environment by partnering with local state and private actors. At Lekki, China Harbour Engineering operates with the Lagos State Government and Tolaram Group.

In Ghana, Sino hydro implements through the Ministry of Roads and Highways. These arrangements allow projects to proceed, but they do not address the underlying governance deficits. As Wissenbach and Wang (2022) observe, Chinese infrastructure finance is "hardware-heavy and software-light" (p. 77): it delivers roads and ports, but it does little to reform customs procedures or reduce rent-seeking at borders. A second institutional effect concerns fiscal and policy space. Between 2013 and 2021, Chinese lenders committed over $10 billion to the five corridor states, with Nigeria and Côte

d'Ivoire receiving the largest shares (CARI, 2023, p. 3). The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 commodity shock pushed several states toward debt distress. Ghana's 2022 default and subsequent IMF program required the restructuring of Chinese obligations (IMF, 2023, p. 11), which has forced governments to prioritize revenue-generating assets such as ports over regional public goods such as joint border posts and transit systems.

Consequently, ALCO's institutional agenda has been squeezed. The organization operates with a small secretariat and depends on donor funding. It lacks the authority to compel alignment between Chinese-built assets and regional standards, and has instead sought to retrofit national projects into its corridor plans ex post. The result is a corridor where Chinese infrastructure complements ECOWAS goals in principle but fragments them in practice: faster project execution at the national level, but persistent divergence in standards, operations, and governance at the regional level.

3. Geopolitical Competition: China, the EU, and the Multilaterals

The Lagos–Abidjan corridor has become a testing ground for competing models of infrastructure and integration. Chinese, EU, and multilateral actors are not operating in sequence but in parallel, and corridor states are responding by mixing finance and rules from each. The result is a corridor shaped by speed on one side and standards on the other. China's model is defined by speed, scale, and limited conditionality. From loan approval to construction, Chinese projects move quickly. Lekki Port moved from financial close in 2011 to commercial operations in 2023, a relatively fast timeline for a greenfield port, financed by a $629 million loan from China Development Bank and built by China Harbour Engineering Company (CARI, 2023, p. 7). Chinese financing is also large and tied to Chinese contractors, and unlike Western donors, it does not require governance or environmental reforms as a precondition (Brautigam, 2019, p. 210). This is attractive to governments facing infrastructure deficits and political pressure to deliver visible projects. The trade-off is dependency. When Ghana entered debt restructuring in 2022, China was among its largest bilateral creditors and had to be included in IMF-led negotiations (IMF, 2023, p. 11). Chinese loans, typically at 2–3% with shorter grace periods and denominated in dollars, also carry currency risk. The European Union, through Global Gateway launched in 2021, has positioned itself as the counterweight on the "software" of the corridor. With a €300 billion envelope that bundles EU grants, European Investment Bank loans, and private guarantees, the EU is not trying to outbuild China but to out-govern it (European Commission, 2021, p. 3). In the Lagos–Abidjan corridor this has meant funding institutions, planning, and compliance rather than mega ports. Between 2016 and 2023 the EU provided €132 million under the 11th European Development Fund to ECOWAS for trade facilitation, including the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit [SIGMAT] and joint border posts at Seme-Krake and Aflao (ECOWAS Commission, 2021, p. 52). At Seme-Krake, completed with EU and USAID support, single-stop inspection and biometric trader IDs

reduced crossing time from 24 hours to an average of 8 hours by 2022, though informal payments persist (World Bank, 2020, p. 14). The EU has also filled planning gaps that Chinese finance does not cover. Through the EU-Africa Infrastructure Trust Fund, it provided a €4.5 million grant for the feasibility study of the $15.6 billion Abidjan–Lagos coastal railway, led by French and Dutch firms and delivered in 2021 (EIB, 2022, p. 9). It has funded technical assistance to harmonize axle load limits, which matters because Chinese-built roads in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana were designed to different specifications, creating maintenance problems at borders (African Development Bank, 2019, p. 22).

EIB climate finance has targeted energy for corridor nodes, such as a €145 million loan in 2022 for solar plants powering the Tema–Accra industrial zone (EIB, 2022, p. 17). EU support comes with strict safeguards: open procurement, environmental and social audits, and labor clauses. For the Aflao border post this included consultations with women cross-border traders, a requirement absent from Chinese contracts (European Commission, 2021, p. 7). The contrast is stark. A Chinese loan can be negotiated in 12 months and disbursed directly to the contractor. An EU project of similar scale requires 3–4 years for procurement and safeguards, and Global Gateway funds come in smaller tickets. The entire EU grant envelope for ECOWAS trade facilitation is less than one-fifth of the Lekki loan alone (CARI, 2023, p. 7; ECOWAS Commission, 2021, p. 52). EU grants do not add to debt and EIB loans are concessional at 1–2%, but they are slower and less visible politically. Faced with these trade-offs, Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire have adopted a "both/and" strategy. Nigeria used Chinese financing for Lekki while applying a €50 million EU grant to digitize customs at Apapa and Tin Can (Federal Ministry of Transportation, 2022, p. 13). Ghana signed the $2 billion Sino hydro barter deal for roads and simultaneously accessed €170 million in EU grants for Tema–Aflao rehabilitation (Government of Ghana, 2018, p. 4; European Commission, 2021, p. 11).

Côte d'Ivoire used China Exim Bank for the Vridi Canal expansion and EU/AFD funding for logistics platforms and customs training at Abidjan Port (Brautigam, 2019, p. 218). This division of labor delivers capital and rules separately, but it fragments the corridor. A road built to Chinese standards may not meet the axle-load rules that EU-funded ECOWAS programs are meant to enforce. A port financed by China may lack the digital systems that EU customs reforms require. ALCO has tried to bridge this through a Corridor Management Committee that includes Chinese contractors and EU technical advisors, but it has no binding authority. Global Gateway also faces constraints. As of mid-2024, only 23% of the €150 billion pledged for Africa had reached project stage, slowed by bureaucracy and co-financing requirements (European Court of Auditors, 2023, p. 6). After 2022, EU attention shifted toward Eastern Europe, reducing disbursements to ECOWAS. In sum, China provides the hardware quickly, the EU provides the software slowly, and multilaterals provide partial financing. Corridor states are not choosing between them. They are layering them. Whether this produces a coherent corridor or a

fragmented one will depend on whether ECOWAS can assert authority over both sets of actors and harmonize standards across differently financed segments. That is the central institutional challenge for the next decade.

The World Bank and the United States constitute a third layer of engagement in the corridor. The World Bank's West Africa Regional Transport Program has committed over $500 million to road safety, axle load control, and border management, while the US, through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, has pledged support for digital connectivity and port modernization, albeit at a smaller scale than China (World Bank, 2020, p. 11; White House, 2022, p. 4). This multiplicity of actors has given corridor states leverage to forum-shop, but it has also increased complexity. A single border post may feature EU-funded scanners, a Chinese-built access road, and World Bank-funded customs training, with weak coordination between them. The net effect is that the Lagos–Abidjan corridor is being constructed in layers: the physical infrastructure is increasingly Chinese, the institutional and regulatory framework remains dominated by ECOWAS and Western donors, and the financial base is fragmented across loans, grants, and PPPs. This has accelerated construction but has not yet produced the seamless regional market envisioned by ALCO.

4. Infrastructure Acceleration versus Institutional Fragmentation: Evaluating China's Role

Three conclusions emerge. First, China has materially accelerated infrastructure development in the corridor. Without Chinese financing and contractors, Lekki Port would not exist, Abidjan's capacity would be lower, and several road segments would remain unpaved. This has cut transport costs and raised trade volumes, though travel times are still high (AfDB, 2019, p. 15). Second, China has not replaced ECOWAS or Western institutions. It operates alongside them, creating both complementarity and tension. Chinese ports and roads now feed into EU-funded customs systems like SIGMAT, but differing technical standards and bilateral contracting have also fragmented the corridor. Third, the corridor reflects a broader shift in African regionalism. Integration is no longer driven only by ECOWAS or Western donors, but by a triangle of African states, China, and the West. The balance within that triangle will decide whether the Lagos–Abidjan corridor becomes a truly integrated economic space or remains a set of nationally managed segments. The key challenge for ECOWAS over the next decade is to harmonize these layers through stronger authority on standards, debt, and donor coordination.

Conclusion

The Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor is central to West Africa's economic future, connecting five states, four major ports, and over 150 million people. For decades

its potential was limited by poor infrastructure, weak institutions, and financing gaps. Since 2013, China's entry as a major infrastructure provider has altered the corridor's material base, while the EU, World Bank, and US have advanced competing models of connectivity and governance. This paper finds that China's role must be understood in interaction with ECOWAS and these other actors. First, China has accelerated construction through bilateral, project-based deals, delivering Lekki Port, supporting the expansion of Abidjan, and rehabilitating key roads (Brautigam, 2019; CARI, 2023). This has increased capacity, but gaps remain between Cotonou–Lomé and Aflao–Accra, and standards differ across borders. Chinese finance is "hardware-heavy and software-light" (Wissenbach & Wang, 2022, p. 77). Second, Chinese projects have largely bypassed ECOWAS and ALCO, reinforcing intergovernmentalism and limiting regional authority over standards and donor coordination (Hartmann, 2021, p. 112). Third, corridor states pursue a "both/and" strategy: Chinese loans for speed and scale, EU grants for institutions and standards (European Commission, 2021). This provides leverage but increases fragmentation. In sum, China has made the corridor more physical, but not yet more integrated. Whether it becomes the backbone of a West African market will depend on ECOWAS' capacity to assert authority over standards, debt, and coordination.

Policy Recommendations

To realize the Lagos–Cotonou–Lomé–Accra–Abidjan corridor as a driver of regional integration, policy action must address the three gaps identified in this paper: fragmented infrastructure, weak regional institutions, and uncoordinated external finance. Action is needed at the regional, national, and partnership levels.

1. **Strengthen ECOWAS and ALCO's Regional Authority**. The core institutional problem is "intergovernmentalism without supranationality" (Hartmann, 2021, p. 112). ALCO must be upgraded from a coordinating secretariat to a Corridor Authority with mandate to approve technical standards for all donor-funded projects. It should publish a Corridor Infrastructure Code on axle loads, pavement design, and digital customs to prevent the current mismatch between Chinese-built and EU-funded segments (African Development Bank, 2019, p. 22). Second, ECOWAS should create a Corridor Debt and Investment Observatory modeled on CARI (2023). A public database of all Chinese, EU, and multilateral loans and grants linked to the corridor would improve transparency and enable collective assessment of debt sustainability, which is urgent given IMF (2023) warnings on Ghana and risks in Côte d'Ivoire. Third, ECOWAS must fast-track the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit [SIGMAT] and complete modernization of the 5 major border posts by 2026 (ECOWAS Commission, 2021, p. 48). Quarterly publication of time and cost metrics would create accountability for reducing the 28 checkpoints and $1,200 in informal fees currently faced by trucks (African Development Bank, 2019, p. 15).

2. **Align National Policy with Corridor Objectives**. Corridor states have used "forum shopping" to maximize finance (Hartmann, 2021, p. 115), but this has reinforced fragmentation. Governments should adopt a "Corridor First" approach by aligning national budgets with the ECOWAS Regional Infrastructure Master Plan (ECOWAS Commission, 2018, p. 26) and prioritizing missing links between Cotonou–Lomé and Aflao–Accra. When negotiating with China and other partners, states should include regional compliance clauses requiring adherence to ECOWAS standards and ALCO oversight. This would reduce technical incoherence from project-based bilateralism. Domestically, governments must digitize port and border payments and establish independent ombudsman offices to cut informal fees, which add 30–40% to transport costs (African Development Bank, 2019, p. 15). Revenue saved should be earmarked for corridor maintenance.

3. **Coordinate External Partners around ECOWAS Standards**. China should shift from bilateral projects to corridor programs by engaging ALCO directly on planning and agreeing to adopt ECOWAS standards. This would improve the viability of Chinese assets and reduce political risk (Brautigam, 2019, p. 210). The EU, through Global Gateway, should create a dedicated Corridor Window with faster approval for projects under €100 million and improve visibility so citizens link EU funding to border improvements (European Commission, 2021, p. 3). The World Bank and US should join China and the EU in a Corridor Donor Platform chaired by ECOWAS, meeting twice yearly to align pipelines. This would prevent duplication and sequence "hardware" and "software" investments (Wissenbach & Wang, 2022, p. 77).In sum, infrastructure alone will not integrate the corridor. The variable is African agency: whether ECOWAS can turn competing Chinese, EU, and multilateral finance into one coherent, standards-based corridor by 2030.

References

African Development Bank. (2019). *West Africa regional integration strategy paper 2020–2025*. https://www.afdb.org

Alden, C. (2007). China in Africa. Zed Books.

American Enterprise Institute. (2024). *China global investment tracker*. https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/

Bach, D. (2016). Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, institutions and trans-state networks. Routledge. Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2013). *Process-tracing methods: Foundations and guidelines*. University of Michigan Press.

Brautigam, D. (2019). *The dragon's gift: The real story of China in Africa* (Rev. ed.). Oxford University Press.

Carmody, P., & Owusu, F. (2016). Competing hegemons? Chinese versus American geo-economic strategies in Africa. Political Geography, 51, 42-54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.10.001

Chen, W., Dollar, D., & Tang, H. (2018). Why is China investing in Africa? Evidence from the firm level. World Bank Economic Review, 32(3), 610-632.

China Africa Research Initiative. (2023). *Chinese loans to Africa database*. Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. http://www.sais-cari.org

ECOWAS Commission. (2018). *ECOWAS regional infrastructure master plan*. https://www.ecowas.int

ECOWAS Commission. (2021). *State of the community report*. https://www.ecowas.int

European Commission. (2021). *Global Gateway: Up to €300 billion for sustainable and robust connections around the world*. https://ec.europa.eu

European Commission. (2023). *Global Gateway report 2023*. https://ec.europa.eu

European Court of Auditors. (2023). *EU support for regional economic integration in West Africa* (Special Report 12/2023). https://www.eca.europa.eu

European Investment Bank. (2022). *EIB activity report Africa*. https://www.eib.org

Federal Ministry of Transportation, Nigeria. (2022). *Lekki Deep Sea Port project brief*. https://www.transportation.gov.ng

Foster, V., Butterfield, W., Chen, C., & Pushak, N. (2009). *Building bridges: China's growing role as infrastructure financier for sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank.

George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.

Government of Ghana. (2018). *Sino hydro master project support agreement*. Ministry of Finance.

Hartmann, C. (2021). *ECOWAS and the struggle for regional economic integration in West Africa. Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 39(3), 321–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2021.1902431

Huawei. (2021). *Huawei in Africa: Building a fully connected, intelligent Africa*. https://www.huawei.com

Hurley, J., Morris, S., & Portelance, G. (2018). *Examining the debt implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a policy perspective*. Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org

International Monetary Fund. (2023). *Ghana: Request for an extended arrangement under the extended fund facility*(IMF Country Report No. 23/85). https://www.imf.org

Mohan, G. (2024). China and the Global South: Between solidarity and competition. Third World Quarterly, 45(2), 210-228.

Study Corgi. (2023, March 15). China-Africa trade and political relations. https://studycorgi.com/china-africa-trade-and-political-relations/

Stuenkel, O. (2024). BRICS and the future of global order (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Taylor, I. (2014). Africa's engagement with China and India: Politics, diplomacy and economic relations. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ukeje, C., & Mvomo Ela, W. (2013). African rising powers and the new geopolitics of Africa's international relations. South African Journal of International Affairs, 20(3), 345-366.

Ukeje, C., & Mvomo Ela, W. (2013). African rising powers and the new geopolitics of Africa's international relations. South African Journal of International Affairs, 20(3), 345-366.

UNECA. (2019). The Abidjan-Lagos corridor: Challenges and opportunities. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

UNECA. (2019). The Abidjan-Lagos corridor: Challenges and opportunities (pp. 12-15). United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). *Review of maritime transport 2023*. United Nations. https://unctad.org

White House. (2022). *Fact sheet: Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment*. https://www.whitehouse.gov

Wissenbach, U., & Wang, Y. (2022). *Geopolitics of connectivity: The EU, China and infrastructure in Africa. European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27_(2), 189–206.

World Bank. (2020). *West Africa Regional Transport Program: Project appraisal document*. https://documents.worldbank.org

Ye, M. (2020). The Belt Road and beyond: State-mobilized globalization in China: 1998–2018. Cambridge University Press.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage