

**NIGERIA AND CHINA INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE FACE OF CORONA  
VIRUS (COVID-19): A MORE HUMANE APPROACH**

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**Abstract**

*The Corona virus disease also known as Covid-19 came with a shockwave that activated global panic button resulting in border closures, cancelled flights, social restrictions and lockdowns. The speed of its spread created global fear leading to trading of blames among world leaders thereby creating diplomatic tensions across the world. This paper examines the nature of Nigeria's-China international relationship in the Covid-19 era with specific focus on China's humane approach. Utilising the qualitative methods of research, this paper critically discussed the nature of international relations in the Covid-19 era. The paper further undertakes an analysis of Nigeria's-China international relationship in the management of Covid-19 pandemic. It submits that China has successfully showcased a humane component of its international relations which had hitherto remained unknown. The paper argues that supports provided by China was critical in providing the needed leverage for Nigeria in combating the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.*

**Keywords:** International relations, China-Nigeria relations, Covid-19, Corona Virus Disease and Diplomatic Tension

**Introduction**

The outbreak of Corona virus pandemic popularly referred to as Covid-19 has significantly affected international relations and caused diplomatic tensions among countries resulting in a United Nations Security Council Resolution demanding a global ceasefire. International relations have been affected largely due to the tensions around trade and transport of medicines, diagnostic tests and hospital equipment for coronavirus disease 2019 (Cable News Network, 2020). Similarly, Yuan (2020) and Watts (2020) noted that leaders of some countries have accused other countries of not containing the Corona virus disease effectively which resulted in the uncontrolled spread of the virus. Many of the developing countries are struggling to cope with shortages of testing kits and personal protective equipment because developed countries are focusing on their citizens thus putting a strain in international relations between the global north and the developing south.

Blame game among countries is not in short supply within the Covid-19 period. For instance, the United States of America consistently criticized the Chinese government for its handling of the pandemic, which began in the Chinese province of Hubei. In Brazil, Eduardo Bolsonaro (son of President Jair Bolsonaro) caused a diplomatic dispute with China when he retweeted a message saying: "The blame for the global coronavirus pandemic has a name and surname: the Chinese Communist party." Yang Wanming, China's top diplomat in Brazil, retweeted a message that said: "The Bolsonaro family is the great poison of this country" (The Guardian, 2020; The Economist, 2020). Smith (2020) stated that at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a newspaper in Germany requested for the payment of 130 billion Euros damage by China to Germany for the former's alleged mishandling of the coronavirus epidemic, China responded that the

demand was an act designed to stir up xenophobia and racism. Similarly, the British Broadcasting Corporation on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 announced that Spain, Turkey and the Netherlands rejected thousands of testing kits and medical masks exported from China because the products were below standard or defective. Also, several countries have expressed reservations over perceived diversion of shipments of medical supplies meant for other countries (Willsher, Holmes and McKernan, 2020; Swanson, 2020)

It is glaringly obvious that in the quest to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries have jettisoned the humane approach of international relations to survival of the fittest approach in international relations. However, China either due to its belief in the humane approach to international relations or driven by the need to counter its negative image, have actively provided supports to several developing countries including Nigeria in combating the Covid-19 virus. Welsh, Walden and Zhao (2020) explained that as at the end of March 2020, China has sent aid to 82 countries, the World Health Organization, and the African Union. Emphasizing China's humane approach to combating Covid-19, Cheng (2020) posited that the Chinese government has been trying to project Chinese state power beyond its borders and establish China as a global leader, not dissimilar to what the U.S. government has been doing for the better part of a century, and the distribution of medical aid is part of this mission.

Nigeria has benefitted immensely from China in the fight against Covid-19. First, the Chinese government provided medical and other supplies to Nigeria which were largely commended by Nigerians including the Trade Union Congress as reported in *The Punch Newspaper* of Wednesday, April 8, 2020. Additionally, China also send a medical team to support Nigeria in the fight against Covid-19 in the country. Although this action triggered series of controversy in Nigeria, it must be noted that the action portrays China's policy of 'all-of-government' and 'all-of-society' approach in the fight against the coronavirus (China Daily Editorial of April 6, 2020).

The Corona virus pandemic seem to have negatively affected the humane approach to international relations. Indeed, Mustasilta (2020) said the pandemic has worsened global conflict dynamics. On March 23, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued an appeal for a global ceasefire as part of the United Nations (UN) response to deteriorating international relations due to Covid-19. Similarly, on July 1, 2020, the UN Security Council passed resolution S/RES/2532 (2020) calling for greater international cooperation to address the pandemic. In line with the UN's resolution, this paper examines the nature of international relations/cooperation between Nigeria and China in combating Covid-19. Specifically, the paper focuses on the humane aspect of the international relationship.

### **Methodology**

The study utilised the qualitative method of research. This method involves analytical and descriptive strategy designed to assist the researchers to understand the tensed international relations occasioned by Covid-19 pandemic. Data for the study were retrieved from desk review of documents, journals, newspapers, books and magazines. After analysing literature related to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the study through content analysis examined the humane approach of China in its international relations at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Coronaviruses, Covid-19 and International Relations**

The Coronavirus disease of 2019 also referred to as Covid-19 gripped the world with a shock, thereby overwhelming the health system of many nations. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel human coronavirus outbreak, which began in Wuhan, China on December 8, 2019, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020). According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020) cited in Opusunju, Akyuz and Inim (2020), Coronavirus is defined as an acute respiratory tract infection which manifests in a patient through sudden onset of at least one of the following: cough, fever, shortness of breath and with no other etiologic that fully explains the clinical presentation and with a history of travel or residence in a country/area reporting local or community transmission and during the 14 days before symptom onset. The Webster dictionary (2020) describes Coronaviruses any of a family (Corona viridian) of single-stranded RNA viruses that have a lipid

envelope studded with club-shaped projections, infect birds and many mammals including humans and include the causative agents of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, severe acute respiratory syndrome and 2019 novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

An abounding keyword in the various conceptualisations of international relations is interactions. Therefore, international relations centres primarily on a variety of interaction between and among sovereign states. These includes: security, economic, social, political and cultural among others. Khan (2019) described international relations as a branch of political science concerned with the study of relations between states, Khan further noted that international relations is the foreign policy of nation-states. The mechanisms and institutions used for this interaction; international organizations, inter-governmental organizations, international and national non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations) through which states interact. Folarin (2012) explained that international relations can be viewed from two angles: first, as a situation which he described as an interaction between two or more actors in separate national boundaries; second, it is the relationship that takes place between and among countries who are members of the international community. This aspect of relationship is often in relation to war, conflict, separation, treaty, cooperation, among others.

According to Amzata, Aminub, Kolob, Akinyeleb, Ogundairob and Danjibo (2020) Covid-19 has caused global social disruption by limiting global social relations. The idea of “social distancing” negates regular social interaction, which is the bedrock of human relationships (Amzat and Razum, 2014). International relations is similar to human relations. Indeed, it is relationship/interaction between countries for the overall interest of their citizens who are humans. The contagious nature of Covid-19 put a strain and also disrupted the usual norms of close physical contacts of diplomats which is essential in international relations since the disease transmits through contact with individuals who already infected. Covid-19 practically “deglobalized” the world in terms of human migration with airports shut, and social events (sports, festivals and the like) postponed indefinitely.

The outbreak and spread of Covid-19 put many countries on panic mood with each scrambling to contain the disease as well as provide support to its citizens. The consequence of these is that many nations to a large extent abandoned the humane component of international and diplomatic relations. The resultant consequence was the emergence of diplomatic tensions occasioned by trading of blames and scramble for medical and safety kits among countries. Lister, Shukla and Bobille (2020) posited that the spread of the disease has led to a global scramble for medical equipment such as ventilator, respiratory masks and gloves; as a result, leaders of some countries accused others of not containing the disease effectively, resulting in uncontrolled spread of the virus and hoarding of medical supplies. Busby (2020) noted that the outbreak of Covid-19 and various measures adopted by countries to manage it has severely affected economies of countries and the stay-at-home, shutting of borders and travel restriction imposed to break the chain of transmission has gradually diminished world economy. The effect of this is strain in international relationship between countries. For instance, some countries imposed travel ban on selected countries; in retaliation, such countries also banned travellers from those nations that placed restrictions on them.

Garcia-Suaco (2020) noted that Covid-19 thrived due to inadequate world cooperation. According to Suaco the outbreak of the disease occurred at a time when two powerful countries (USA and China) were engrossed in trade war which was severely reducing international cooperation and fanning the embers of global disharmony. Consequently, Jackson (2020) argued that the rate of deaths associated with Covid-19 would have been drastically reduced if the world fought the disease from a common front. Similarly, the Global Economic Effects (2020) noted that the reduction of social interaction for the containment of the spread of Covid-19 disease is disrupting the daily lives of people and increasing rates of unemployment thereby raising the prospects of widespread global social unrest and conflicts which may affect international and diplomatic relations among countries. Already, the trading of blames by world leaders has already strained international relations of several countries necessitating the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to on April 10 2020 call for global ceasefire noting that the Covid-19 pandemic poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security, potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence across the world.

### **Covid-19 and International Relations: China's Humane Approach**

Akon and Rahman(2020) and Benjamin and Davies (2020) submitted that within the last few decades, China has strictly followed Deng Xiaoping's '24 Character' strategy of: observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership to define its position and guide its international relations. Based on the strategy, many countries including the United States of America did not feel threatened by China. Mohanty (2013) explained that since Xi Jinping came into power in China in 2012, he moved beyond this '24 Character' strategy following his great 'China Dream' and 'One Belt, One Road (OBOR)' initiative (now Belt and Road Initiative or BRI) to drive her international relations and influence global economic order (Nie, 2016).

Currently, China which is the second-largest economy in the world has maintained a cordial international relationship with other countries particularly African countries who have largely embraced China in their drive for infrastructural development. China has provided loans, manpower, technology, among others to various African countries, Nigeria inclusive. Indeed, many African countries view China's diplomatic and international relations as being "more humane" than those of European countries. Similarly, loans repayment terms from China are seen as "more humane and friendly" than those of Europe's Bretton Woods Institutions. Even in the Middle East, Auon and Kelner (2015) stated that China's international relations has helped its allies to fight against Europe's influence.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has further helped China to showcase the humane approach of its international relations in order to accelerate its desire to create a Chinese influence of horizon. China offered medical supplies across the world to battle the pandemic collectively. China's sphere of influence has reached most of the countries; from Asia to Africa; from Europe to America (Akon and Rahman, 2020). For instance, In Europe, China responded quickly to Italy's call for support in the wake of the ravaging effect of Covid-19 on the country. Okano-Heijmans and Kamo (2020) noted that this was after Italy failed to get assistance from the EU. Fallon (2020) submitted that China's quick response to Italy is seen as a diplomatic ovation of China as a saviour of Italy that will strengthen the Sino-Italian bilateral relations. The shipment was displayed by a gigantic Chinese flag with a read 'The friendship road knows no borders' (Chakraborty, 2020). Alongside, Chinese company ZTE - a joint 5G innovation and technology in Italy - donated around 2000 face masks as medical assistance (Fallon, 2020). Like Italy, other Western European countries i.e. Spain, France, and Germany have also relied on China to get sufficient medical assistance. For instance, China sent much needed medical supplies — face masks, protective suits, and gloves to France and Spain (Akon and Rahman, 2020).

Similarly, in Eastern Europe, China sent immense medical assistance to Serbia after dismissing European solidarity as 'a fairy tale' (Campbell and Doshi, 2020). Besides, China suggested the promotion of public health cooperation during a videoconference with 17 Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) a framework of China-CEEC, launched in Warsaw in 2012 to control the infection (Kawashima, 2020). Before Covid-19, China offered a US\$ 10 billion as a soft loan for the investment to CEEC countries (Fabrizi, 2015). Campbell and Doshi (2020) stated that though other Eastern European countries maintain strategic relations with the EU and Russia, some CEECs moved closer to China which is considered a great success of Chinese foreign policy. Moreover, the non-EU member countries in Europe sometimes face a lot of challenges to run the government smoothly and due to the non-effective role by the EU to integrate those countries within the EU organization, aggressive competition between Russia and China took place to increase their involvement and engagement with those countries.

In Asia, China showed its solidarity and its humane approach to international relations through sending a medical team and necessary equipment including test kits, face masks, personal protective equipment to the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia so far to fight against the pandemic. Besides, in Japan, China donated kits for testing coronavirus to the Japanese National Institute of Infectious Diseases (Chakraborty, 2020). On the other hand, in South Asia, China extended her friendly hand to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh through providing essential medical assistance. In Bangladesh, when

China sent a shipment, it also carried a gigantic Chinese flag with a read ‘The boat of love runs through the mountains’ (Akon and Rahman, 2020).

Amid the current pandemic of COVID-19 in Africa, particularly in the health sector, China provided massive technical, logistics, manpower and other supports to almost all the African countries. China is also one of the partners of African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (Brinza, 2020). Like the Chinese government, some other Chinese companies such as China Civil Engineering and Construction Company (CCECC), Huawei and ZTE are also investing in e-health technologies in the African continent. Besides this bilateral cooperation, China is also interested to create a ‘health silk road’ (Brinza, 2020) through strong health, network to combat the further pandemic in the world, especially in Africa. On the other hand, in the Middle East, China sent a medical team with seven specialists to Baghdad of Iraq and Iran as well (Akon and Rahman, 2020).

Beyond the above-mentioned regions, China has also declared to help the USA by sharing its experiences in the management of Covid-19. Also, Alibaba, a Chinese multinational technology company, sent a large number of medical materials to several Covid-19 affected countries. The Covid-19 pandemic has helped China to showcase the humane components of its international relations to several countries and to successfully implement the concept ‘it is China only who can help’ to the mindset of state leaders that promotes China to increase international reputation (Kawashima, 2020). China has also successfully sent a message to the world while USA (the existing global leader) scrambles to protect her citizens within its borders, China moves forward to help both American allies and enemy countries in battling the pandemic.

#### **Covid-19 and Nigeria-China International Relations – A More Humane Approach: An Analysis:**

As Covid-19 quickly spread across the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, the Government of Nigeria asked China to assist it in containing the pandemic in Nigeria. The Chinese responded favourably. Apart from the offer of medical supplies, they sent a medical team to Nigeria. However, informed medical public opinion in Nigeria opposed the idea of accepting the Chinese doctors, fearing that the Chinese doctors might be carriers of Covid-19 or that the Chinese doctors might have an ulterior agenda for its quick response to Nigeria’s request for assistance. This fear was unfounded and does not reflect the high level of mutual economic and trade international relationship currently existing between Nigeria and China.

For instance, Opusunju, Akyuz and Inim (2020) noted that Nigerian trade with China has grown substantially in the twenty-first century resulting in the Chinese engaging in trade of export from Nigeria to China and undergoing some business transactions with the Nigerian government. Similarly, China is actively involved in driving Nigeria’s infrastructural development through Chinese companies such as China Civil Engineering and Construction Company and the China Railway Construction Company International which signed contracts with the Nigerian government for the construction several railway lines connecting different parts of Nigeria including a line connecting Abuja, in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), with Itakpe and Warri in the south. Also, some Chinese businessmen established business ventures in Nigeria such as Chinese-owned Western Metal Products Company Limited (WEMPCO) located in Lagos, Clean point herbal tampons, bright ocean view international Nigeria limited, Plantaero, Plantaero greenhouse services, Chens Consulting etc. It should also be noted that while the Covid-19 saga is still rearing its ugly head, the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), one of the shareholders of the Lekki Deep Sea Port Projects under the construction at the Lagos Free Trade Zone injected the sum of \$221.05 million equity fund as an expression of commitment. And also true enough, the Chinese Ma Foundation has donated medical supplies to Nigeria and for which great appreciation has been expressed by the Government of Nigeria.

Having provided a brief overview of the robust economic relationship between Nigeria and China, this paper argues that the various support provided by China to Nigeria in the fight against Covid-19 where undertaken in good faith and in furtherance of China’s desire to strengthen and sustain the prevailing cordial international relations with Nigeria. When the Chinese medical personnel arrived Nigeria, there were allegations of lack of transparency on the part of the Federal Government on the visit. Suffice to say that

these submissions were made by Nigerians out of good intention considering that as at the time of the arrival of the Chinese team to Nigeria, China was still the epicenter of Covid-19 thus bringing in medical personnel from the hub of the pandemic seemed dangerous. However, this paper opines that based on the tenets of international relations, China's could not have deliberately sent infected persons to a sovereign state, indeed, if such occurs, it could be viewed as an act of deliberate sabotage and aggression. Therefore, China's gesture showcases the humane face of its international relationship with Nigeria. Particularly when several countries including Nigeria's traditional allies were focused on combating the virus in their country and were reluctant to provide any form of assistance to Nigeria.

It is particularly heartwarming that at a time when the Chinese humane gesture was attracting series of controversy, the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria acknowledged the positive role of China in Nigeria's war against Covid-19. The Trade Union's acknowledgement of China's role showcases the appreciative nature of an average Nigerian. It also reveals that Nigerians appreciate the Chinese authorities for releasing their doctors and some of their best hands, despite the catastrophic effect the virus had on the country. This paper submits that this kind of acknowledgement should be shown by other stakeholders in order to further encourage other nations to provide needed support to Nigeria. More importantly, the Trade Union admitted that 'truly, the Chinese authorities have done well by not recording more cases in their country. It is novel and also shows their pro-activeness and commitment to crises' (The Punch, Wednesday, April 8, 2020, p.29).

China's support to Nigeria in the fight against Covid-19 aligns with its policy of 'all-of-government' and 'all-of-society' approach in the fight against the coronavirus as sufficiently outlined in the China Daily Editorial of April 6, 2020. In the editorial, the author noted that as at the first weekend of April 2020, China had donated medical supplies to more than 80 countries (including Nigeria) and exported more than 4 billion surgical masks and 16,000 ventilators, and shared its experience of fighting the outbreak with the world.' Indeed, this gesture showcases the humane face of China's international relations in the fight against Covid-19.

Finally, in the battle against Covid-19 and quest for improved foreign relations, Nigeria needs to maximise efforts at acquiring foreign assistance not just from China but also from other countries but these should be on the basis of the principle of non-alignment, non-discrimination against any source, and taking advantage of the pandemic as a challenge and opportunity of building a greater Nigeria. Put differently, the ultimate objective of the ongoing Covid-19 efforts should not be limited to Covid-19 eradication only, but also to improve the social-economic and infrastructural development of the country in order to address issues of poverty and unemployment currently facing millions of Nigerians.

#### **Post Covid-19 Challenges for China's-Nigeria International Relations.**

Due to the inward policy of the USA and the inaction of European solidarity, a new question has come up regarding the leading of the international order amid the current and post-pandemic. In this regard, China has the desire to lead the world and maintains close connection through providing necessary medical equipment to Covid-19 affected countries including Nigeria. The quick response of China to Nigeria and other countries in the fight against Covid-19 across the globe has largely portrayed China as a Humane country. Though China has provided quick responses, there are some major challenges that China would face in its post Covid-19 international relations with Nigeria in particular and other countries at large. These challenges are discussed below.

First, as China has also faced the cascading effects of the COVID-19, her economy is still not sufficient to share the responsibility of other countries including Nigeria. Rise of the unemployment rate, shutting down of many factories and industries, and the fall of the GDP is the current scenario of the Chinese economic arena. Besides, the sharp drop in international investment and export orders hindered China's economic development (Watts, 2020). Moreover, the world's consuming power is going down and Chinese products would face a big challenge in the Nigeria markets. Before Covid-19, Nigeria markets were one of the major economic hub of Chinese goods and products. However, loss of jobs occasioned by Covid-19 and economic hardship will reduce the purchasing power of many Nigerians and this will in turn affect the robust economic

relationship between Nigeria and China. Also, with the slow economic growth of China, it would be difficult for it to share the economic burden of countries such as Nigeria.

Second, China's desire of increasing its influence and diplomatic power with countries such as Nigeria is not dependent only over the crisis response in this current pandemic situation. However, the inward foreign policy of the USA is an opportunity for China to spread its global influence. But the question is the length of such an inward policy of the USA. After the end of the pandemic, USA's new engagement with the rest of the world including Nigeria would lessen the leading role of China. It is important to see the reaction of the USA and how they coordinate and support countries to fight against poverty in the post-Covid-19 era. Due to China's communist government system, countries such as Nigeria practising democracy, may think twice before going under the Chinese umbrella. So, communism could be a disadvantage for China's international relations in the Post Covid-19 era.

Third, the world system has changed rapidly since the 9/11 terror attack in the United States of America. After the end of the Cold War, there was no powerful state who could compete with the then militarily and economically powerful USA, even Japan, who had a bubble economy at that time, was the key ally of the USA (Envall, 2017). But the global balance of power has shifted later and the world has witnessed the rise of Russia and the rise of powerful China. So, in the post-Covid 19 world order, it would be very difficult for China to dominate Nigeria's international relations as the country will also seek other allies to support other aspects of its developmental and economic drive.

Fourth, there are some geographical and cultural disadvantages for China in its international relations with Nigeria in the post Covid-19 era. Geographically, Nigeria has friendly relations with her neighbours where China has conflicts with its neighbour particularly with India, Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam which poses a challenge to the nature of China's humane international relations. Similarly, aside of its democratic governance structure, Nigeria has cultural affinities with the United States of America in form of dressing, eating, education model, language, among others. Thus, changing these may not be easily feasible in the post Covid-19 era.

Finally, due to interdependency of states and the multiplicity of international relations, it is difficult for Nigeria to align and domicile its international interest with a single country such as China particularly in the post Covid-19 era. It has been widely acknowledged that post Covid-19 era will witness a rise in global violent unrest, increased poverty resulting in conflict, Nigeria will situate its international relations in a manner that will provide international economic support for the achievement of its economic and developmental drive. There is no position of emotion in international relations as Hans Morgenthau pointed out, no country could behave irrationally in the post-Covid-19 era.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

For years, the world has observed the rise of China where it has played a key role in the global value chains despite facing challenges — discomfort relations with the USA; USA-Japan's continuous pressure in the East China Sea; India's all-out attempt to suppress China, particularly in South Asia. But no effort is successful to keep down China's economic engagement in almost all the region i.e. relations with Bay of Bengal Initiative for MultiSectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries (Bhowmick, 2020). The desire of China to play a dominating role in global affairs is now seeing the light of hope due to the spread of the current Covid-19. In pursuance of its agenda, China provided supports in terms of testing kits, personal protective and other medical equipment, among others to several countries in the fight against Covid-19. In Nigeria, China was particularly supportive of the Nigerian government in the fight against Covid-19 through the provision of logistics and medical supply. Indeed, China showed Nigeria the humane face of its international relations when it sent medical personnel from China to support in the treatment of Covi-19 in the country. These actions have bonded Nigeria's-China relations closer. However, as the world gradually overcome Covid-19, Nigeria's-China relations will face emerging challenges. It is recommended that the two countries develop effective and robust strategies that will ensure and facilitate the sustenance of the current existing mutual international relations that has sufficiently showcased the humane face of China's relationship with Nigeria.

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