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## ASSESSMENT OF NIGERIA'S ACCESSION INTO THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

<sup>1\*</sup>SHERIFF GHALI IBRAHIM, <sup>2</sup>IRO IRO UKE AND <sup>3</sup>YUSUF A. ADEGBITE

<sup>123</sup>Department Of Political Science And International Relations, University Of Abuja

\*Email: sherfboy@yahoo.com

Phone: +234-7063372013

### ABSTRACT

*The Belt and Road initiative focuses on promoting policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties through a consultative process and joint efforts with a goal of bringing benefits to all. Despite the advantages of the BRI, the initiative has spawned debates on its political, economic and strategic implications in international system, especially in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. This paper examines Nigeria accession into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while dwelling on different perspective about the initiative. The paper adopts Relational Theory of World Politics to provide a scientific backing to this paper as a neutral theory amidst other theories that back or criticize the initiative because no nation can operate in isolation without relating with other states in the international system. Descriptive research instrument from the secondary methodology was used for gathering data. The paper finds out that the BR initiative is a prospect for Nigeria to explore for human and infrastructural development, the arguments of the BRI critiques will be right if Nigeria failed to refrain from; policy abortion, policy summersault and lack of proper implementation. The paper therefore recommends that China should encourage equal beneficial partnership and, abide by international norms and legal standards to enable a level playing ground for all.*

*Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Assessment; Nigeria; Ascension; Benefits; Achievements.*

### INTRODUCTION

Three months after taking office, President Xi Jinping launched the first of what would come to constitute his signature political undertakings. In June 2013, Xi put forward the idea of a “new model of great-power relations” using the legend of the ancient Silk Road to introduce the concept of an economic belt and road initiative across Asia and beyond during his first state visit to the United States. This model was meant to revamp China-US

relations and “promote the stable development of the Asia-Pacific and world peace” (Wertime, 2015).

Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there have been inconclusive debates on its political, economic and strategic implications in international system, especially in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. This is partly because scholars and analysts have examined BRI through different theoretical lenses. Sheriff and Farouk (2020) view the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through theory of International Development Cooperation. White TengJianqun (2018) analyzed BRI from Geopolitical Theories eliciting how to control the world from geographical perspective.

Amidst these divergent debates, Nigeria joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by President Muhammadu Buhari at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in September, 2018. Despite the major advantages that the Belt and Road Initiative brings to Nigeria which includes: Job opportunities, infrastructure, investment, connectivity among others, several opinions have also emerged for and against the initiative in Nigeria. Some see the initiative as imperialistic agenda, some view it from dependency angle and we have those that accept it as new globalization.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to; examine Nigeria accession into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), highlight the objectives of the BR initiative, examine the critiques argument about the initiative, achievement of Nigeria accession into the BRI, weaknesses and challenges of the initiative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The initiative seeks to build multi-tiered communication networks to enhance the connectivity among countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. The initiative proper builds substantially on Go Out or Go Global policy. This initiative was not the offshoot of a fresh, wholly original idea. The legend of the Silk Road began to be used in the mid-1990s to revive trade in Asia and from then on became a powerful inspiring concept for fostering trade across Asia. Then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used it in July 2011 to call for the construction of a “New Silk Road” which would include a north– south trade corridor meant to help boost the Afghan economy. It was not until two years later that, prompted by Clinton’s proposal, Xi Jinping formulated his own concept of a Silk Road for the 21st century upon which he launched the B&R Initiative (Juan, 2017).

The fact is, then, that his signature political undertaking was originally instigated by a plan proposed by a Western politician. On the other hand, the B&R initiative draws on concepts proposed and policies launched by Xi himself, his predecessors and even by leaders of other Asian countries. To begin with, it is guided by a grand vision put forward by Xi in November 2012, labeled as the Chinese Dream, which calls for the creation of more development opportunities with other countries and the transition of China’s toward a green, new economy. The B&R initiative is, therefore, the main, natural instrument for the realization of Xi’s Chinese Dream (Juan, 2017).

According to Juan (2017), the initiative proper builds substantially on the Go Out or Go Global policy. Officially launched in 2000 to encourage Chinese enterprises under all forms of ownership to invest abroad, this policy was restated in the subsequent five-year plans (2001-2005, 2006-2010, and 2011-2015) and taken up in 2013 by President XI Jinping as a core element of the B&R initiative. In June 2013 President Xi Jinping brought about the idea of a “new model of great-power relations” as the foundational concept that would guide the whole initiative.

This model is an updated version of the “Harmonious World” vision proposed by Hu Jintao in 2005, which in turn was the basis for Hu’s Harmonious World policy and, later, for his concepts of Harmonious Society and Harmonious Socialist Society.

In September 2013 Xi introduced the concept of an economic belt across Eurasia and beyond to “forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region”. To accomplish this, he proposed to improve road connectivity, promote unimpeded trade, enhance monetary circulation, and increase understanding between the peoples of Eurasia. In October 2013 Xi proposed to build a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and create an “Asian infrastructure bank” to harness China’s massive foreign reserves. The construction of the Maritime Silk Road began over the following months and the proposed bank was established in June 2015 as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) (Juan, 2017).

### **Regional Integration and the Belt and Road Initiative**

Regional integration is a complex, multidimensional process that, at best, takes a long time to complete. It tends to start with the elimination of barriers to trade and investment flows and continues with the homogenization of the economic environment of the countries involved. Only until the economies of these countries become intertwined, the conditions can exist for them to integrate in a social, cultural, political, and even military sense. In general, the process can start off in different ways and at any of its phases and dimensions. As such, regional integration can adopt two basic modalities: de jure or de facto, depending on how the process starts off and what factors drive its inception (Baldwin, 2007).

De jure integration is set in motion when two or more national governments decide to subscribe a formal agreement to widen and/or deepen their economic exchange and to coordinate their policies and institutions, firstly by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade and investment. De facto integration originates spontaneously, in the absence of formal agreements or even of diplomatic relations between the countries involved; it is driven by geographic proximity and the thrust of economic fundamentals. In time, de facto integration processes usually prompt the governments involved to establish cooperation arrangements (Juan, 2017).

On the other hand, irrespective of whether it follows a de jure or a de facto development path, regional integration can be deep or shallow. Shallow integration results from the liberalization of trade flows by removing tariff and nontariff barriers. Deep integration obtains when the countries involved develop economic links via the fragmentation of intra-firm and inter-firm production processes and when permanent and cross-border production networks and regional supply chains form as a result. Therefore, de facto integration is synonymous of deep integration. Eventually, though, the former calls for some kind of intergovernmental cooperation so as to create the supporting institutions that process requires to run its course (Juan, 2017).

In general, no unidirectional, mechanical relationship exists between international cooperation and regional integration for, eventually, one leads to or calls for the other. In a case like the Belt and Road initiatives, where more than five dozen of widely different countries are involved, the difficulties for regional integration to set in grow and may become virtually insurmountable given the intricate web of free trade and international cooperation arrangements in place in the continents where the initiative is intending to implement its projects and programs.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts a neutral theory amidst other theories that support or criticize the Belt and Road initiative. Relational Theory of World Politics is being adopted to provide a scientific backing to this paper. The Relational Theory of World Politics was developed by Qin Yaqing of Chinese School of international Relation Theory. Relational theory of world politics argues that the logic of relationality from the relational theory provides alternative understandings of the key International Relation concepts such as power, governance and international system. Based on the three assumptions about the IR world, the relational theory defines the concept of relationality as follows: “The logic of relationality holds that an actor makes judgments and decisions according to his relationships with specific others, with the totality of his relational circles or the relational context as the background” (Qin, 2018).

If one country manages the relations with its neighboring countries very well, it is likely to become one of the most relationally powerful countries, or the relationally central country, in the region. The relationally central country is not to conquer neighboring countries and seek regional domination. The relational perspective suggests that the central country will probably implement relational governance to supplement, rather than to replace, the rule-based governance, which may give rise to a relational international system in the region (Zhaohi, 2021).

### Key assumptions

Qin’s relational theory helps the rest of the world understand how the Chinese view and interact with the world. A full elaboration of his relational theory came from a 2016 paper and further developed into a representative book in 2018 (Qin, 2018). The relational theory begins with three assumptions about world politics:

**First** “the IR world is a universe of interrelatedness” (Qin, 2016), more specifically, the world in the Chinese view is complicated with interrelated people and objects. The fundamental relatedness implies that states agents are connected very much like ropes in a net in world politics. It definitely looks very different from neorealist literature, which adopts a billiard ball model of the International Relation world.

**Second**, “actors are and can only be ‘actors-in-relations’” (Qin, 2016). There are various accounts that the Chinese people, particularly politicians and strategists, think like players of Weiqi or Go, a game originated in ancient China. It is by no means feasible to understand the exact meaning and function of any particular piece without reference to other pieces in the game, which also applies to understanding actors in a society, in a political system and further in the world politics. The relational perspective suggests that relations should be the primary unit of analysis in international politics. This is fundamentally different from the methodological individualism of neorealist or neoliberal International Relation approaches. Therefore, it is suggested that “analysis of world politics should start from a study of relations rather than taking nation-states as independent entities” (Qin, 2016).

**Third**, “‘process,’ which is a key concept in the relational theory, is defined in terms of relations in motion” (Qin, 2016). Process herein could be better understood by referring to constructivist’s account that identities of state agents are subject to change in the process of interactions, which will shape states’ interests and explain their

actions. The neorealist and neoliberal International Relation theories generally view state agents with such fixed properties as unitary and rational actors, while the relational perspective is more inclined with constructivism in the sense that “actors-in-relations” should be dynamic and be understood in the process of interactions. The identities of state actors are historically and socially constructed, and the preferences and interests are not exogenously given. Therefore, it is essential to explore the process of interactions among states, which helps to understand their relations.

## APPLICATION OF THE THEORY

Having outlined the logic of relationality and the relational International Relation concepts, we can now apply this perspective to analyze the Belt and Road Initiative. After more critical examination of the Belt and Road Initiative, the three elements of relational theory, relational management, relational governance and relational system, the following conclusion was drawn: First, the relational perspective emphasizes Beijing’s efforts to manage and improve the relations with its neighboring countries, rather than to pursue regional domination and compete with Washington. Second, the relational perspective suggests relational governance as a new possibility of regional governance to facilitate regional development and cooperation, which is also different from rule-based governance suggested by liberal institutionalism. Last, should China’s Belt and Road Initiative be implemented successfully, there might exist a relational system in Asia and Africa in which the relationship among states is characterized by sense of identity within a “Community of Shared Future” (Zhaohi, 2021).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Trades between China and African countries continue to grow significantly, testifying to the deepening economic relations between the two sides. China Customs Administration corroborates this assertion, noting that trade volume between China and Africa increased from 10.6 billion dollars in 2000 to 204.2 billion dollars in 2018. In the same vein, the Export-Import bank of China (China Exim Bank), claims that it so far funded more than 87 billion dollar-project in more than 40 African countries that are mostly BRI partners. Undoubtedly, China and Africa cooperation has moved from the pre-independent political cooperation of 1950’s to the post millennium economic cooperation of the 21st century. China-Africa friendship has always been on the basis of win-win cooperation for common development (Lawal, 2020).

President Xi Jinping explains that no matter how the international situation changes and in spite of the interference of certain powers, the original aspirations of China and Africa for win-win cooperation and common development remain. According to him, it is the resolve of China to jointly build a closer community with a shared future that will not falter. Analysts, therefore, observe that China and Africa cooperation have moved from the pre-independent political cooperation of 1950s to the post-millennium economic cooperation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To sustain the commitment, Chinese foreign ministers have made it a duty to visit Africa at the beginning of every New Year. The idea for such visits is because of China’s belief that economies around the world are becoming more independent, especially after the end of cold war and Africa as a big group of countries (thenewsigeria.com.ng).

According to the Charge d’Affaires of the Embassy of People’s Republic of China in Nigeria, Zhao Yong, trade

volume between Nigeria and China has soared to 15.3 billion USD in 2018; 10.8% higher than in 2017. Yong said this at a “Belt and Road” event: Nigeria and China Economic and Trade Forum held in Abuja in April 2019. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of rising protectionism and unilateralism, trade between China and African countries continue to grow significantly, testifying the deepening economic relations between the “two sides”. African experts and officials have said. According to statistics by China Customs Administration, trade volume between China and Africa soared from \$10.6 billion in 2000 to \$204.2 billion in 2018 (Lawal, 2020).

According to Lawal (2020), the Export-Import bank of China (China Exim Bank) has so far funded over 600 billion Yuan (87 billion USD) projects in more than 40 African countries who are mostly Belt and Road Initiative partners. The findings were mainly to support major projects with prominent economic and social benefits to Africa, the bank said. China Exim Bank is a state funded and state-owned bank dedicated to supporting China’s foreign trade, investment and international economic cooperation. President Xi Jinping, in describing how important and strategic relationship between China and Africa have become, pointed out that no matter how the international situation changes and despite the interference of certain powers, the original aspirations of China and Africa for win-win cooperation and common development will stay unchanged.

However, it is not surprising that in an effort to sustain and maintain such cooperation over the years Chinese Foreign Ministers made it a duty to visit Africa at the beginning of every New Year. In fact, this year marks the 30th year since the Foreign Minister Qian Qichen started the diplomatic shuttle with a maiden tour in 1990 to four African countries; these included Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The idea behind such visits, according Foreign Minister Qian, was because China believes that economies around the world were becoming more interdependent especially after the end of cold war and Africa as a big group of countries in the United Nations family represents an important force in international affairs (Lawal, 2020).

In 2020, the Foreign Minister Wang Yi visit Egypt, Djibouti, Eritrea Burundi and Zimbabwe from 7-13 January; and coincidentally, this year too marks 20th anniversary of the establishment of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). During his visit to Egypt, Mr. Wang Yi promised to help the country combat extremism. In Djibouti, the Chinese Foreign Minister said China is willing to view relations with Djibouti from a strategic, long-term perspective and deepen political mutual trust. He reiterated that the two countries should build “Belt and Road” together, vigorously promote bilateral pragmatic cooperation, and push China-Djibouti strategic partnership to a new level (Lawal, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, China has increasingly broadened its ties to include the construction of a new parliament building estimated to cost more than \$100 million. China also provides humanitarian assistance such as food items as well as technical assistance during natural disasters. While in Burundi, the Chinese Foreign Minister assured President Pierre Nkurunziza of continued support in areas such as education, energy, and agriculture, China is also constructing a new state house building for the country. Indeed, there are and there will be tremendous achievements for the over 40 member countries of the BRI as the initiative represents an authentic attempt by the world’s second largest economy to practice a new kind of diplomacy based on inclusiveness, equal opportunity, and respect for the diversity of cultures and political system Diplomats (Lawal, 2020).

## **Nigeria Accession into the Belt and Road Initiative**

Nigeria officially entered into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by President Muhammadu Buhari at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in September, 2018. President of China, Xi Jinping at the signing ceremony asserted that Nigeria becoming a member of The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would further strengthen China-Nigeria bilateral relations through bilateral diplomacy. Though, there was a lot of skepticism when Nigeria joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2018 at a summit in Beijing, Nigeria has recorded tremendous success, resulting in being the Africa's largest economy and the most populous nation in Africa. Nigeria is among the 40 African countries that signed the memorandum of understanding with Beijing to the partnership of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). So far, 126 countries, including 26 European countries, have also signed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation agreements with China. Further to this, the initiative and its core concepts have been incorporated into the G-20, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Vanguard, 2020).

According to Sheriff and Farouk (2020), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is part of the Chinese new diplomacy which openly involves global generality and moderates the process of international and multilateral trade. It is the inspired thought of president Xi Jinping which was made known in 2013 in Kazakhstan. The one belt one road initiative is the only one of its kind in terms of world history that truly connect the world. It can be likened with the American marshal plan offered to Europe after the Second World War to rebuild Europe (Ghali & Farouk, 2020).

## **Objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative**

The initiative's objectives, guiding principles, policy guidelines, pragmatic priorities, and working instruments are stated in the document Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road published in March 2015. There China pledged to uphold the principles of mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence, dialogue and tolerance, and full respect for each country's path to and mode of development (Juan, 2017). On the international realm, the B&R initiative seeks to build multi-tiered communication networks to enhance the connectivity among countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. The aim is to promote a free flow of economic factors, a highly efficient allocation of resources, and a deep integration of markets among B&R countries, and in this way to "tap market potential, promote investment and consumption, create demands and job opportunities, and enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges" among them. The objective is to integrate supply chains in the region and encourage "companies from all countries to invest in China" and "Chinese enterprises to participate in infrastructure construction in other countries along the Belt and Road, and make industrial investments there". A key, related goal is to achieve the financial integration of B&R countries by procuring currency stability and integrating national economic development strategies. A broader objective not stated in the Vision and Actions document nor declared in verbal statements by President Xi and other members of the Chinese leadership underlies and articulates the ones listed above, namely, the integration of the participating countries into a single, transcontinental, China-centred, economically cohesive region (Juan, 2017).

This is a long-term goal that permeates the B&R narrative and guides the bulk of the projects and programs required to implement this initiative. It is implicit in that document where the notion of such a transcontinental region transpires throughout the text. On the domestic domain, the B&R initiative draws directly on Jiang Zemin's Great Western Development vision and thus on the Go West policy inspired in this vision and launched in 2000. On these bases, the aim is to abate China's wide and growing regional disparities and socioeconomic inequalities; leverage the comparative advantages.

According to Sheriff and Farouk (2020), the belt and road initiative does not come without reasons of some objectives to be achieved by the Peoples Republic of China. Some of the reasons why China needs the One Belt One Road Initiative have been outlined by Wenping (2019) and China power Team (2019) as follows:

- i. Expansion of China's export markets,
- ii. The Promotion of The Renminbi (RMB) As an International Currency,
- iii. Reduction of trade frictions like tariffs and transport costs.
- iv. Developing and connecting hard infrastructure with neighboring countries will help reduce transport times and costs.
- v. Establishing soft infrastructure with partner countries will allow for a broader range of goods to be traded with fewer regulatory hurdles.
- vi. Raising capital for these infrastructure projects by issuing bonds in RMB will encourage its use in international financial centers.
- vii. Boost growth in its lower-income western provinces by building overland economic connectivity with Central Asia.
- viii. Diversification of Chinas's investment pattern.
- ix. Upgrade Chinese companies from local to international ones.
- x. Sharing China's development results with other countries.
- xi. Help to promote connectivity/trade of Asian, European and African countries and push for world economic recovery
- xii. Free trade vs protectionism; inclusive globalization vs Deglobalization.

### **Achievements of the Belt and Road Initiative in Nigeria**

The major advantages that the Belt and Road Initiative brings to Nigeria and Africa includes: Job opportunities, infrastructure, investment, connectivity, social cohesion, inter-cultural marriages, tourism, traditional medicine and most importantly African unity. China has been collaborating and connecting with the African union especially in the construction of the institutional building in Addis Ababa Ethiopia. With the belt and road initiative in Nigeria, it will serve as a signal that it is high time Nigeria to take the lead and observe Nigeria revitalization in the continent towards fulfilling the vision of African founding fathers (Sheriff and Farouk, 2020).

For instance, the Abuja-Kaduna rail service that was inaugurated in 2016 has created major transportation channel from the capital city to the industrial and metropolitan Kaduna. The Abuja-Kaduna rail line has also improved investment environment, promoted business trade and safer passenger traffic and cargo transportation between the

two cities. Similarly, dozens of Chinese enterprises of different scale are almost in every state of Nigeria, thriving and contributing to the economy of those states and Nigeria.

Completed projects and ongoing ones in Nigeria include the popular Abuja–Kaduna standard gauge rail line, Abuja rail mass transit, new terminal at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, Lagos–Ibadan standard gauge rail line, Port Harcourt International Airport, Port Harcourt, Malam Aminu Kano International Airport, Kano, Lekki Deep Sea port project and Abuja township road project, among others. Unarguably, infrastructure development by the Chinese in partnership with Nigerian government has been making impact in the lives of many Nigerians

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While realists underline power and interests as the fundamental variables, liberals attach great importance to rules and institutions. Owing to their different ontological primacy, realists and liberals have distinct interpretations of China's BRI. Realists are more cautious about the consequence of a potential Sino-centric order established by the BRI, whereas the liberals are generally more confident with the liberal rule-based order that China's BRI will remain tied to.

Although Sino-Nigeria relationship started as a win-win encounter in the beginning, but unfortunately, it was not consolidated. Instead of the win-win relationship being consolidated, it drifted to "dependency" relationship. It is notable that the BR initiative comes with a new order based on "shared interest and shared future for mankind.

Nigeria and China bilateral cooperation broadly consultative and productive are currently at all-time high, but Nigeria should find appropriate policy framework to engage the process, Nigeria, must refrain from knee-jerk approach, but initiate a sound approach of properly studied and thoroughly examined process that brings about meaningful contribution to the process and shared benefits to all.

China should encourage equal opportunities and abide by international norms and legal standards to create a level playing field for all the states involved.

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