



GLOBAL POWER TRANSITION AND GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FOR NIGERIA FROM AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC INFLUENCE AND CHINESE ECONOMIC EXPANSION

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is undergoing a significant transition from a unipolar order dominated by the United States to an emerging multipolar order increasingly shaped by China's expanding global influence. This shift has profound implications for governance and development in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where both powers have pursued distinct engagement strategies. While the United States has traditionally advanced liberal democracy, constitutional governance, and human rights through diplomacy, foreign assistance, and multilateral institutions, China has strengthened its influence through economic diplomacy, infrastructure investment, trade, and development cooperation with limited political conditionalities. This study examines the implications of this evolving global power transition for governance in Africa, with particular emphasis on Nigeria. Anchored on Soft Power Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and other scholarly sources. The findings indicate that although U.S. engagement has contributed to democratic reforms and institutional development, China's development-oriented approach has gained increasing acceptance among African governments because it prioritizes economic growth, infrastructure development, and state sovereignty. The study argues that the emerging multipolar order presents both opportunities and governance challenges for Nigeria. It concludes that Nigeria should adopt a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy that leverages the comparative advantages of both powers while strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing accountability, promoting inclusive governance, and pursuing sustainable development consistent with its national priorities and socio-political realities.

Keywords: *Global power transition, democracy, economic diplomacy, governance, China-United States*

Introduction

The international political and economic system has experienced profound transformations since the end of the Cold War in 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the emergence of the United States as the dominant global superpower, ushering in a unipolar world order characterised by the global promotion of liberal democracy, capitalism, constitutional governance, and market-oriented economic reforms (Alcaro, R. (Ed.) 2018).

During this period, the United States and its Western allies, through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and various international development agencies, strongly advocated democratic governance as the most suitable political system for global stability and development. African states, including Nigeria, experienced increasing political and economic pressure to embrace democratic reforms, multiparty elections, rule of law, respect for human rights, transparency, accountability, and economic liberalisation (Cheeseman, 2015).

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The democratic wave that swept across Africa during the 1990s was largely influenced by Western ideological dominance after the Cold War. Several African countries abandoned military rule and authoritarian systems in favour of civilian democratic governance (Houngnikpo, 2016). In Nigeria, prolonged military rule ended in 1999 with the restoration of democratic governance under the Fourth Republic. Western nations and international institutions supported democratic consolidation in Nigeria through electoral assistance, governance reforms, anti-corruption campaigns, and civil society development. Liberal democracy was therefore presented not only as a political system but also as a prerequisite for economic development, international legitimacy, and foreign assistance.

Despite these democratic transitions, many African countries continue to face serious governance and developmental challenges. In Nigeria, democratic governance over the past two decades has not adequately addressed persistent issues such as corruption, insecurity, poverty, unemployment, ethnic tensions, poor infrastructure, and ineffective service delivery (Odo, 2015). Electoral violence, political instability, and governance failures have also weakened public confidence in democratic institutions (Ighoshemu, & Ogidiagba, 2022). Consequently, questions have emerged regarding whether the Western liberal democratic model alone is sufficient to guarantee sustainable development and effective governance in African societies with distinct socio-political realities.

Meanwhile, the rapid rise of China as a major global economic power has significantly altered the structure of international relations and global development discourse. China's remarkable economic transformation from a largely agrarian society to the world's second-largest economy has attracted global attention, particularly among developing countries seeking alternative pathways to development. Unlike the Western democratic model, China's approach emphasises state-led development, economic pragmatism, infrastructural expansion, industrialisation, long-term national planning, and non-interference in the internal affairs of partner states.

China's growing influence in Africa has been facilitated through trade partnerships, foreign direct investments, infrastructural financing, bilateral cooperation agreements, and strategic diplomatic engagement (Hameiri, & Jones, 2016). Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China has financed and constructed roads, railways, airports, seaports, power projects, and telecommunications infrastructure across several African countries. In Nigeria, Chinese involvement is visible in major infrastructural projects such as railway modernisation, airport development, road construction, energy projects, and telecommunications expansion. These developments have strengthened China's economic and political influence within Africa and challenged the long-standing dominance of Western powers on the continent.

Unlike Western nations that often attach democratic and governance conditions to aid and financial assistance, China's development cooperation model is largely based on economic engagement without explicit political conditionalities. This approach has become attractive to many African governments because it provides opportunities for rapid infrastructural development and economic cooperation without external interference in domestic political affairs. Consequently, China's rise has introduced a competing governance-development paradigm that prioritises economic growth and state capacity over liberal democratic prescriptions.

The emerging competition between American democratic influence and Chinese geo-economic expansion presents both opportunities and challenges for African countries. On one hand, the rivalry

creates opportunities for African states to diversify international partnerships, attract investments, improve infrastructure, and strengthen economic growth. On the other hand, it raises concerns regarding debt dependency, governance standards, economic sovereignty, neo-colonial influence, and the future of democratic governance in Africa.

Nigeria occupies a strategic position within this evolving global order due to its population size, economic potential, regional influence, and geopolitical importance in Africa. As Africa's largest democracy and one of the continent's leading economies, Nigeria's governance trajectory has significant implications for regional stability and development. However, the country continues to struggle with institutional weaknesses, corruption, insecurity, policy inconsistency, youth unemployment, and socio-economic inequality despite more than two decades of democratic governance. The growing presence of China in Nigeria's economy and infrastructure sector has therefore generated debates among scholars, policymakers, and development experts regarding the most appropriate governance and development model for the country.

Against this background, this study examines the implications of the ongoing global power transition from Western democratic dominance toward Chinese economic influence on governance in Africa, with particular emphasis on Nigeria. The paper seeks to analyse how the competing governance and development approaches of the United States and China shape governance outcomes in Africa and identify strategic lessons that Nigeria can adopt to strengthen democratic institutions, promote sustainable development, and enhance national sovereignty within the emerging multipolar world order.

The transition to democratic governance across Africa since the early 1990s was widely expected to promote political stability, accountability, rule of law, economic growth, and sustainable development. Encouraged by the United States and other Western powers after the Cold War, many African countries embraced multiparty democracy, constitutional governance, and neoliberal economic reforms as pathways to national development and international integration. In Nigeria, democratic rule was restored in 1999 after several years of military dictatorship, generating high public expectations for improved governance, economic transformation, and institutional development.

However, more than two decades after democratic consolidation efforts began, many African states continue to experience significant governance challenges. In Nigeria, democratic governance has not fully translated into effective public service delivery, poverty reduction, economic diversification, infrastructural development, or political stability. The country continues to face widespread corruption, weak institutions, insecurity, electoral malpractice, youth unemployment, ethnic and religious conflicts, and declining public trust in political leadership. Although democratic institutions such as elections, legislatures, political parties, and judicial systems exist formally, their effectiveness in promoting accountability and responsive governance remains limited.

Furthermore, the liberal democratic model promoted by Western powers has often been criticised for placing excessive emphasis on political processes without adequately addressing the socio-economic realities of developing countries. In many African states, democratic governance has coincided with economic hardship, rising debt burdens, unemployment, and social inequality. Consequently, growing public dissatisfaction with democracy has raised concerns regarding the sustainability and effectiveness of Western-inspired governance frameworks within the African context.

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At the same time, the rise of China as a global economic power has introduced an alternative development model that prioritises economic growth, infrastructural expansion, industrialisation, and strong state coordination. China's extensive economic engagement with African countries through loans, investments, trade agreements, and infrastructural projects has significantly expanded its influence across the continent. Unlike Western development partners, China generally adopts a non-interference policy and does not impose strict democratic or governance conditions on its financial assistance and development cooperation.

This Chinese development approach has become increasingly attractive to many African leaders seeking rapid economic transformation and infrastructural development. In Nigeria, Chinese involvement in rail transportation, power generation, construction, telecommunications, and manufacturing sectors has contributed to economic and infrastructural growth. Nevertheless, concerns have emerged regarding debt sustainability, transparency, local economic dependency, environmental implications, labour practices, and the potential erosion of democratic accountability associated with Chinese economic expansion.

The growing competition between American democratic influence and Chinese economic diplomacy has therefore created a strategic dilemma for African states, particularly Nigeria. While Western democratic governance frameworks emphasise political freedoms, human rights, accountability, and institutional reforms, the Chinese model focuses more on economic pragmatism, state-led development, and policy continuity. The challenge for Nigeria is determining how to balance these competing global influences in ways that strengthen governance, protect national sovereignty, enhance economic development, and address the country's persistent socio-economic and political challenges. Despite increasing scholarly attention to China-Africa relations and democratic governance in Africa, limited studies have comprehensively examined how the ongoing global power transition affects governance choices and development strategies in Nigeria. There is therefore a need for a critical investigation into the implications of the shifting global order for governance and development in Nigeria. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the lessons Nigeria can learn from both American democratic influence and Chinese economic expansion within the context of the emerging multipolar world system.

American Democratic Influence in Africa

The promotion of democracy in Africa by the United States and other Western powers has remained a central feature of international relations since the end of the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, liberal democracy emerged as the dominant global political ideology, and Western countries increasingly promoted democratic governance, constitutionalism, rule of law, respect for human rights, and market-oriented economic reforms across developing nations (Nye, 2004; Huntington, 1991). African countries, many of which had experienced prolonged military rule, authoritarianism, and one-party systems, became major targets of Western democratic reform initiatives (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

The United States promoted democratic governance in Africa through diplomatic engagement, election monitoring, development assistance, conditional foreign aid, civil society support, and multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United Nations (Diamond, 2008). Western governments and donor agencies linked economic assistance and international legitimacy to the adoption of multiparty democracy, constitutional reforms, and economic liberalisation policies (Ake, 1996). Countries that complied with democratic reforms often received

greater access to development aid, debt relief, foreign investments, and diplomatic support.

In Africa, the democratic transition of the 1990s was largely influenced by these external pressures and changing global realities. Many African states abandoned authoritarian rule and adopted multiparty electoral systems. Nigeria, for instance, returned to democratic governance in 1999 after decades of military rule. The Fourth Republic was welcomed by Western powers as part of the broader democratic wave across Africa (Joseph, 2014). International organisations and Western governments subsequently supported electoral reforms, anti-corruption campaigns, judicial reforms, and governance capacity-building programmes in Nigeria and other African states.

According to Umezurike (2012), globalisation and Western-inspired economic reforms significantly shaped democratic transitions in Nigeria and many African countries. The author argues that liberal democratic governance became closely connected with neoliberal economic policies such as privatisation, deregulation, trade liberalisation, and reduction of state control over the economy (Umezurike, 2012). While these reforms were intended to improve efficiency and stimulate economic growth, they also produced negative socio-economic consequences in several African countries, including rising unemployment, poverty, inequality, and weakened state capacity.

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) implemented in many African countries under the guidance of the IMF and World Bank further reinforced Western influence on governance and economic policy (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Although these programmes aimed to stabilise economies and encourage market reforms, critics argue that they weakened domestic industries, reduced government spending on social services, and increased economic dependency on Western financial institutions (Ake, 1996). Consequently, while political liberalisation expanded in many African states, economic hardship and social instability persisted.

Scholars generally acknowledge that Western democratic influence contributed positively to the expansion of electoral politics, civil liberties, media freedom, and political participation in Africa (Diamond, 2008). Democratic governance created opportunities for citizen engagement, political competition, and constitutional rule. Civil society organisations, independent media institutions, and human rights advocacy groups also expanded significantly under democratic regimes.

However, despite these achievements, democratic institutions in many African countries remain fragile and ineffective. Several scholars argue that democracy in Africa has often been characterised by elite domination, electoral manipulation, corruption, weak political institutions, and external dependency (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Ake, 1996). In many cases, elections occur regularly, but democratic governance has not necessarily translated into good governance, accountability, or socio-economic development.

In Nigeria, democratic governance since 1999 has faced serious challenges including electoral violence, corruption, weak institutions, insecurity, and poor public service delivery (Joseph, 2014). Political elites often dominate state institutions and manipulate democratic processes for personal or sectional interests. Furthermore, ethnic politics, patronage networks, and weak institutional frameworks have undermined the effectiveness of democratic governance. Public trust in political leadership has therefore declined significantly due to persistent poverty, unemployment, and insecurity despite the country's democratic status.

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Another criticism of Western democratic promotion in Africa is the perception that democracy is sometimes selectively promoted based on strategic political and economic interests rather than genuine commitment to African development (Chomsky, 1999). Some scholars argue that Western powers occasionally support authoritarian regimes that align with their strategic interests while criticising governments that oppose Western influence. This perceived inconsistency has contributed to scepticism regarding the sincerity of Western democratic interventions in Africa.

Moreover, the liberal democratic model itself has been questioned in relation to African socio-political realities. Critics argue that Western democratic frameworks were largely transplanted into African societies without sufficient adaptation to indigenous political cultures, traditional governance systems, and socio-economic conditions (Ake, 1996). As a result, many African democracies struggle with institutional instability, political fragmentation, and weak state legitimacy.

Despite these criticisms, the American democratic model continues to influence governance reforms, civil society development, anti-corruption initiatives, and human rights advocacy across Africa. Democratic governance remains globally recognised as an important framework for promoting political participation, accountability, transparency, and protection of fundamental freedoms. Nevertheless, the limitations of liberal democracy in addressing Africa's developmental challenges have created space for alternative governance and development models, particularly the Chinese model of economic pragmatism and state-led development.

Chinese Economic Expansion in Africa

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as one of Africa's most influential economic partners. China's growing engagement with African countries represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary international political economy (Taylor, 2010). Unlike Western countries that often prioritise democratic governance and political reforms, China focuses primarily on economic cooperation, infrastructural development, trade expansion, and diplomatic partnership. This alternative approach has increasingly attracted African governments seeking rapid development and infrastructural transformation.

China's involvement in Africa intensified significantly after the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Through this platform, China expanded bilateral trade, concessional loans, infrastructure financing, educational exchanges, and diplomatic cooperation with African countries (Alden, 2007). Chinese investments across Africa cover strategic sectors such as transportation, energy, telecommunications, mining, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.

One of the major features of China's engagement with Africa is its policy of non-interference in the internal political affairs of partner states. Unlike Western powers that often attach governance and human rights conditions to financial assistance, China generally provides loans and development support without explicit political conditionalities (Taylor, 2010). This approach has made Chinese partnerships attractive to many African leaders who prefer development assistance that does not involve external pressure on domestic political systems.

Studies indicate that Chinese investments have contributed significantly to infrastructural growth in Africa, particularly in transportation, energy, and telecommunications sectors (Mabasa & Mqolomba, 2020). Chinese companies have financed and constructed roads, railways, airports, seaports, bridges, dams, and power projects across many African countries. In Nigeria, Chinese-supported projects

include railway modernisation, airport expansion, road construction, hydroelectric projects, and telecommunications infrastructure. These investments have contributed to economic activities, regional connectivity, and infrastructural improvement.

Furthermore, China's rapid economic transformation has inspired many African policymakers who view the Chinese developmental model as evidence that economic growth and poverty reduction can be achieved through strong state coordination, strategic planning, and industrialisation (Naughton, 2007). China's success in lifting millions of people out of poverty has strengthened its image as a credible development partner for African countries facing persistent socio-economic challenges.

Despite these benefits, China's growing influence in Africa has generated considerable debate among scholars, policymakers, and development experts. Critics argue that Chinese economic engagement may encourage elite dependency, weaken democratic accountability, and increase debt vulnerability among African states (Pay & Nwosu, 2020). Some scholars contend that China's non-interference policy indirectly strengthens authoritarian tendencies by reducing external pressure for governance reforms and human rights protection.

Concerns have also emerged regarding the sustainability of Chinese loans and infrastructure financing. Several African countries have accumulated substantial debts through Chinese-funded projects, raising fears of long-term economic dependency and financial vulnerability (Brautigam, 2009). Critics warn that excessive reliance on Chinese loans could undermine national sovereignty and expose African economies to external influence.

Obert Hodzi (2017) argues that the effectiveness of China-Africa relations largely depends on the quality of African political leadership and domestic institutions. According to him, Chinese investments can contribute positively to development if African governments maintain strong institutions, transparent governance systems, and effective regulatory frameworks. However, weak institutions and corruption may limit the developmental benefits of Chinese engagement and reinforce elite capture of public resources.

Similarly, recent studies on Chinese capital in Nigeria emphasise that institutional quality plays a critical role in determining whether Chinese investments produce sustainable development outcomes (Agah & Ikenga, 2023). Where governance systems are transparent and accountable, Chinese investments can stimulate infrastructural growth, industrialisation, and economic development. Conversely, weak institutions, corruption, and policy inconsistency may reduce the effectiveness of such investments and increase economic risks.

Therefore, while China's economic expansion presents significant opportunities for Africa, its long-term developmental impact depends largely on the governance capacity, institutional strength, and policy direction of African states themselves.

Governance Challenges in Nigeria

Despite over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance since 1999, Nigeria continues to face serious governance and developmental challenges. The transition from military rule to democratic governance generated high public expectations for political stability, economic growth, accountability, and improved service delivery. However, many of these expectations remain largely unmet due to persistent institutional and structural weaknesses (Joseph, 2014).

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One of the major governance challenges confronting Nigeria is corruption. Corruption remains deeply embedded in public institutions and affects virtually all sectors of the economy. Mismanagement of public resources, bribery, contract inflation, and abuse of office have weakened state institutions and undermined public trust in government (Transparency International, 2024). Although several anti-corruption agencies exist, enforcement mechanisms are often weakened by political interference and institutional inefficiency.

Insecurity also represents a major governance challenge in Nigeria. The country continues to experience terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, armed robbery, and separatist agitations across different regions (International Crisis Group, 2023). These security challenges have resulted in loss of lives, displacement of communities, destruction of infrastructure, and economic instability. Weak security coordination, inadequate intelligence systems, and poor governance have contributed to the persistence of insecurity.

Poor infrastructure constitutes another critical challenge affecting governance and development in Nigeria. Despite being one of Africa's largest economies, Nigeria faces inadequate electricity supply, poor road networks, weak healthcare systems, limited industrial capacity, and insufficient educational infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). Infrastructural deficiencies have negatively affected productivity, industrialisation, foreign investment, and quality of life.

Additionally, Nigeria's governance system is characterised by policy inconsistency and weak institutional capacity. Frequent changes in government policies, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of continuity in development planning have undermined sustainable development efforts. Political patronage and elite interests often influence policy implementation, thereby weakening institutional effectiveness.

Comparative studies between China and Nigeria indicate that China's relatively stronger institutional discipline, policy continuity, merit-based bureaucracy, and anti-corruption enforcement significantly contributed to its economic transformation and rapid development (Odinye & Orok, 2025). In contrast, Nigeria's governance system is weakened by patronage politics, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and institutional instability. These factors limit the country's ability to implement long-term developmental policies effectively.

Furthermore, unemployment and poverty remain widespread despite Nigeria's vast natural and human resources. Youth unemployment has contributed to social unrest, criminality, and migration pressures (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Economic inequality and poor living standards have intensified public frustration with democratic governance.

Recent economic challenges, including inflation, currency instability, rising fuel prices, and declining purchasing power, have further increased dissatisfaction among citizens (The Guardian, 2024). Many Nigerians perceive democratic governance as failing to deliver meaningful socio-economic improvements. Consequently, questions have emerged regarding the relationship between democracy and development within the African context.

The Nigerian experience demonstrates that democracy alone may not automatically guarantee development, good governance, or institutional effectiveness. Effective governance requires strong institutions, visionary leadership, policy continuity, accountability, economic planning, and citizen

participation. As global power dynamics continue to evolve, Nigeria faces the challenge of balancing democratic governance with developmental pragmatism in order to achieve sustainable national transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts **Soft Power Theory** developed by Joseph Nye.

Soft Power Theory (Gomichon, 1990), explains how states influence others through attraction, ideology, diplomacy, culture, and economic cooperation rather than military coercion. The United States traditionally projects soft power through democracy promotion, human rights advocacy, media influence, and international institutions. China, on the other hand, increasingly deploys soft power through economic diplomacy, infrastructure development, educational exchanges, and trade partnerships. (Journals.unijos.edu.ng)

The theory is relevant because Nigeria is currently influenced by competing global powers employing different mechanisms of influence. Understanding these dynamics provides insight into Nigeria's governance choices within the emerging global order.

Soft Power Theory, developed by **Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1990; 2004)**, is founded on the assumption that the ability of a state to influence the behaviour, preferences, and decisions of other states extends beyond military strength or economic coercion. The theory argues that international influence can be achieved through attraction, persuasion, and the legitimacy of a country's values, institutions, and policies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the implications of the ongoing global power transition from a United States-led unipolar order to an emerging multipolar system increasingly influenced by China, with particular emphasis on governance in Nigeria. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth analysis of the political, economic, and institutional dimensions of global power competition and their implications for governance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, institutional reports, and publications from international organizations, including the United Nations (UN), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), African Union (AU), and the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These sources provide comprehensive evidence on democracy promotion, China–Africa relations, economic diplomacy, governance reforms, and international political economy.

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which enabled the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring themes related to U.S. democratic influence, China's development-oriented engagement, governance challenges, institutional development, and the implications of the emerging multipolar order for Nigeria. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data were triangulated across multiple scholarly and institutional sources. This methodological approach provides a robust framework for understanding how shifting global power dynamics shape governance and development trajectories in Nigeria within the broader African context.

Discussion

The Decline of Unipolarity and the Rise of Multipolarity

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterised by a gradual transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States emerged as the dominant global superpower, exercising extensive political, economic, military, and ideological influence across the international system. During the post-Cold War era, the United States promoted liberal democracy, market capitalism, globalisation, and neoliberal economic reforms as the dominant framework for global governance and development (Fukuyama, 1992). This period of American dominance shaped international institutions, development policies, and diplomatic relations across Africa and other developing regions.

However, the global balance of power has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades due to the rapid economic rise of China and other emerging economies such as India, Brazil, and Russia. China's extraordinary economic growth, industrial expansion, technological advancement, and increasing geopolitical influence have challenged the long-standing dominance of Western powers within the international system (Naughton, 2007). As a result, the contemporary global order is gradually shifting toward a multipolar structure characterised by multiple centres of economic and political influence.

China's rise has been particularly significant in the areas of global trade, infrastructure financing, development cooperation, and strategic diplomacy. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has expanded its economic engagement across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Europe. Chinese state-owned enterprises and financial institutions have become major actors in global infrastructure development, particularly in developing countries seeking investments in transportation, energy, telecommunications, and industrial projects (Brautigam, 2009).

Unlike Western democratic promotion strategies that often emphasise political liberalisation, governance reforms, and human rights conditionalities, China's approach to international engagement focuses primarily on economic cooperation, infrastructural development, trade expansion, and state-led development pragmatism (Taylor, 2010). China's foreign policy principle of non-interference in domestic political affairs has made its development model particularly attractive to many African governments that seek external partnerships without political conditionalities attached to aid or investment.

This Chinese approach appeals strongly to African states because it offers practical developmental assistance in critical sectors such as roads, railways, airports, seaports, energy infrastructure, telecommunications, and industrialisation. Many African leaders perceive China's developmental trajectory as evidence that economic growth and poverty reduction can be achieved through strong state coordination, strategic planning, and infrastructure-led development without necessarily adopting Western liberal democratic prescriptions.

In Africa, China's growing influence is visible through increasing bilateral trade, infrastructure financing, diplomatic engagement, and institutional partnerships. The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 institutionalised China-Africa relations and strengthened economic cooperation between China and African countries. FOCAC has since become one of the most important platforms for China's engagement with Africa through investment commitments, development assistance, educational exchanges, and policy coordination (Alden, 2007).

The 2024 FOCAC summit further demonstrated China's expanding influence in Africa's governance and development landscape. During the summit, China reaffirmed its commitment to infrastructure financing, technological cooperation, industrial partnerships, and economic development across African states. The growing participation of African leaders in China-led development initiatives reflects the increasing relevance of China's geo-economic strategy within the continent's development agenda.

Nevertheless, the decline of unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity present both opportunities and challenges for African countries. On one hand, the emergence of multiple global powers provides African states with greater diplomatic flexibility, diversified economic partnerships, and alternative development opportunities. African countries are no longer exclusively dependent on Western powers for development assistance, investment, and international cooperation.

On the other hand, increasing competition among global powers may also expose African states to new forms of dependency, geopolitical rivalry, debt vulnerability, and external influence. Scholars have warned that excessive reliance on external powers—whether Western or Eastern—may undermine national sovereignty and weaken domestic institutional development (Moyo, 2009). Consequently, African countries must strategically navigate the evolving global order by strengthening domestic institutions, promoting economic self-reliance, and prioritising national development objectives.

For Nigeria, the transition toward multipolarity presents an important opportunity to reposition itself strategically within the international system. Nigeria can benefit from diversified partnerships with both Western and Eastern powers while maintaining policy independence and national sovereignty. However, achieving these objectives requires effective governance, institutional strength, strategic foreign policy planning, and sustainable economic transformation.

Ultimately, the decline of American unipolar dominance and the rise of China's geo-economic influence signify a broader transformation in global governance structures. This transition has important implications for democracy, development, state sovereignty, and governance models across Africa. The challenge for African states, particularly Nigeria, is to maximise the developmental benefits of global competition while safeguarding democratic accountability, institutional integrity, and long-term national interests.

Implications for Governance in Nigeria

The ongoing transition in the global political and economic order, characterised by the gradual decline of Western unipolar dominance and the rise of China as a major global economic actor, has significant implications for governance and development in Nigeria. As Africa's largest economy and most populous state, Nigeria occupies a strategic position within the evolving multipolar international system. The increasing competition between Western democratic influence, particularly from the United States, and China's geo-economic expansion presents both opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's governance trajectory. Consequently, Nigeria must adopt a pragmatic and strategic governance approach capable of balancing democratic accountability with developmental effectiveness.

Institutional Development

One of the most important lessons Nigeria can derive from China's developmental experience is the significance of strong institutions, long-term national planning, and policy continuity. China's

remarkable economic transformation over the past four decades has been largely attributed to effective state coordination, institutional discipline, strategic planning, and consistent implementation of developmental policies (Naughton, 2007). Unlike many developing countries where government programmes frequently change with political transitions, China institutionalised long-term development plans that transcended individual leadership tenures and focused on industrialisation, infrastructural expansion, technological innovation, and poverty reduction.

In contrast, governance in Nigeria has often been undermined by policy inconsistency, weak institutional frameworks, bureaucratic inefficiency, and excessive personalisation of political power (Joseph, 2014). Successive administrations frequently abandon or modify development programmes initiated by previous governments, thereby weakening institutional continuity and long-term planning. The absence of stable and autonomous institutions has negatively affected public administration, economic management, and infrastructural development.

Therefore, Nigeria's governance system requires substantial institutional reforms aimed at strengthening bureaucratic professionalism, administrative efficiency, judicial independence, and policy continuity. Strong institutions are essential for sustainable democratic governance because they promote accountability, reduce corruption, and ensure effective implementation of public policies. As Fukuyama (2013) argues, state capacity and institutional effectiveness remain critical determinants of national development and political stability.

However, while learning from China's developmental state model, Nigeria must simultaneously preserve democratic accountability, constitutionalism, and protection of civil liberties. Unlike China's one-party political structure, Nigeria operates within a plural democratic system characterised by electoral competition, federalism, and constitutional governance. Consequently, institutional reforms in Nigeria must balance developmental efficiency with democratic legitimacy and citizen participation.

Economic Transformation

The expansion of Chinese economic engagement in Nigeria has significantly influenced infrastructural development and economic activities within the country. Chinese investments in transportation, energy, telecommunications, and construction sectors have contributed to the modernisation of critical infrastructure in Nigeria. Projects such as railway modernisation, airport rehabilitation, road construction, hydroelectric power development, and telecommunications expansion demonstrate the growing role of Chinese capital in Nigeria's development process (Alden, 2007).

These infrastructural investments have the potential to stimulate economic growth, improve regional connectivity, enhance trade activities, and support industrialisation. Infrastructure development remains a critical requirement for sustainable economic transformation because inadequate infrastructure has historically constrained productivity, manufacturing, foreign investment, and economic diversification in Nigeria (World Bank, 2023).

Nevertheless, the increasing reliance on Chinese loans and investments also raises concerns regarding debt sustainability, economic dependency, and national sovereignty. Several African countries have accumulated substantial external debts through Chinese-funded infrastructural projects, generating fears of long-term financial vulnerability and external influence (Brautigam, 2009). In Nigeria, concerns have emerged regarding the transparency of bilateral loan agreements, procurement processes, and repayment obligations associated with Chinese infrastructure financing.

Consequently, Nigeria must strengthen domestic institutions responsible for public financial management, debt regulation, procurement oversight, and contract transparency. Effective governance mechanisms are necessary to ensure that foreign investments contribute meaningfully to national development without undermining fiscal sustainability or economic independence. Furthermore, Nigeria must avoid excessive dependence on external borrowing by prioritising domestic industrialisation, economic diversification, and revenue generation.

Economic transformation in Nigeria should therefore focus not only on infrastructural expansion but also on building productive capacity, technological innovation, human capital development, and industrial competitiveness. The experiences of emerging economies demonstrate that sustainable development is achieved through strategic investment in manufacturing, agriculture, education, science, and technology rather than dependence on primary commodity exports alone (Naughton, 2007).

Democratic Accountability

Although economic development and infrastructural expansion are essential for national progress, democratic accountability remains a fundamental requirement for sustainable governance and political legitimacy. One of the major concerns associated with the Chinese developmental model is the possibility that excessive emphasis on economic growth may weaken democratic institutions, civil liberties, political participation, and governmental accountability (Taylor, 2010).

Nigeria's democratic experience since 1999 has demonstrated that democratic governance, despite its limitations, provides important mechanisms for citizen participation, protection of human rights, freedom of expression, electoral competition, and constitutional rule. Democratic accountability allows citizens to demand transparency, challenge abuse of power, and participate in governance processes. Therefore, while Nigeria may learn from China's developmental discipline and strategic planning, it must avoid authoritarian tendencies that could undermine democratic freedoms and political inclusion.

Scholars have argued that development without accountability may produce economic progress in the short term but could ultimately weaken institutional legitimacy and political stability (Diamond, 2008). In societies characterised by ethnic diversity, social pluralism, and regional complexity such as Nigeria, democratic governance remains particularly important for managing political competition, protecting minority interests, and maintaining national cohesion.

Furthermore, effective democratic governance enhances transparency and reduces opportunities for corruption and elite capture of state resources. Nigeria's governance challenges are not solely the result of democratic practice itself but are largely linked to weak institutions, corruption, poor leadership, and inadequate policy implementation. Consequently, democratic consolidation in Nigeria should focus on strengthening electoral integrity, judicial independence, legislative oversight, anti-corruption institutions, and civic participation.

The challenge for Nigeria is therefore not to abandon democracy in pursuit of developmental efficiency, but rather to deepen democratic governance while simultaneously improving state capacity and economic performance. A successful governance model must combine political accountability with developmental effectiveness in ways that promote both economic progress and democratic legitimacy.

Strategic Foreign Policy Balance

The emerging multipolar global order requires Nigeria to adopt a more strategic and balanced foreign policy orientation. Historically, Nigeria maintained close diplomatic and economic relations with Western powers, particularly the United States and European countries, due to colonial legacies, economic ties, and democratic partnerships. However, the rise of China and other emerging powers has expanded Nigeria's foreign policy options and reduced Western dominance in international relations.

Maintaining balanced diplomatic engagement with both Western and Eastern powers is essential for protecting Nigeria's national interests and strategic autonomy. Excessive dependence on any single global power bloc may undermine policy independence, economic sovereignty, and diplomatic flexibility (Nye, 2004). Therefore, Nigeria must pursue a pragmatic foreign policy based on diversification of partnerships, economic cooperation, technological transfer, and national development priorities.

China's growing presence in Nigeria provides opportunities for infrastructure financing, trade expansion, industrial cooperation, and technological development. Simultaneously, Western countries continue to play important roles in democratic governance support, security cooperation, education, technology, and foreign investment. Nigeria should therefore avoid ideological alignment with either bloc and instead adopt a non-exclusive foreign policy approach that maximises developmental opportunities from multiple international partners.

Furthermore, Nigeria should strengthen its regional leadership role within Africa by promoting regional integration, economic cooperation, peacebuilding, and collective development initiatives through institutions such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States. Strategic regional engagement would enhance Nigeria's bargaining power within the international system and support broader African developmental interests.

Ultimately, Nigeria's foreign policy should be guided by principles of national sovereignty, economic transformation, democratic stability, and sustainable development. In an increasingly competitive global environment, the ability to balance relations between competing global powers while preserving national interests will remain critical for Nigeria's long-term governance and development trajectory.

Lessons for Nigeria

The ongoing transition in the global balance of power from Western democratic dominance toward increasing Chinese geo-economic influence presents important strategic lessons for Nigeria. As Africa's most populous country and one of the continent's leading economies, Nigeria occupies a critical position within the emerging multipolar international order. The comparative experiences of the United States and China demonstrate that sustainable national development depends not merely on the adoption of a particular political ideology, but on the strength of institutions, strategic leadership, economic productivity, and policy continuity. Consequently, Nigeria must develop a pragmatic governance framework capable of integrating democratic accountability with developmental efficiency.

First, Nigeria must prioritise the strengthening of state institutions rather than the personalisation of governance around political elites or influential office holders. One of the fundamental weaknesses of governance in Nigeria has been the overdependence on individual political actors instead of durable institutions. Effective governance systems are sustained through strong public institutions that operate

according to constitutional principles, legal frameworks, bureaucratic professionalism, and institutional continuity. Comparative experiences from advanced economies and developmental states indicate that sustainable development is closely associated with institutional stability, meritocratic public administration, and policy consistency. Therefore, Nigeria must strengthen the autonomy, efficiency, and accountability of critical institutions such as the judiciary, electoral bodies, anti-corruption agencies, civil service structures, and security institutions in order to promote political stability and effective governance.

Second, Nigeria must adopt a comprehensive long-term national development strategy that transcends short-term political interests and electoral cycles. One major lesson from China's developmental trajectory is the importance of strategic state planning and policy continuity. China's economic transformation was driven by carefully coordinated long-term national development plans focused on industrialisation, infrastructure, technological advancement, and poverty reduction. In contrast, Nigeria's development efforts have frequently been undermined by policy inconsistency, abrupt programme discontinuity, and changing political priorities between successive administrations. A sustainable governance framework therefore requires the institutionalisation of long-term development planning anchored on national consensus, economic diversification, infrastructural development, technological innovation, and human capital investment.

Third, Nigeria must accelerate economic diversification and industrialisation as essential foundations for national development and political stability. Excessive dependence on crude oil revenues has exposed the Nigerian economy to external shocks, fiscal instability, unemployment, and limited productive capacity. Lessons from emerging economies demonstrate that industrialisation, manufacturing expansion, technological innovation, and export-oriented production are critical drivers of sustainable economic growth. Consequently, Nigeria should prioritise investments in agriculture, manufacturing, renewable energy, digital technology, transportation infrastructure, and small and medium-scale enterprises. Economic diversification would not only strengthen national productivity but also reduce poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic inequalities that often contribute to political instability and insecurity.

Fourth, Nigeria must improve transparency, accountability, and institutional oversight in foreign partnerships and international agreements. The increasing engagement of China and other global powers in Africa presents both opportunities and risks. While foreign investments and infrastructural financing can contribute significantly to development, weak governance structures may expose countries to debt dependency, elite capture, corruption, and loss of economic sovereignty. Nigeria therefore needs to strengthen regulatory institutions, procurement processes, public financial management systems, and legislative oversight mechanisms to ensure that foreign agreements serve national development objectives. Transparent governance and public accountability are essential for maximising the developmental benefits of international partnerships while protecting national interests.

Fifth, Nigeria should pursue a governance model that reflects its socio-political realities, historical experiences, and developmental aspirations. One of the limitations of externally imposed democratic frameworks in Africa has been the inadequate consideration of indigenous political cultures, communal governance traditions, and local socio-economic conditions. Although liberal democracy remains important for promoting civil liberties, political participation, and constitutional rule, democratic systems must also be adapted to local realities in order to achieve legitimacy and effectiveness.

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Nigeria's governance system should therefore promote inclusive participation, federal balance, social cohesion, and community-based governance structures capable of addressing the country's ethnic, religious, and regional diversities.

Sixth, Nigeria must institutionalise merit-based leadership recruitment, bureaucratic professionalism, and comprehensive anti-corruption reforms. Comparative evidence suggests that developmental states achieve sustainable progress when leadership selection and public administration are guided by competence, discipline, and national commitment rather than patronage politics or ethnic considerations. Corruption remains one of the major obstacles to governance effectiveness and economic development in Nigeria. Therefore, anti-corruption institutions must be strengthened through legal independence, improved enforcement capacity, judicial reforms, and political neutrality. In addition, leadership recruitment within public institutions should prioritise competence, integrity, and professional expertise in order to improve policy implementation and administrative efficiency.

Seventh, Nigeria must strike a strategic balance between democratic freedoms and developmental effectiveness. While democratic governance promotes accountability, political participation, and protection of fundamental rights, democracy without effective economic development may generate public frustration and institutional instability. Conversely, economic development without accountability may encourage authoritarian tendencies and weaken civil liberties. The challenge for Nigeria is therefore not to abandon democracy, but to deepen democratic governance through effective leadership, institutional accountability, economic inclusion, and developmental performance. A functional democratic state must simultaneously guarantee political freedoms and deliver tangible socio-economic benefits to citizens.

Furthermore, Nigeria must adopt a more strategic and independent foreign policy posture within the emerging multipolar world order. The growing competition between Western democratic influence and Chinese economic expansion provides opportunities for Nigeria to diversify its international partnerships and negotiate development cooperation from a position of national interest. Rather than aligning excessively with any external power bloc, Nigeria should pursue a pragmatic foreign policy that prioritises economic transformation, technological advancement, infrastructure development, regional integration, and national sovereignty.

Ultimately, the Nigerian state must recognise that sustainable governance and development cannot be imported wholesale from external models. Neither the American liberal democratic framework nor the Chinese developmental model should be adopted uncritically. Instead, Nigeria should selectively integrate the strengths of both systems while developing an indigenous governance model rooted in institutional strength, democratic accountability, economic productivity, social inclusion, and national development priorities. Such an approach would enable the country to navigate the complexities of the emerging global order while promoting political stability, economic transformation, and sustainable national development.

Conclusion

The contemporary global order is witnessing a major transition from Western democratic dominance toward a more multipolar system shaped by Chinese economic influence. While American democratic promotion contributed to political liberalisation in Africa, it has not fully resolved governance and development challenges in countries such as Nigeria. China's economic expansion presents an alternative development pathway focused on infrastructure, economic cooperation, and state-led growth.

Nevertheless, neither model should be adopted uncritically. Nigeria must strategically combine democratic accountability with developmental pragmatism by strengthening institutions, promoting transparency, and pursuing sustainable economic transformation. The future of governance in Nigeria depends not merely on external influence but on the country's ability to develop an indigenous governance framework capable of addressing its unique socio-political and developmental realities.

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