CHINA'S BELT-ROAD INITIATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative has emerged as a major global development framework aimed at enhancing infrastructure connectivity, trade integration, and economic cooperation across participating countries. In Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, the BRI has increasingly been interpreted as a potential *phase-skipping* or development leapfrogging strategy capable of accelerating sustainable national development by bypassing some traditional stages of industrial and infrastructural evolution. This paper examines China's built road initiative as a phase-skipping approach for sustainable development in Nigeria, with particular attention to infrastructure provision, industrialization, economic diversification, and long-term national development planning. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design and relies on secondary data sourced from policy documents, government reports, academic literature, and publications of international development institutions. The analysis is anchored on modernization and developmental state theories, which emphasize strategic state intervention, infrastructure-led growth, and technology transfer as critical drivers of development. The findings reveal that built and road initiative-supported projects in Nigeria especially in the areas of rail transportation, road networks, port modernization, power infrastructure, and industrial zones have contributed to improved connectivity, reduced transaction costs, and enhanced the prospects for regional and international trade. The study also identifies key challenges that undermine the sustainability of this phase-skipping approach, including rising public debt exposure, weak local content integration, limited technology transfer, environmental concerns, and governance and transparency deficits in project implementation. The paper concludes that while the BRI offers Nigeria a viable pathway for accelerated and potentially sustainable development, its success depends largely on strong domestic institutions, coherent development planning, and effective policy coordination. The study recommends that Nigeria strategically align BRI projects with national development priorities, strengthen regulatory oversight, promote local participation and skills transfer, and ensure fiscal and environmental sustainability in order to fully harness the developmental benefits of the initiative.

Keywords: Belt, China, Road Initiative, sustainable, sustainable development

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become one of the most significant global development frameworks of the 21st century, seeking to enhance infrastructure connectivity, economic integration, and international cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Launched in 2013, the BRI has attracted participation from over 150 countries, including Nigeria, reflecting its potential as a catalyst for large-scale infrastructure and economic transformation (Nwachukwu, 2025). In Nigeria, the BRI has supported high-profile projects such as the Lagos-Ibadan railway, deep-sea port development, and plans for expanded road and energy infrastructure, which are expected to improve transportation, trade, and industrial capacity (Tinubu, 2025). While proponents emphasize the initiative's potential to address Nigeria's longstanding infrastructure deficits and promote sustainable development, concerns persist regarding debt sustainability, transparency, and equitable economic benefits (Nwachukwu, 2025; Gbadebo, 2025). However, China's Belt and Road Initiative as a phase-skipping development approach for Nigeria, is necessary for accelerating national development outcomes by leveraging foreign investment and technological support to "leapfrog" traditional stages of economic transformation. It is in this regard that this paper examines china's belt and road initiative as a phase skipping approach to sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Despite Nigeria's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, the country continues to grapple with persistent development challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, weak industrialization, fiscal pressures, and limited economic diversification. Although Chinese-supported Belt and Road Initiative projects have delivered critical infrastructure such as railways and ports, questions remain about the long-term sustainability, debt implications, and inclusiveness of these interventions (Gbadebo, 2025; Nwachukwu, 2025). Moreover, the lack of cohesive national planning and capacity deficits has sometimes limited Nigeria's ability to fully integrate Belt and Road Initiative projects into broader development strategies. Without addressing these gaps, there is a risk that Belt and Road Initiative engagement may reinforce dependency or exacerbate fiscal vulnerabilities, rather than support Nigeria's transition to a more diversified and sustainable economy. These challenges necessitate a systematic inquiry into how the

Belt and Road Initiative can be effectively harnessed as a phase-skipping approach to sustainable national development in Nigeria. This research seek to answer how has the Belt and Road Initiative contributed to phase-skipping in infrastructure and connectivity in Nigeria, What are the socio-economic effects of Belt and Road Initiative projects on sustainable development outcomes in Nigeria?, What policy measures can enhance the sustainability and developmental impact of Belt and Road Initiative projects in Nigeria and how does phase skipping contrast with modernization theory?.

Chinese Built and Road Initiative (BRI) and sustainable development in Nigeria

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global development and cooperation framework launched by China in 2013 with the objective of enhancing cross-border infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, investment flows, and people-to-people exchanges across participating countries. Initially conceptualized as the *Silk Road Economic Belt* and the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, the BRI draws historical inspiration from the ancient Silk Road trading routes while adapting them to contemporary global economic realities (Xi, 2017). At its core, the Belt and Road Initiative seeks to address infrastructure deficits in developing regions by promoting large-scale investments in transport networks, energy systems, ports, digital infrastructure, and industrial parks. Through policy coordination, financial integration, trade connectivity, and cultural exchange, the initiative aims to stimulate economic growth and regional integration, particularly in Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC, 2015). Financing for BRI projects is largely supported by Chinese policy banks, state-owned enterprises, and multilateral platforms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The Belt and Road Initiative is both a development strategy and a geopolitical instrument. From a development perspective, it is viewed as an infrastructure-led growth model capable of accelerating industrialization and reducing transaction costs in partner countries (World Bank, 2019). Critics, however, caution that the initiative may expose recipient countries to debt sustainability risks, governance challenges, and asymmetrical economic relations if not carefully managed (Hurley et al., 2018).

In the African context, including Nigeria, the Belt and Road Initiative is increasingly framed as a *phase-skipping* or *development leapfrogging* approach, enabling countries to fast-track infrastructure development without undergoing lengthy incremental stages of economic transformation (Brautigam, 2020). Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a complex blend of development cooperation, strategic diplomacy, and global economic restructuring. The phase-skipping approach, also referred to as *development leapfrogging*, is a development strategy that enables late-developing countries to bypass certain traditional stages of economic and technological development by adopting advanced systems, technologies, or institutional arrangements already utilized by more industrialized economies. Rather than following the linear, incremental path historically experienced by developed countries, phase skipping allows developing states to accelerate growth by strategically investing in modern infrastructure, technology, and governance frameworks (Steinmueller, 2001).

In development theory, phase skipping challenges classical modernization assumptions which posit that societies must sequentially transition through defined stages of growth. Proponents argue that globalization, technological diffusion, and international cooperation have created opportunities for latecomers to compress development timelines and avoid inefficient or obsolete stages (Lee, 2019). Examples often cited include the rapid adoption of mobile banking in Africa, which bypassed extensive fixed-line financial infrastructure, and the use of renewable energy technologies in regions lacking centralized power grids. From an infrastructure and industrial development perspective, phase skipping emphasizes large-scale investments in transport, energy, and digital systems to create the foundational conditions necessary for accelerated industrialization and economic transformation. By leveraging foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and strategic partnerships, countries can overcome domestic capacity constraints and fast-track integration into global value chains (Perez &Soete, 1988). In the context of National development, phase skipping is closely linked to state-led development strategies. Developmental state theorists argue that effective state coordination, long-term planning, and targeted investment are essential to ensure that leapfrogging initiatives translate into sustainable development outcomes rather than short-term gains (Chang, 2002). Without strong institutions and regulatory frameworks, phase-skipping efforts risk creating dependency, inequality, or infrastructural enclaves disconnected from the broader economy.

Applied to contemporary development initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), phase skipping is increasingly viewed as an infrastructure-led leapfrogging mechanism. Through access to large-scale financing and advanced construction capacity, developing countries can rapidly expand transport networks, energy systems, and industrial zones that would otherwise take decades to develop (World Bank, 2019). For countries like Nigeria, this approach holds the potential to accelerate economic diversification, enhance productivity, and support sustainable development goals. However, the phase-skipping approach is not without challenges.

Scholars caution that debt sustainability, weak absorptive capacity, environmental risks, and limited local participation can undermine its long-term effectiveness (Lee, 2019). Therefore, successful phase skipping requires strategic alignment with national development priorities, strong governance structures, and deliberate policies to ensure technology transfer, local capacity building, and inclusive growth. Sustainable national development refers to a holistic development process that promotes long-term economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection in a manner that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The concept is rooted in the principles of sustainable development popularized by the Brundtland Commission, which emphasizes the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives in national development planning (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). At the national level, sustainable development goes beyond short-term economic expansion to include structural transformation, human capital development, institutional effectiveness, and environmental stewardship. It entails the creation of productive employment, reduction of poverty and inequality, enhancement of social welfare, and preservation of ecological systems that support livelihoods and economic activities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). Thus, sustainable national development requires coherent policies that balance growth with equity and environmental sustainability.

From a political economy perspective, sustainable national development also depends on strong governance structures, transparent institutions, and inclusive decision-making processes. Effective state capacity is essential for mobilizing resources, regulating economic activities, and ensuring that development benefits are equitably distributed across regions and social groups (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In developing countries, sustainability further demands resilience to external shocks, diversification of the economy, and reduced dependence on volatile primary commodities. In the context of globalization, sustainable national development increasingly incorporates international cooperation, technological innovation, and infrastructure development as critical enablers. Investments in sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, education, and technology can accelerate development while minimizing environmental degradation (World Bank, 2020). Consequently, sustainable national development is best understood as a dynamic, multidimensional process that aligns economic progress with social justice, environmental protection, and institutional sustainability.

Belt and Road Initiative Projects in Nigeria

The existing literature generally portrays China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a strategic instrument for accelerating infrastructure development in developing countries through a phase-skipping or leapfrogging approach. Scholars such as Lee (2019) and the World Bank (2019) argue that the initiative enables countries with significant infrastructure deficits to bypass the lengthy and sequential stages of infrastructure accumulation experienced by advanced economies. Within this perspective, Chinese financing, technical expertise, and project implementation capacity are viewed as mechanisms through which countries can rapidly acquire modern infrastructure and stimulate economic transformation. In Nigeria, much of the literature presents the BRI as a catalyst for infrastructure modernization. Studies frequently highlight projects such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port, the Abuja–Keffi–Akwanga–Lafia–Makurdi Road Project, the Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Station, and the Greater Abuja Water Supply Project as evidence of the transformative impact of Chinese investment on national development (Africa China News, 2025). Similarly, railway projects including the Kano–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan standard-gauge rail lines are often cited as examples of how BRI-supported investments enhance connectivity, reduce transportation costs, and facilitate economic integration (Nwachukwu, 2025). These studies collectively suggest that the BRI provides Nigeria with an opportunity to overcome historical infrastructure deficits and accelerate economic growth through a development leapfrogging strategy.

However, a closer examination of the literature reveals important shortcomings. First, much of the existing scholarship adopts a project-centered approach that focuses primarily on describing infrastructure projects and their anticipated economic benefits. While such studies demonstrate the scale and significance of BRI investments, they often fail to critically assess whether infrastructure expansion automatically translates into sustainable development outcomes. Consequently, there is a tendency within the literature to equate infrastructure provision with development success without adequately examining issues of sustainability, inclusiveness, and long-term socioeconomic transformation.

Second, the literature pays insufficient attention to the institutional and governance conditions necessary for successful phase-skipping. Although some scholars acknowledge concerns regarding debt sustainability, governance effectiveness, and policy coordination (Hurley et al., 2018), these factors are often treated as secondary issues rather than central determinants of development outcomes. As a result, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how governance quality, accountability mechanisms, and institutional capacity influence the effectiveness of BRI-supported infrastructure projects in achieving sustainable development objectives.

Third, existing studies rarely conceptualize the BRI within a broader phase-skipping development framework. Most analyses examine individual projects or sectors in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding how Chinese-funded infrastructure collectively contributes to development leapfrogging and sustainable national development. The relationship between BRI projects, phase-skipping development, and sustainable development outcomes therefore remains underexplored, particularly within the Nigerian context.

The literature on policy imperatives for optimizing Nigeria's engagement with the BRI similarly emphasizes issues such as alignment with national development plans, debt sustainability, local content promotion, technology transfer, and environmental safeguards (Hurley et al., 2018; Nwachukwu, 2025). While these recommendations provide useful policy guidance, they largely remain normative in nature. Existing studies tend to prescribe what governments should do without empirically assessing whether such measures have been effectively implemented or how they influence the developmental outcomes of BRI projects. This creates a gap in understanding the practical conditions under which BRI investments can support sustainable national development.

The contrast between phase-skipping and classical modernization theory further highlights unresolved debates in the literature. Classical modernization theorists such as Rostow (1960) maintain that development occurs through sequential stages characterized by gradual industrialization, capital accumulation, and institutional development. In contrast, proponents of phase-skipping argue that late-developing countries can bypass some of these stages through the adoption of advanced technologies and infrastructure (Steinmueller, 2001; Lee, 2019). Although scholars acknowledge the potential of leapfrogging strategies, there remains limited empirical evidence regarding the extent to which such approaches generate sustainable and inclusive development outcomes in developing countries. This theoretical and empirical gap is particularly evident in studies examining Nigeria's engagement with the BRI.

It is within this context that the present study is situated. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on describing BRI projects or discussing their potential benefits, this study examines the relationship between BRI projects, phase-skipping development, and sustainable national development in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates whether BRI-supported infrastructure projects contribute to sustainable development beyond mere infrastructure provision and explores the institutional, governance, and policy factors that shape these outcomes. By integrating insights from phase-skipping theory and sustainable development discourse, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how infrastructure-led leapfrogging influences national development. In doing so, it addresses the existing gaps in the literature and contributes to ongoing debates on the developmental implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Phase-Skipping/Development Leapfrogging framework as the theoretical lens, which is closely related to resource-based development theories and infrastructure-led growth models. The phase-skipping theory posits that late-developing countries can accelerate economic and social development by bypassing traditional incremental stages of industrialization, technology adoption, and infrastructure development. Instead of following the linear progression suggested by classical modernization theory, countries can "leapfrog" intermediate phases by strategically leveraging advanced technologies, foreign direct investment, and institutional support to achieve rapid development outcomes (Lee, 2019; Steinmueller, 2001).

The basic assumptions of this framework include the following: first, that countries can achieve accelerated development by adopting external knowledge, technology, and capital; second, that infrastructure is a critical enabler of economic transformation, and its strategic implementation can reduce time lags associated with traditional development pathways; third, that institutional capacity and governance are essential to maximize the benefits of leapfrogging while mitigating risks such as dependency, debt accumulation, and social inequality; and fourth, that phase-skipping interventions should be aligned with national development priorities to ensure sustainable outcomes (World Bank, 2019; Hurley et al., 2018).

In the Nigerian context, this framework is particularly relevant. Nigeria faces longstanding challenges of infrastructure deficits, limited industrial diversification, and regional disparities that constrain sustainable national development. Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers an avenue for phase-skipping infrastructure development, enabling Nigeria to rapidly acquire modern transport networks, ports, energy systems, and urban infrastructure. These interventions can accelerate industrialization, stimulate trade, generate employment, and promote inclusive growth, aligning with national development goals such as those outlined in the National Integrated Infrastructure Masterplan (Nwachukwu, 2025). However, the successful application of the phase-skipping framework in Nigeria depends on strong governance, fiscal prudence, technology transfer, and integration of projects into broader socio-economic and environmental objectives. When effectively managed, this theoretical approach provides a robust lens to understand how strategic infrastructure investment and international partnerships can enable Nigeria to fast-track sustainable national development while overcoming the limitations of traditional linear development models.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design combined with content analysis to investigate the role of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a phase-skipping approach for infrastructure-led sustainable development in Nigeria. The descriptive method is appropriate because it allows for a systematic, detailed, and factual examination of existing phenomena, in this case, BRI-related infrastructure projects, policy documents, and development outcomes. Descriptive research enables the study to identify patterns, trends, and relationships between BRI interventions and Nigeria's sustainable national development objectives without manipulating variables (Best & Kahn, 2016). The content analysis method is employed to examine textual and documentary evidence, including government policy papers, BRI agreements, project reports, official statistics, media publications, and scholarly articles. Content analysis allows for a systematic evaluation of qualitative data to extract meaningful insights about project objectives, implementation strategies, and developmental impacts (Krippendorff, 2018). By coding themes such as project scope, infrastructure type, financing mechanisms, socio-economic benefits, and sustainability considerations, the study can draw evidence-based conclusions on the effectiveness of BRI interventions as a phase-skipping strategy. Data for the study is drawn from secondary sources, including official publications from the Nigerian government, international development organizations such as the World Bank, academic journals, and credible media reports. The combination of descriptive and content analysis methods provides both quantitative summaries (e.g., scale of projects, investment amounts, coverage) and qualitative insights (e.g., policy alignment, governance issues, sustainability impacts), thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of how BRI projects contribute to Nigeria's sustainable development.

The methodological approach is particularly suitable for this study because it captures the complexity of multi-sectoral infrastructure interventions, evaluates them against national development objectives, and allows for contextual interpretation using the phase-skipping theoretical framework. This enables the research to offer robust policy insights and recommendations grounded in empirical evidence.

Results and Discussions

This study was motivated by a significant gap in the existing literature on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and development in Nigeria. While previous studies have extensively documented BRI-funded infrastructure projects and their anticipated economic benefits, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how these projects function as instruments of phase-skipping development and whether they contribute to sustainable national development. Much of the literature remains descriptive, focusing on individual projects, financing arrangements, and projected outcomes, while paying limited attention to the broader developmental implications of BRI-induced infrastructure transformation. This gap informed the study's central research question: To what extent can China's Belt and Road Initiative serve as a mechanism for accelerating Nigeria's development through a phase-skipping strategy?

To address this question, the study first examined the challenges confronting infrastructure development in Nigeria. The findings reveal that inadequate infrastructure remains one of the major constraints to economic transformation, industrialization, and regional integration. Consistent with previous studies (World Bank, 2019; Nwachukwu, 2025), the research identified chronic deficits in transportation, energy, water supply, and logistics systems arising from inadequate financing, weak institutional capacity, policy discontinuity, and prolonged implementation processes. However, unlike existing studies that primarily describe these challenges, the present study demonstrates how the BRI provides a state-led mechanism through which Nigeria can overcome these structural constraints. By mobilizing Chinese capital, technology, and technical expertise, BRI projects have enabled the rapid delivery of strategic infrastructure that would otherwise require decades to achieve under conventional development pathways. This finding provides empirical support for the assumption that late-developing countries can accelerate development through carefully managed external partnerships.

The study further investigated the policy and institutional conditions necessary for maximizing the developmental impact of BRI projects. Existing literature frequently recommends stronger governance, policy coordination, and fiscal discipline but rarely examines how these factors shape the effectiveness of phase-skipping strategies. The findings indicate that the developmental benefits of BRI projects depend significantly on their integration with national development priorities, institutional accountability, debt management practices, and local capacity-building initiatives. Projects such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port, Lagos-Ibadan Standard Gauge Railway, Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Station, and Greater Abuja Water Supply Project demonstrate that infrastructure investments generate greater developmental outcomes when embedded within coherent national development strategies. This finding fills an important gap in the literature by showing that infrastructure provision alone is insufficient for sustainable development; rather, governance and institutional effectiveness determine whether phase-skipping translates into long-term development gains.

The findings also provide important insights into the theoretical assumptions underpinning the phase-skipping approach. Classical modernization theory assumes that countries must progress through gradual and sequential stages of development before attaining industrialization and economic maturity (Rostow, 1960). However, the evidence generated by this study suggests that strategic state-led initiatives such as the BRI can enable countries to bypass certain intermediate stages of infrastructure accumulation. Through Chinese financing and technological support, Nigeria has been able to rapidly acquire modern transport, energy, and logistics infrastructure that accelerates economic activity and national integration. In this regard, the findings support the core proposition of phase-skipping theory that development need not always follow a linear trajectory when external resources, technology, and strategic partnerships are effectively utilized (Lee, 2019; Steinmueller, 2001).

More importantly, the study advances the literature by establishing a direct analytical connection between BRI projects, phase-skipping development, and sustainable national development. Whereas previous studies have often treated these concepts separately, this research demonstrates how BRI-funded infrastructure serves as a conduit through which Nigeria can leapfrog traditional development stages and accelerate progress toward sustainable development goals. The findings show that improvements in transportation networks, electricity generation, water supply, and logistics infrastructure contribute to economic growth, employment generation, industrial development, regional integration, and enhanced public service delivery. Consequently, the BRI emerges not merely as a source of infrastructure finance but as a strategic state-led development instrument capable of facilitating rapid socioeconomic transformation.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that the success of this leapfrogging strategy is not automatic. Persistent concerns regarding debt sustainability, environmental management, institutional weaknesses, and dependence on foreign expertise suggest that phase-skipping carries significant risks if not carefully managed. This observation extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that the developmental outcomes of phase-skipping depend not only on infrastructure acquisition but also on governance quality and national policy direction. Therefore, while the BRI presents Nigeria with an opportunity to accelerate development, its long-term success ultimately depends on the country's ability to integrate these investments into a broader framework of sustainable national development. Overall, the study contributes to knowledge by addressing a major gap in the literature: the limited understanding of how China's Belt and Road Initiative functions as a state-led phase-skipping mechanism for sustainable development in Nigeria. By linking infrastructure investments, governance conditions, and sustainable development outcomes within a single analytical framework, the study provides a clearer research agenda for understanding the role of external development partnerships in accelerating socioeconomic transformation in developing countries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as an effective phase-skipping strategy for accelerating infrastructure development in Nigeria, enabling the country to bypass traditional incremental stages of industrialization and public service expansion. BRI interventions have improved transport, energy, water, and urban infrastructure, thereby promoting economic growth, employment, and regional integration. However, the benefits are contingent on strong governance, fiscal prudence, local capacity building, and alignment with national development priorities. Overall, when properly managed, BRI projects can significantly contribute to sustainable national development in Nigeria. Strengthen institutional capacity and governance mechanisms to address project delays, fragmentation, and inefficiencies in infrastructure planning and implementation.

Strategically prioritize BRI projects that offer the highest development impact and align with national development plans to maximize the benefits of phase-skipping infrastructure interventions. Implement robust fiscal management, environmental safeguards, and local content policies to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and socially responsible project outcomes. Monitor and evaluate the socio-economic impacts of BRI projects using standardized indicators to ensure long-term sustainability, equitable growth, and integration with Nigeria's broader development objectives.

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