BRI and Nigeria's Post COVID-19 Revelations: A Future Projection

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Nigeria's economic outlook in the post-COVID-19 Era. It highlights the potential benefits of global infrastructural development strategies such as free trade and globalization for developing nations like Nigeria. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global economic activities, but Nigeria still has an opportunity to align with global trends and prioritize economic development. The paper employs the critical case sampling data collection method and comprehensively explores Nigeria's potential path toward economic recovery and growth in a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords: BRI, Infrastructural development, competitive markets, technology sharing, economic prosperity.

Introduction

African countries are endowed with enormous natural resources. However, harnessing and tapping into the advantage of such resources has been a herculean task for most African governments. African countries have been engrossed in the daunting tasks of development and state-building. Their economies have failed to grow while they have become ever-reliant on their former colonial masters. Poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, unstable government administration, ethnic rivalries, inadequate infrastructures, and dilapidated educational and health facilities have been the core characteristics of most African countries. Nigeria has faced these daunting challenges, and the benefits of an oil-rich country have never transformed into economic benefits and infrastructural development. Models of development and progress have come from many parts of the world, most significantly China, which undeniably has historical characteristics similar to those of African countries.

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Through its leadership and consistent focus in its economic planning, China has transformed its once agrarian economy into the manufacturing core of the world. It has been able to carve a niche by building and developing its nation-state while offering many development opportunities to other nations. Constructive state policies have been the core driver of the Chinese economy and the nation-state, facilitating the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) concept. As propounded by President Xi Jinping, the BRI offers other nations of the world economic prosperity through global connectivity and trade while offering an expansive concept of infrastructural development and construction. President Xi's model of development is unique, and it collaborates with the Western notion of globalization; however, the distinctiveness of this model is that China is the one driving it. This is based on its inherent experience of developmental trajectories and schemes adopted over the years.

The BRI offers China massive benefits. On the one hand, it designates China as a global actor, influencer, and superpower. On the other hand, it offers an avenue to strengthen Chinese economic and geopolitical relationships with many countries of the world. Globalization and integration ignited China's rise as a geo-economic superpower. From 2001, China's GDP went from USD 1339.41 billion to USD 11202.92 in 2016. This dramatic increase was due to China's joining the World Trade Organization (WTO). China, therefore, became a geopolitical power, and one of its inherent characteristics is that it causes tensions with the previously existing power blocs. Therefore, the Beijing-led government sees a rising China as one that intends to take the central stage of the world's socio-economic and geopolitical narratives where it seems they belong. This was clearly stated by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping when his dream of national rejuvenation dwelt on the consolidation of the nation's wealth and military prowess coupled with the heightened legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party rule and the taking of the central stage in world affairs. Thus, influencing global governance is vital for China to achieve its dream, and it has championed this cause by institutional building activities at both national and international levels (Gabusi, 2017).

On the other hand, as stated earlier, China has been uniting the globe by offering a platform for economic progress and prosperity. China is, therefore, propelling the formation of a highly assimilated, supportive, and communally advantageous set of maritime and land-based economic corridors connecting European and Asian markets. Precisely, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce in March 2015 stated that inventiveness would pass through the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).

Despite the massive success of the BRI, its most significant challenge in recent times was the outbreak of COVID-19. This contagious disease threatened the core foundation of humanity. As such, many countries, including Nigeria, tightened up border controls and restricted their contact and engagement with the outside world. This paper examines the BRI development pattern for Africa, Nigeria in particular. Furthermore, it aims to examine the BRI during and after the COVID-19 Era. Specifically, this work argues that Nigeria still has much to gain regarding economic development and commerce with the BRI initiative. It concludes by saying that despite all the challenges posed by COVID-19, Nigeria still has the choice to maximize the opportunities derivable from the post-COVID-19 Era. Other parts of the paper are arranged as follows: Section two is on literature review, section three is on the Belt and Road initiative, section four is about COVID-19 and the Nigerian economy, and section five concludes the paper.

Literature Review

The BRI policy is located within the precincts of globalization, and as such, this work examines the various works of literature on globalization. The notion of globalization will be examined from Western, Eastern, and African scholars' perspectives.

Tomlinson (1999) claims that globalization connotes multifaceted connectivity of social, political, economic, and cultural flows that activate us to the events of historical times. Similarly, Albrow (1990) perceives globalization as the process by which humanity is incorporated into a single society. Likewise, McGrew (1992) states that globalization constitutes a diversity of interconnections and linkages that transcend the modern world system's nation-states. It defines a process through which countries that are far apart are influenced by the events, decisions, and activities of one another. Correspondingly, Cerny (1995) posits globalization as a set of commercial and political framework processes that develop from exchanging goods and assets in the international political economy. Equally, Jones (1995) proposes that globalization may amplify the process of international interdependence through the resultant effect of the international free trade system, which is strengthened by technology dissemination.

Furthermore, Bairoch and Kozul-Wright (1996) referred to globalization as the process by which countries are linked together through financial structures that diversify labor and create wealth for many actors. Thomas (1997) also claims that globalization refers to power usage globally, crafting networks and social formations. Likewise, McGrew (1998) characterized globalization as including flows and connections across different civilizations and regions. Jameson (1998) also conceives globalization as a cultural phenomenon that connects or merges different world nations. It hinges his power on certain vices such as technology, media integration of markets, and the creation of new forms of labor.

Fafowora (1998) equally sees globalization as the integration process of a world market through the breakdown of trade barriers. Likewise, Ohuabunwa (1999) also claims that globalization includes breaking down barriers. However, he elucidated further that commerce, culture, communication, and others become increasingly accessible and interactive. Madunagu (1999) also postulates that globalization includes the free access of multinational corporations with their commercialization, liberalization, and privatization ideologies. Adewuyi (2001), on the other hand, argues that globalization connotes a wide array of international transactions through vertical and horizontal integration of economies. In the same vein, Omar (1990) supports the notion of integration of economics through trade engagements and financial transactions, which invariably would influence and redirect governmental policies. Similarly, Akindele (1990) views globalization from the same perspective and argues that globalization promotes the homogenization of the global political and socio-economic structures.

Harding (1987) sheds insights into one of the driving forces behind the Chinese notion of globalization. In his opinion, China opposed America-led Western hegemony and its Western-idealized capitalist economic order by championing Third World countries' development, progress, and prosperity through economic liberation. China's elucidation of globalization differs from Western conception because it is narrowly perceived in China. Globalization is simply an economic phenomenon in China with market expansion, lifting of barriers, and free trade (Huang, 2003). Globalization in Chinese is seen as *quán qiú huà* (全球化), which, when broken down into different components, connotes *quán* (total or complete), *qiú* (globe or earth), and huà, denoting a process of transformation or intensification. In essence, the whole phrase, when added together, connotes globalizing the globe. Other Chinese scholars have posited globalization in different forms, and some of their notions include *zǒu xiàng shìjiè* (走向世界), meaning going towards the world or going global or *zǒu xiàng* w*èilái* (走向未来), which means going towards the future. Globalization in the Chinese view can also be seen as *yǔ guójì jiē guǐ* (与国际接轨), which means to integrate with the international norm, *shìjièzhǔyì* (世界主义) which means *cosmopolitan*, *tiānxià zhǔyì* (天下主义) which means all under heaven and *guójìhuà* (国际化) which means internationalism (Ning & Yifeng, 2008). Lin (2007), on the other hand, sees globalization as China's effort to encourage global growth through several integrating mechanisms such as innovation, technology, and infrastructural development. Wang, Cai, and Gao (2006) see globalization as a country's economic interest in a global integration that attracts foreign direct investment through exports and a broad consumer base that invariably stimulates dynamic growth.

In the literature review above, we have examined the different notions of globalization held by different scholars. Most scholars see globalization as a form of economic integration that allows the exchange of goods and services to support global socio-economic and geopolitical developments.

The Belt and Road Initiative

Economist scholars of the West and the East have examined the BRI strategy of China; there is much literature on the essence, configuration, and implementation of this policy. One intrinsic fact is that this policy is one of economic engagement and entanglement of different world countries. What facilitated or inspired China's quest to embark on such a monumental project? President Xi proclaimed that the relationship with China's neighboring countries must be value-added, and he noted that they should have "tremendously momentous strategic value." He further proclaimed:

> "Maintaining stability in China's neighborhood is the key objective of peripheral diplomacy. We must encourage and participate in regional economic integration and speed up the building of infrastructure and connectivity. We must build the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, creating a new regional economic order." (Xinhua News Agency, 2013).

President Xi, therefore, sees China's regional stability as a hindrance to his ability to utilize its economic resources in the region entirely. Over the years, Western power has dominated the Asian region. Japan, the Philippines, India, and other Asian countries are all the West's allies and critical economic trading partners. The BRI strategy offered new dynamics in dealing with all countries involved to bring home the economic improvement needed in Asia. In 2015, Justin Yifu Lin, a persuasive strategy adviser and a previous chief economist at the World Bank, argued that President Xi had propelled BRI to counterweight U.S. policies such as the Pivot and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He contended that China should use its financial resources, including its large foreign reserves and knowledge in building infrastructure, to reinforce its position in the region (Lin, 2015).

President Xi's strategy is an elaborate project, and economists have analyzed the elements of the project into six broad categories. The first essence of the BRI strategy is policy coordination. China aims to promote inter-governmental cooperation, build a multi-level macro policy exchange and communication mechanism, expand shared interests, enhance mutual political trust, and reach a new cooperation consensus. China believes that a harmonious world can be built through these salient attributes.

Another is connectivity. China aims to build a bridge to connect the world with its nation-state. This ambitious aim is engineered on the subject of facilities connectivity. China must build some international trunk passageways and form an infrastructure network connecting all sub-regions in Asia and between Asia, Europe, and Africa. This would be done step by step based on valuing each other's sovereignty and security concerns. China intends to construct port infrastructure, build smooth land-water transportation channels, advance port cooperation, increase sea routes and the number of voyages, and enhance information technology cooperation in maritime logistics. Likewise, its connectivity objective intends to improve aviation infrastructure and the security of oil and gas pipelines and other transport routes. It has proposed building cross-border power supply networks and power-transmission routes and creating the Information Silk Road. The Beijing-led government wishes to build bilateral cross-border optical cable networks faster, plan transcontinental submarine optical cable projects, and improve spatial (satellite) information passageways to expand information exchanges and cooperation. These tenets of connectivity aim to link regions of the world through infrastructural development, transportation advancement, and modern-day communication networks (Fallon, 2015).

China has also proposed a full-fledged, unobstructed trade policy, which is the core basis of globalization. It wants unimpeded trade; thus, Beijing aims to improve investment and trade facilitation and remove investment and trade barriers to create a sound business environment by opening accessible trade areas, developing cross-border e-commerce, and other modern business models to consolidate and expand conventional trade. It wants to promote cooperation in marine-product farming, deep-sea fishing, aquatic product processing, seawater desalination, marine bio pharmacy, ocean engineering technology, environmental protection industries, marine tourism, and other fields. Furthermore, it intends to build industrial parks such as overseas economic and trade cooperation zones.

Also, it aims to construct cross-border economic cooperation zones, promote industrial cluster development, and make the Silk Road environment-friendly. The Beijing-led government recommends opening up its doors to companies from all countries to invest in China and encourage Chinese enterprises to participate in infrastructure construction in other countries along the Belt and Road.

China has recommended financial integration that would engage its financial institutions and boost the value or usage of the Renminbi as an international currency. China wants financial integration in preparation for forming the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB). It wants to negotiate with related parties on establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a financing institution that can issue Renminbi (RMB) 3 bonds in China.

China intends to create a people-to-people bond to bring people who are still culturally far apart from one another together. Beijing has allegedly encouraged extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personnel and cooperation, media cooperation, youth and women exchanges, and volunteer services to win public support for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For this purpose, China annually provides thousands of government scholarships to countries along the Belt and Road. China believes that the role of multilateral cooperation mechanisms has to be enhanced by making full use of existing mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Plus China (10+1), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), China-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue, Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation, and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the Silk Road (Dunhuang) International Culture Expo, the Silk Road International Film Festival and the Silk Road International Book Fair. Additionally, China has recommended an international Summit Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative (Fallon, 2015).

Antagonists of this policy have put forward many arguments about this elaborate project.

China has continuously reiterated the economic advantage of the project. However, scholars have viewed it as a project to secure China's interest in claiming a position as Asia's dominant economic and military power. They have scrutinized its blueprint and exclaimed that China faces rising labor costs, labor-intensive goods that are not competitive, and the exit of labor-intensive industries to neighboring countries. Over the years, China has practiced manufacturing and exporting cheap goods, which is now in decline due to weak market demands, protectionism, minimal imports from emerging economies, and soaring trade deficits (Du, 2016). Therefore, the aim of the BRI initiative is multifaceted. On the one hand, China seeks to revive its economy by pushing out its excessive manufacturing products and exporting its infrastructures and capital while providing for nations worldwide.

The Belt and Road Initiative in Nigeria

Scholars have also advanced theories about why China has involved Africa in this project. They highlighted two reasons. First, they see China's inclusion of Africa in the BRI strategy as infrastructural-inclined. They think the continent needs infrastructural development, and China presumes it could assist Africa in fostering infrastructural growth and transferring its labor-intensive industries there. This facilitated signing an MOU on January 27, 2015, between China and the African Union to connect all 54 African countries through transportation infrastructure projects, including modern highways and high-speed railways.

China has engaged different African countries with the BRI strategy. Nigeria joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit in Beijing in 2018. Since then, Nigeria has experienced significant success and development through its participation in the BRI, fostering cooperation between the two nations (Vanguard Nigeria 2020, Gu 2022 et al.). One significant aspect of BRI's contribution to Nigerian infrastructural development is the development of Nigerian railway networks. These projects are geared towards stimulating economic growth as many are connected to the country's industrial hubs and commercial environments, cutting down on excessive spending on logistics and thereby contributing to economic development.

An example of this is described in the words of Lopez, Chen et al. (2019), who state that the Lagos-Ibadan line is a significant step in the Nigerian government's goal of a modernized rail network. It kick-started in 2012 with the construction contract signed by the Nigerian government and China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) to improve logistical efficiency, increase capacity to transport passengers and freight and generate comprehensive benefits for local economies along the railway. Along the lines of these railway projects, visible spillover activities can only be attributed to the emergence of the projects. Examples are residential, industrial, and community developments that spring up in these railway paths—all these point to one direction: economic development.

Another significant BRI involvement in Nigeria can be seen in China's involvement with Nigeria's Special Economic Zones (SEZs). In Nigeria, the SEZs are called Free Trade Zones (FTZs), and many are scattered around the nation with varying Chinese investments. These FTZs are geographically distinct areas of unique economic practices where the movement and landing of goods and services are not subjected to customs duties. According to Adepoju (2019), it could also refer to a particular chosen area within a country where traditional trade barriers like quotas and tariffs are removed. The administrative restricted access should be increased to attract new foreign business investments.

Notable among Nigeria FTZs for huge Chinese investment is the Lekki Free Trade Zone (LFZ) in Lagos State, Nigeria. The Lagos State Government (LSG) partnered with China to develop the LFZ, which was established in 2006 in line with the Nigeria Export Processing Zone Act. The Lekki Free Zone Development Company is managing the partnership. In the partnership, China-Africa Lekki Investment Company owns 60%, the Lagos State Government (20%), and the Lekki Worldwide Investment Ltd. investment group (a privately held company set up by Lagos State Government) owns 20% (Mthembu-Salter, 2009 and Adunbi & Stein, 2019).

The continuous investment of China into the Nigerian economy by SEZ projects routed through BRI has been very beneficial to the country's infrastructural development. According to Adunbi & Stein (2019), the proponents of SEZs have also argued that it could draw on Chinese expertise in managing the zones that would eventually propel Africa on the path of industrialization and move the continent away from aid dependency. This idea has manifested in developing the Lekki Deep Seaport inside the LFZ. It is a transformative public-private project initiated by the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) and Tolaram Group. Through the BRI, China is one of the major partners involved in the seaport's construction, running, and ownership.

COVID-19 and Nigerian Economy

Many countries face unprecedented economic and financial crises after the Covid-19 pandemic. This, in any way, does not sidestep Africa. Before the arrival of the pandemic, Africa was already in a deep crisis. In Nigeria, for example, every sector was already overstretched with many problems. FDI inflow was also at its lowest. COVID-19 was in Nigeria before it reached her shores because many investors held on to their funds in a 'wait and see approach' as they kept from Africa what it needed the most - capital and liquidity.

4.1 Nigeria in the post-COVID-19 Era and re-positioning opportunities

From March 2020, Nigeria began to experience its fair share of the downward spiral movement of the African economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below is a table showing the forecast of COVID-19 impacts for Africa as compiled by OECD.

Institution, date	Africa's GDP growth prospect
IMF Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa (April 15, 2020)	Growth in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 is projected at –1.6%, the lowest level on record, a downward revision of 5.2 percentage points

	compared to six months ago.
World Bank (April 9, 2020)	GDP growth in Sub-Saharan Africa could fall sharply from 2.4% in 2019 to -2.1% to -5.1% in 2020.
African Union Commission (April 6, 2020)	Forecasts show a negative growth from 3.4% to -0.8% to -1.1%.
McKinsey (April 6, 2020)	In the worst-case scenario, Africa's GDP growth will decrease by three to eight percentage points, from 3.9% in 2019 to between 0.4% and -3.9%.
African Development Bank (April 3, 2020)	projected GDP growth contraction of between 0.7 and 2.8 percentage points in 2020.
Oxford Economics (March 26, 2020)	The coronavirus-related knock-on economic growth in Africa's three largest economies alone could affect the continent's GDP growth from 3.8% to 2.8%.
Brookings Institute (March 18, 2020)	Africa's GDP growth is expected to fall from 3.5% in 2019 to 2.5% and 1.5% in 2020.
UNECA (April, 2020)	Depending on the policy response, Africa's GDP growth prospects are likely to drop from 3.2% in 2019 to between 1.8% and -2.6% in 2020.

Forecasts of COVID-19 impacts on Africa's GDP growth (Culled from OECD, (2020))

These saddening realities were meant to drive some African countries into their first recession in 25 years (World Bank 2020). However, despite all this, there are still some windows of opportunity for the Nigerian government and people to grow the nation. Some efforts need to be made to address some Nigerian socio-economic problems to allow for the opportunities derivable from the COVID-19 Era.

A. Digital transformation

Maximizing the importance of digital space to get many aspects of life going during the pandemic lockdown in many countries has opened a window of opportunity for many. In Africa, according to a McKinsey survey of consumers in key African economies during the crisis, over 30 percent said they were increasing their use of online and mobile banking tools. According to Sacha Poignonnec, the co-founder and co-CEO at Jumia, a lasting impact of the crisis is a change of mentality to transacting and paying online; this has positively affected one of the barriers to e-commerce in Africa.

Apart from the increased acceleration of digital payments in Africa, other aspects of digitization that have witnessed a massive exploration are online education, online office space, online trading, and investment. According to IMF (2020), for African countries to reap the benefits derivable from this new digitization trend, African governments, including Nigerian, have to make intelligent and pro-digital policies, which are grouped into four as shown below:

i. Investing in infrastructure – this should include both traditional digital-friendly infrastructures like electricity supply and I.T. infrastructure;
ii. Investing in policy frameworks – this can be done by providing a digital-friendly business environment for all.
iii. Investing in skills should involve scaling up digital skills education in all local, state, and federal parastatals.
iv. Investing in risk management frameworks – this should be done to address cyber-security threats.

B. Government improvement in service delivery

Nigerian government should take it as urgent to strengthen the capacity of all societal sectors. The governments should double their efforts to expand access to essential social services. In the words of the South African president, Mr. Ramaphosa, at the June 2020 Sustainable Infrastructure Development Symposium South Africa (SIDSSA), the government efforts that will facilitate economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is that government should:

i. Introduce a stimulus package that boosts government infrastructure spending;
ii. Create financing instrument that provides liquidity;
iii. Bridge financing or debt restructuring instruments;
iv. Develop finance institutions to be able to support economic growth
v. Encourage private developers for resilient and sustainable projects
vi. Prioritize infrastructure projects that are important to economic recovery
vii. Provide quality service to the public
viii. Provide access to bankable investment opportunities
ix. Provide access for the rural population to improve agricultural productivity

These governmental efforts are essential workable in all parts of Africa, including Nigeria, and are also efficacious in helping society and the economy recover from the pandemic crisis. They will also help maintain economic growth at the minimum level required to meet countries' needs.

C. Health sector improvements

The pandemic has exposed the fragility of the country's health sector. Presently, according to OECD (2020), the growing number of COVID-19 patients increased the risk of overcrowding health facilities, and patients with high-burden diseases like AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria could lack access to adequate care. So, the pandemic has exposed a massive gap between how the working capacity of the health sector should be and how it is. As the pandemic persists, the healthcare challenges plaguing Nigeria's already frail health system have been exacerbated, and healthcare workers are struggling (Global Citizen, 2020).

D. Infrastructural development

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented itself to be the whole world's nightmare. Africa has not been spared of the economic crises that came with the rise of the pandemic. Africa is still battling a huge infrastructure deficit, which is visible in many contests. For many African countries, especially Nigeria, the need for more helpful infrastructure in the societal sectors where they are needed was already holding to ransom in many developmental activities before COVID-19. Therefore, there is an urgent need to invest in infrastructure to fuel economic activities.

COVID-19 has severely impacted infrastructure service providers, resulting in a drop in demand and revenues for them and the buyers of infrastructure services. Also, experts have estimated that the global economy is facing unprecedented commodity price dips, and commodity-dependent countries in Africa, particularly oil exporters (e.g., Nigeria, Angola), are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 (Amoah-Darkwah & Reboredo, 2020). In order to maximize infrastructure development as an avenue that can stimulate the pandemic recovery effort, the Nigerian government should push ahead to revive infrastructure with transparency, efficiency, and accountability in order to be able to improve consumer trust, increase productivity, drive sustainable growth and procure fast recovery access for the Nigerian society.

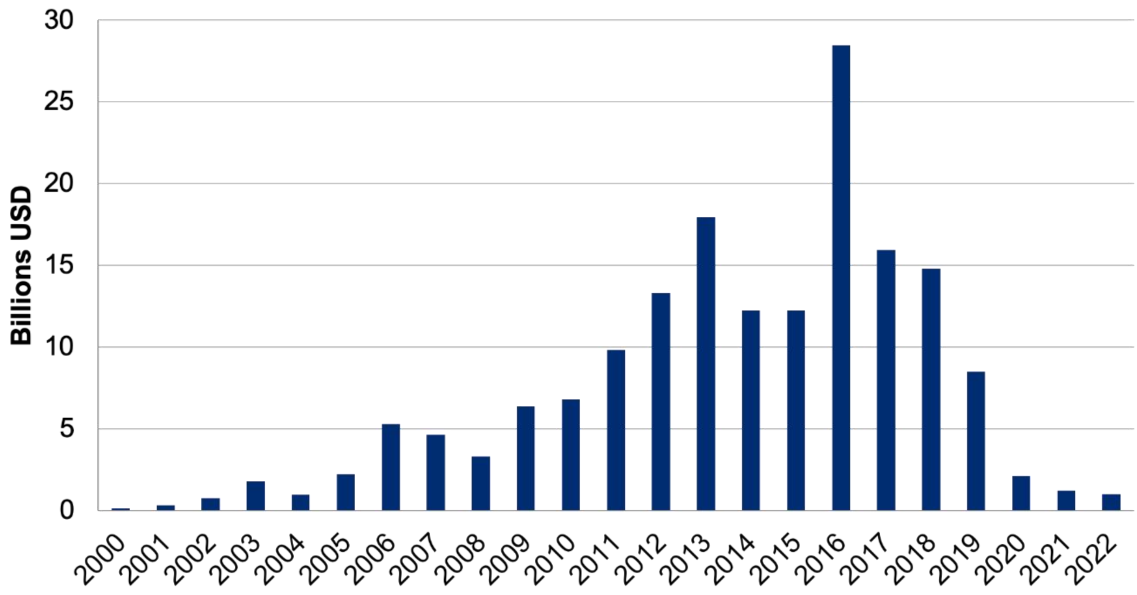
E. Stimulation of MSMEs' performance

In March 2020, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) introduced the N50 billion Targeted Credit Facility (TCF) as a stimulus package to support households and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (CBN, 2020). However, on August 10, 2020, the organized private sector (OPS) research reports in Vanguard, Nigeria, showed that the various financial stimulus disbursements did not reach the targeted businesses. This means that the government's plan to spend considerable money to support cash flow in the private sector, which the impact of COVID-19 has battered, has yet to be thwarted. It should be noted that this same sector of the economy contributes mainly to the country's GDP (Emmanuel et al., 2019). This means that Nigeria is set on the path of greatness if its activities are well-managed and coordinated. For this reason, the paper posits that the government should provide a more secure avenue for productivity improvement of Nigerian MSMEs. This should be done by securing them with dependable access to finance and tackling other problems like frequent electricity outages, lack of infrastructure, corruption, and lack of deep integration into the supply chains of larger businesses.

BRI and post-COVID-19 Nigeria

In the wake of COVID-19, many BRI workings have been dragged back throughout the lines where they are present because of the backlash of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Nigeria, many ongoing BRI projects had to be postponed or halted as many Chinese workers had to travel back home at the pandemic's start. This has posed many challenges to Nigeria's BRI manufacturing and supply chain activities. However, the growth of digital BRI during this pandemic must be noticed. According to Baker McKenzie (2020), opportunities abound for the entire digital value chain for digital BRI activity, from ICT companies to e-commerce platforms, including firms established throughout the BRI geography: Huawei, Alibaba, and Tencent. This is true in Nigeria because the pandemic has increased the use of Alibaba's DingTalk, Tencent's WeChat, Voov, and Huawei's WeLink.

Although BRI spending on developmental projects in Africa has been criticized, some quarters even described it as neocolonialism and dept trap diplomacy (De Freitas, 2023). Nevertheless, China has provided African countries with the most enormous volume of bilateral loans. However, China's African lending portfolio has declined quickly in recent years. China's sovereign lending in Africa fell below $1 billion in 2022, marking the lowest figure in nearly two decades (Bavier & Savage, 2023). This significant drop in China's lending is a notable shift from the previous trend of substantial investments in Africa's infrastructure (McCarthy, 2023).



Source: Chinese Loans to Africa (CLA) Database, 2023. Boston University Global Development Policy Center

This new trend in Chinese lending in Africa has been described as 小而美 (xiǎo ér měi- small but beautiful). It is a saying that came to the limelight when President Xi, during the BRI Symposium in November 2021, announced new policy directions for BRI (van Staden, 2023). Similarly, the Chinese translated version of the book The Minimalist Entrepreneur (Lavingia, 2021) also enunciates the 'small and beautiful' saying, which has become popular among Chinese officials in their reference to Chinese loans in Africa. In line with Chinese spending in Africa, 'small but beautiful' is a minimalist philosophy favoring small but focused, efficient, and strategic investments against inefficaciously big and unmanageable loans.

This decline in Chinese spending in Africa could reshape the economic relationship between China and African nations, potentially impacting large-scale development projects on the continent (McCarthy, 2023). African leaders should learn how to manage this type of change. Most importantly, this is the best time for African leaders to enhance their performance in dealing with China. There are still many benefits from China and even other Asian countries. African nations, including Nigeria, need to rise and build more frontiers of strategic partnerships than aid-dependent relationships with others.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has given Nigeria the chance to re-calibrate the economy. Therefore, the Nigerian government needs to do much more to prepare the nation for the opportunities derivable from the adverse economic effects presented by the pandemic. Also, the possibility for Nigeria to derive some higher economic values from China's growing influence certainly exists, but the Nigerian government has to find out how to maximize this fully. With China, Nigeria should wake up to the reality of the win-win situation that the gospel of Chinese BRI brings. The government should understand that no matter how a loan is given in goodwill, it still has to be well managed and paid back when due; if not, the purpose for which it is given will be defeated. This means that the government needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to balance the current level of Chinese engagement in the country (BRI engagements) to create a sustainable development path for all citizens.

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