

CHINESE DEBT TRAP DIPLOMACY: EXPLORING THE POLITICAL NARRATIVES BY OPPOSITION PARTIES IN NIGERIA AND ZAMBIA

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Political Science at the Faculty of
Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

Oumie Njie

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UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNATIONAL INDONESIA

DEPOK

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ABSTRACT

Oumie Njie

02212320005

oumie.njie@uiii.ac.id

Master in Political Science

Universitas Islam International Indonesia

This research explores how Nigerian and Zambian opposition political parties frame and strategically use the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) narrative to challenge the legitimacy of incumbent governments. Although the DTD narrative has become popular globally and is widely explained as a geopolitical strategy employed by China to expand its influence using unsustainable lending, this work redirects analytical attention to the actions of African political elites. The critique contends that opposition parties reinterpret the DTD script under domestic political circumstances to suit party political agendas, applying it to depict governing parties as corrupt, fiscally irresponsible, and guilty of compromising national sovereignty. The research uses qualitative methodology grounded in critical discourse analysis, sampling from political speeches, parliamentary reports, media releases, and policy documents between 2015 and 2023. The analytical model borrows from DeBoom's Geopolitical Narrative Theory and Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, which advances the argument that a narrative succeeds only to the extent that it is internally coherent and consistent with the values of the audience (fidelity). The study addresses the following three main questions: how do opposition parties construct the DTD narrative, whom do they address, and how and when do they disseminate it? Evidence supports that opposition forces in both countries react to construct the DTD narrative, not to blame the Chinese intention, but to portray the ruling elites as public trust violators. In Nigeria, opposition communication is future-oriented and symbolic, emphasizing potential dangers to national sovereignty; in Zambia, it is crisis-oriented and rooted in an acquired economic experience. Target audiences vary: in Nigeria, opposition communication targets urban, professional, and youth segments of the electorate, whereas in Zambia it appeals more strongly to economically hard-pressed and rural segments. They are used intentionally during election cycles, periods of economic distress, and controversial policy battles, periods when there is heightened political agitation and more public criticism. The findings of the study are twofold. Theoretically, it demonstrates the malleability of global scripts in local political contexts and affirms the precedence of narratives in democratic contention. Practically, it illustrates the political risk of secret loan agreements and the requirement for openness in development finance. The research recommends that incumbent governments establish parliamentary oversight of foreign borrowings, that opposition parties focus their criticisms on evidence-based arguments, and that Chinese lenders adopt more transparent and inclusive engagement cultures in Africa. This research ultimately enriches knowledge concerning the localization, politicization, and deployment of global economic narratives within African democracies, thus showcasing narrative processes engaged in elite contestation during globalization.

Keywords: Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy, Opposition Parties, Zambia, Nigeria, Political Narrative

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	: <i>All Progressives Congress (Nigeria)</i>
ADP	: <i>Action Democratic Party (Nigeria)</i>
CNPP	: <i>Conference of Nigeria</i>
PDP	: <i>People's Democratic Party (Nigeria)</i>
NNPP	: <i>New Nigeria People's Party</i>
UPND	: <i>United Party for National Development (Zambia)</i>
PF	: <i>Patriotic Front (Zambia)</i>
DTD	: <i>Debt Trap Diplomacy</i>
BRI	: <i>Belt and Road Initiative</i>
DMO	: <i>Debt Management Office (Nigeria)</i>
ICT	: <i>Information and Communication Technology</i>
GDP	: <i>Gross Domestic Product</i>
ZESCO	: <i>Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation</i>
IMF	: <i>International Monetary Fund</i>
G20	: <i>Group of Twenty (Economic Forum)</i>
NAT	: <i>Nationalistic Framing Identity Construction (code)</i>
SOV	: <i>Sovereignty and National Integrity (code)</i>
ECM	: <i>Economic Mismanagement and Fiscal Critique</i>
COR	: <i>Corruption and Transparency Deficit (code)</i>
RQ	: <i>Research Question</i>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

China's relations with Africa have always been viewed with skepticism, especially by its Western counterparts. This cynicism gave birth to the notion of Chinese debt trap diplomacy (DTD). This notion ignited the skepticism around Chinese lending and consequently triggered debate in various areas, including among academics, politicians, activists, and policymakers. (Abdulrasheed, 2021; Adrian, Stones; Yigal, 2020; Brautigam, 2019; Carmody, 2020; Himmer & Rod, 2022; Lokanathan, 2020) and eventually, local actors in borrowing nations (Martorano et al. 2021; DeBoom, 2020). Recently, the notion has occupied a considerable space in international relations, development economics, political science, and related fields.

Chinese debt trap diplomacy is often considered a strategic approach adopted by China to provide considerable financial assistance to developing countries under the pretext of acquiring strategic gains when the countries default on paying debts (Chellaney, 2017). Details on this can be found in (Brautigam, 2019; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Maluki & Lemmy, 2019). The present-day debate on debt trap diplomacy in the context of Chinese loans could be traced back to an Indian scholar, Brahma Chellaney, in 2017, who characterized it as a policy tool in which 'state X' (lending country; in this case, China) supports infrastructure projects in strategically located 'state Y' (borrower country; usually a developing country in the context of this study I focus on

Africa), often by providing excessive loans to the developing countries. As a result, developing nations become economically dependent on China, leaving the developing countries even more firmly under China's control. In other words, developing countries become trapped in a debt trap that leaves them vulnerable to Chinese influence. Consequently, 'State developing nations are not able to repay China's loans; therefore, they relinquish some of their assets (for instance, infrastructure) in favor of China to decrease its debt burden (this final step can also be designated as debt-for-equity swap), said Chellaney. Such characterization suggests that the core of the Chinese debt trap is that China deliberately extends unserviceable loans to countries for self-serving reasons. This means intentionally seeking to entrap them in debt with an ulterior motive of using that influence to force strategic concessions or gain political influence (Chellaney, 2017).

The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is the most cited case surrounding the Chinese debt-trap diplomacy. This offers a compelling scenario for framing Chinese loans as predatory. After Sri Lanka defaulted on Chinese loans, its port was reportedly leased to China for 99 years. Cases of this nature have perpetuated the narrative of the Chinese debt trap and become accepted as a reality in explaining Chinese lending strategy across the board, particularly in Africa (Maluki & Lemmy, 2019).

However, researchers argue that there is no empirical evidence to support such claims. Somewhat is driven by geopolitical motivation in discrediting China, see (Abdulrasheed, 2021; Brautigam, 2019; Carmody, 2020; Carrai, 2019; Himmer & Rod, 2022; Singh, 2020). On the other hand, some studies insisted that instances like Sri

Lanka's Hambantota Port, which prove that financial pressures can result in asset seizures, indicate the reality of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy (Moramudali & Panduwawala, 2024).

Notwithstanding, the Chinese debt trap gained traction in geopolitical discourse due to Western anxiety about China's growing influence in Africa. The rhetoric of asset seizures, the potential neocolonial tendency by China, predatory lending, and possibly jeopardizing their national sovereignty have triggered a new wave of concern in borrowing countries, particularly in Africa. This led to local actors harnessing the Chinese debt trap as a threat to national sovereignty. Surprisingly, this important yet underappreciated aspect of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy gained little attention in academic discourse, by trying to understand how local actors in borrowing countries intentionally exploit the notion of the Chinese debt trap to advance their political agenda.

This is the starting point of the current study, which aims to explore how domestic elites utilize the Chinese debt trap to satisfy their political or personal interests. In many developing countries, especially in Africa, domestic elites have increasingly utilized the Chinese DTD narrative, particularly opposition political parties. This serves as a means of confronting ruling authorities, shaping popular opinions and attitudes, and consequently affecting domestic politics (DeBoom, 2020; Haderiansyah et al., 2020). Though the utilization of debt traps varies from country to country, it indicates elites' agency in reconstructing the narrative for their purpose.

Portraying Chinese loans as a threat to national sovereignties induces considerable doubt in the minds of many locals. This puts opposition political parties in a better position to paint the ruling governments as financially irresponsible and/or over-dependent on China, thus undermining their political legitimacy (Martorano, et al., 2021; DeBoom, 2020). The intentional and political motivational use and interpretation by local elites serve several functions. Among those are an attempt to delegitimize governing parties, fueling mass dissatisfaction among locals, and casting opposition leaders as guardians of national interests (DeBoom, 2020; Lippolis & Verhoeven, 2022).

For instance, opposition political parties in Zambia have always had reservations regarding Chinese engagement in key areas such as mining and infrastructure development. In 2018, Zambia's main power-supplying company was found to be heavily indebted and undergoing a debt crisis. As a result, some allegations implied that the Zambian government was set to hand over the state-owned electricity utility, ZESCO, to Chinese creditors (Ajetunmobi, 2018). These allegations resulted in controversy and eventually provoked anti-government demonstrations and heightened public attention to Chinese investments (Asada, 2023; Dynamic, 2017; Olsson, 2022).

Similarly, the opposition leaders in Kenya have condemned the move by the government to fund the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) with Chinese loans on the basis that such a debt burden risks derailing economic stability (Alden & Otele, 2022). Therefore, the application of the Chinese debt trap discourse in these instances

undermines public confidence in the governing parties, as opposed to providing an in-depth examination of the underlying financial conditions.

As mentioned above, opposition political parties emphasize large-scale infrastructure projects financed through Chinese loans as proof of irresponsible borrowing behavior. Arguing that such fiscal obligations will impose enormous burdens on future generations and compromise national sovereignty (DeBoom, 2020). This perception is not only limited to Zambia and Kenya; similar situations are found in other parts of Africa, including The Gambia (Samba & Jatta, 2021), Nigeria, where opposition parliamentarians raised concerns about Chinese loans due to a lack of transparency (PLAC-LEGIST, 2020), and Zimbabwe (Kuo, 2016), just to mention a few.

Apart from local political controversies, the Chinese DTD narrative also plays a decisive role in shaping international interactions. Most opposition political parties tend to align their rhetoric with Western assessments and comments about China's place in the world economy and their ill lending behaviors. This gives them room to rally support from international institutions, media, and policy think tanks. (Adera, 2023), as in the case of Kenya's current president, William Ruto. Before his presidency, he was critical of Chinese finance and vowed to break away from such deals and address his country's debt crisis. After he was elected as president in 2022, he turned back to the IMF as his main investment partner, viewing China with a critical eye. This alignment serves to legitimize their criticisms as well as expand their political influence by tapping into wider geopolitical anxieties regarding China's emergence.

The effects of this strategic performance are seen in the changing attitude of the public, where individuals are increasingly perceiving government activities related to Chinese loans as suspicious, interpreting them as threats instead of development opportunities (DeBoom, 2020; Lippolis & Verhoeven, 2022). See data from the Afrobarometer, a platform that surveys African societies concerning their views on “democracy, governance, and other issues”. Through this dataset, a growing sense of China’s rising domestic economic influence among citizens was observed, particularly among those directly affected by Chinese-funded projects. This perception has the potential to instigate protests if locals believe that their domestic interests are at risk against the Chinese (Martorano et al., 2021). Consequently, the ruling parties can experience electoral costs and increased scrutiny over their foreign economic activities.

This study argued that the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy narrative is not just an externally driven discourse but also a means for domestic political competition. By examining how opposition parties reconstruct/frame and propagate the narrative, the research attempts to reveal how the opposition parties talk about the Chinese loans and their funded projects. Who their targeted audiences are in the political narrative, and how they try to convince those audiences about their narrative framing.

1.1.1 Rationale for Choosing Opposition Parties

The reason why this research concentrates on Nigerian and Zambian opposition parties is that they play a direct and active role in shaping and utilizing the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) discourse as a political instrument. In contrast to civil society movements or governing parties, opposition parties have an apparent incentive

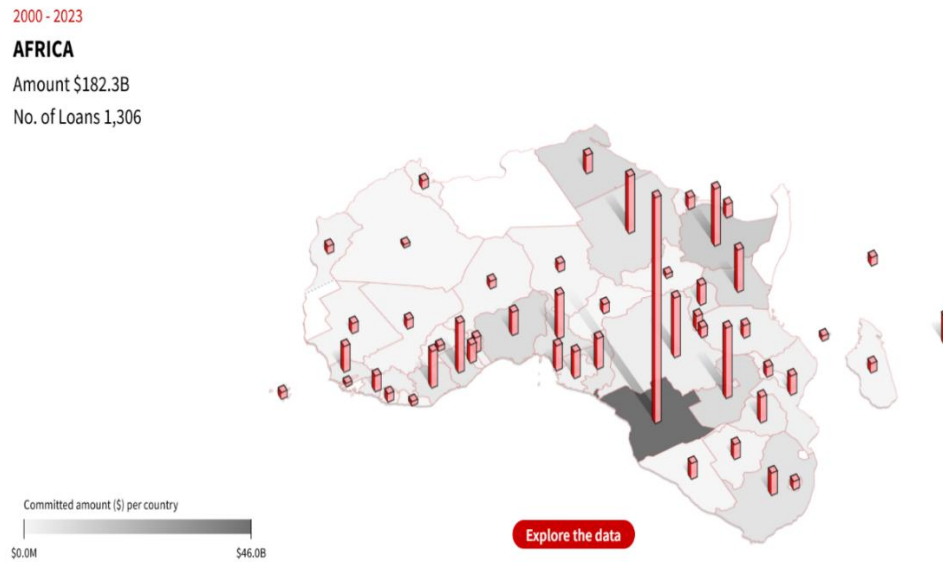
to utilize the narrative strategically to confront the incumbents and present themselves as alternatives. They aim not to merely counter policy but to galvanize public opinion, change political debate, and eventually approximate power. This renders their deployment of narrative more deliberate, competitive, and politically charged.

Ruling parties, on the other hand, are more likely to defend or justify Chinese loans as necessary for development. Their accounts emphasize legitimacy and policy continuity and thus are less likely to cast Chinese lending in a threatening light. Similarly, while civil society actors may voice concerns about debt or transparency, they lack the political leverage, visibility, and electoral motivation that characterize opposition campaigns. Opposition parties thus provide a clearer lens through which to observe the tactical deployment of narrative for political advantage. Nigeria and Zambia are particularly suitable since both have vibrant opposition parties and extensive Chinese loan portfolios, and therefore are ideally placed to test how narratives are framed and mobilized in democratic political settings.

1.1.2 The Nature of Chinese Loans and the Belt and Road Initiative

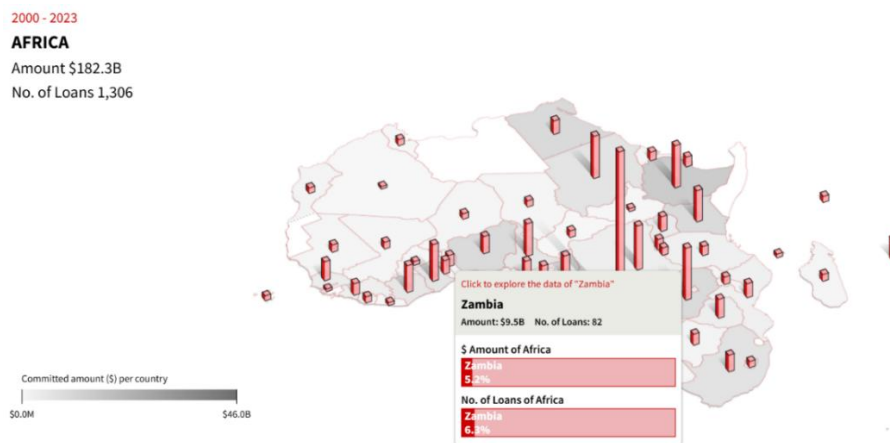
Figures reflect the debt database those African countries owed to China. I extracted two countries relevant to this study and presented them below.

Figure 1.1: Chinese Loans to Africa Database



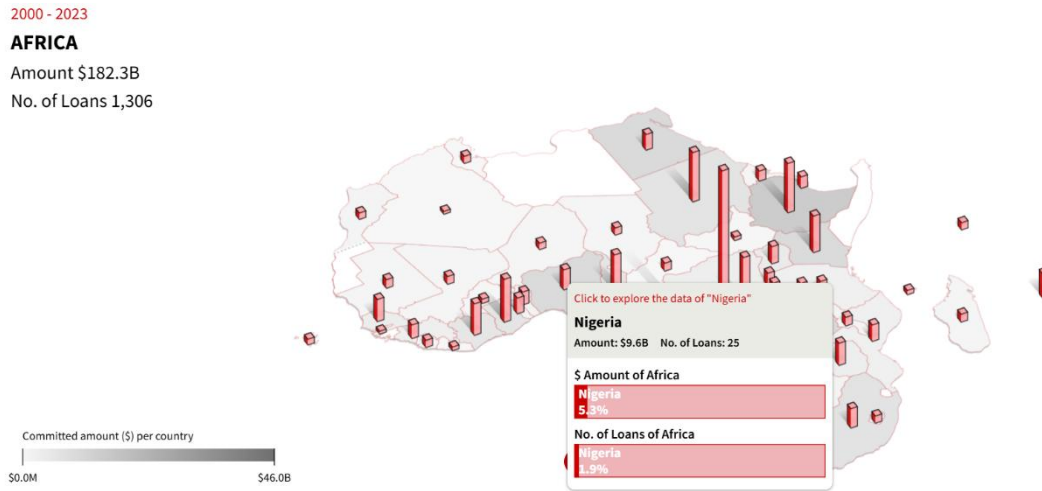
Source: Global Development Policy Center. (n.d.). Chinese Loans to Africa Database.
<https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>

Figure 1.2: Chinese loans to Zambia from 2000 to 2023



Source:
 Global Development Policy Center. (n.d.). Chinese Loans to Africa Database.
<https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>

Figure 1.3: Chinese loans to Nigeria from 2000 to 2023



Source: Global Development Policy Center. (n.d.). Chinese Loans to Africa Database. <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>

Chinese financing to African countries is intricately woven into the overarching context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure policy introduced by the Chinese government in 2013 to improve regional connectivity and economic integration. These loans are mostly advanced through Chinese policy banks; for example, the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China are known to provide concessional or semi-commercial loans for the financing of roads, railways, ports, and energy plants (Brautigam, 2019). Unlike traditional Western lenders like the IMF and World Bank, Chinese loans are usually bilateral, and a number of their features distinguish them from other loans: they lack transparency, have very few policy conditionalities, and minimal external oversight from international financial institutions (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). While this borrowing strategy tends to be derided

by critics for creating debt sustainability risks, particularly in countries with a fragile economy, it is helpful for African governments, who view it as an approach that is unapologetically quicker, more flexible, and enables them to pursue development schemes on a grand scale. China's great power politics are often cited as the most plausible explanation for the debt sustainability risks in the economically vulnerable states.

The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is the most commonly referenced case in which China received a 99-year lease on the port after the Sri Lankan government defaulted on loan repayments, an outcome broadly interpreted as a debt-for-equity swap. (Chellaney, 2017; Moramudali & Panduwawala, 2024). This incident has been cited in support of the “debt-trap diplomacy” narrative. However, scholars such as Brautigam (2019) and Rithmire and Brautigam (2021) have highlighted the dangers of oversimplifying the narrative, as most Chinese-financed projects in Africa do not result in asset seizures, and in many cases, the debt distress is due to domestic economic mismanagement rather than predatory lending. In addition, more recent research emphasizes that African governments retain significant control over the terms and conditions of these loans and their negotiation strategies domestically and politically (Brautigam, 2020; Singh, 2020). Thus, although Chinese loans are a crucial alternative to development finance, they simultaneously present governance and sovereignty dilemmas that draw international criticism and become the subject of domestic political contestation.

1.1.3 What sets Chinese loans apart from the IMF and the World Bank's?

It is critical to highlight that China's approach to lending in Africa stands in stark contrast to that of multilateral frameworks like the IMF and World Bank. While Chinese loans are framed within a narrative of mutual benefit and non-interference, these are bilateral agreements that prioritize infrastructure development. This stands in stark contrast to Pritchett (2010) and Dreher et al. (2019), who explain the intricate political and economic strings that come with Western loans. Furthermore, Corkin (2013) highlights how World Bank and IMF loans require social sector investments and institutional reforms, while Chinese loans often require the use of state-owned enterprises funded by the Chinese government for large-scale construction projects. This Chinese financing model is attractive to numerous African governments because it provides rapid development financing free from Western bureaucratic red tape and policy interventions. That same model has triggered concerns, mainly centered around limited democratic accountability, lack of transparency, and deepening debt vulnerabilities. Such concerns provide domestic opposition parties with political leverage. Examining the peculiarities of China's lending model helps explain the divergence of narratives surrounding Chinese loans compared to those related to IMF and World Bank loans.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the availability of an enormous body of literature on China-Africa relations, there is a need to analyze China's lending strategies and their geopolitical consequences. A few studies have explored how domestic elites in borrowing nations

exploit the narrative of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy for their political gains, particularly opposition parties. Based on my search, I found that only Martorano et al. (2021), DeBoom (2020), Marks (2010), and Lippolis & Verhoeven (2022) explicitly address the domestic aspect of the Chinese debt trap in Africa.

Seemingly, most literature on Chinese debt trap diplomacy is an attempt to determine the authenticity of the notion. Typically, arguing over whether or not China intentionally practices predatory lending or such accusations are overstated (Details on such discussion can be found in the selected works of (Abdulrasheed, 2021; Adrian, Stones; Yigal, 2020; Brautigam, 2019; Chellaney, 2017; Himmer & Rod, 2022; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Peng & Cheng, 2024; Pradumna Bickram Rana, 2020; Singh, 2020)). While others discuss elites' utilization of the narrative in a broader sense in other parts of the world. However, in Africa, there has been little focus on how domestic elites, particularly opposition parties, use the narrative for their political gain by challenging governing authority, and make their bid through a political narrative to access political power.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the domestic utilization of the Chinese DTD narrative in Africa and how the narrative is framed, utilized, and eventually weaponized in the domestic political process. The study focuses on Nigeria and Zambia, which are reported among the countries with the highest Chinese loans. These countries present a unique case on how domestic opposition parties utilize their strategies based on the context and situation.

1.3 Variables to be Observed

The concerned variable in this study is how Nigeria's and Zambia's opposition parties politically frame and deploy the notion of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) for political ends. The emphasis of this variable is on the tactical deployment of the DTD frame as a strategic act of political communication, and not as a reactive foreign debt scenario. This can be observed in the way opposition parties time, frame, and position their messages with specific audiences within each national context.

This variable accounts for three interconnected dimensions of oppositional deployment of the narrative. The first dimension is the construction of the narrative, where the framing and content of Chinese loans are deliberately designed to project the incumbent government as irresponsible, opaque, and responsible for acquiescing to a surrender of national sovereignty. In this instance, Chinese lending is not presented as an objective economic deal but as a symbol of elite incompetence and a threat to national sovereignty. The opposition constructs the narrative through some of its themes, which are the loss of sovereignty, confidentiality of loan terms, economic hardship, and recolonization, so that it appeals to nationalist sentiments and popular grievances. This narrative framing allows the opposition to claim to be the guardian of national interests and the voice of the people.

The second component of the observed variable is the targeted identification of audiences. The opposition parties in Nigeria and Zambia do not utter the DTD narrative universally. Instead, the opposition uses rhetoric that addresses specifically identifiable social audiences. For example, in Nigeria, the opposition appeals to economically

pinched citizens, cohorts of youths frustrated by unemployment, and middle-class professionals demanding good governance and fiscal responsibility. In Zambia, the tale is usually communicated to rural voters, workers, and nationalist-minded citizens who are particularly anxious about foreign domination. The narrative is framed in language that is emotionally and politically appealing to the values, anxieties, and everyday experiences of each group.

The third and final element of the observed variable is the timing and mode of deployment, which specifies when and how these narratives are deployed. The opposition does not deploy the Chinese DTD narrative consistently in all contexts. Instead, they intensify or vary their use based on the political timing. Election periods, national economic crises, rescheduling of loans, and high-profile debt revelations are all periods when the discourse is more likely to be triggered. In election periods, the discourse is voiced in campaign speeches and popular rallies, where opposition candidates highlight debt as a symbol of national treachery. During times of economic crisis, say inflation, withdrawal of fuel subsidy, or debt re-profiling, the narrative is used to magnify public discontent, usually by way of parliamentary sessions, media talk shows, street protests, and social media debate. This is so that the narrative gets maximum political traction and emotional currency.

1.4 Research Questions

Per the background and the research problem, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. How do opposition parties construct and deploy narratives of the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy to challenge the ruling governments for political advantage?

- 1a. Who are the targeted audiences?

- 1b. How and when do they communicate these political narratives

1.5 Research Objectives

1. Explain how opposition parties construct and deploy narratives of the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy to challenge the ruling governments for political advantages.

2. Describe who the targeted audiences are in the opposition political narrative.

3. Explain the timing and the mode of narrative utilization of Chinese debt discourse at the domestic level.

1.6 Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, namely, how political opposition parties build and use the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) narrative to confront incumbent governments, the specific actors they seek to target and shape, and when and how they spread their narratives, an appropriate hypothesis can be stated as follows:

Nigerian and Zambian opposition political parties are likely to strategically develop and use the narrative of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy when there is political weakness, such as during elections or economic crises. The motive is to delegitimize governments in power, invoke nationalism, and appeal to influential social groups whose views on debt are authoritative. They are designed to resonate with the life

situations of specific groups, including unemployed young people, rural voters, or urban middle classes, by portraying Chinese lending as endangering national sovereignty, economic self-reliance, and public well-being.

This hypothesis proposes that the use of the DTD narrative by the respective challengers is not random or universal but is instead contextually driven and politically driven. The narrative employs a discursive approach to influencing public opinion and pursuing political advantage by linking foreign debt to domestic grievances. Through examining the deliberate construction and timing of communication among competing political players, this study investigates the extent to which the deployment of narrative tracks key political openings and is targeted toward those segments of the population that are most vulnerable to its rhetorical appeal.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research is particularly important on many fronts, adding to more nuanced scholarly discussion related to international relations, political science, and governance of nations engaged in borrowing, especially in the China-Africa context. Analyzing how opposition parties use the Chinese Debt Trap narrative in borrowing nations, this research provides important evidence on how this discourse shapes local governance, public perception, and foreign policy towards China.

One of this research's key contributions is that it breaks from the standard geopolitical perspective that predominantly investigates whether China's lending practices are exploitative by design. Instead, it shifts the focus to how opposition parties

strategically utilize the Chinese DTD narrative for political gains. As a result, this study pushes the boundaries of existing scholarship, offering a more nuanced explanation of how the Chinese debt trap is not only externally imposed but also domestically mobilized.

The study showcases an important angle on political elite tactics using the DTD narrative for domestic political advantage. The opposition parties often utilize rhetoric about Chinese loans to confront their domestic government as financially irresponsible and China-dependent. Thus, appreciation of the strategic use of the Chinese DTD narrative is vital for understanding how domestic political competition affects foreign policy positions, electoral returns, and stability in governance.

Aside from its academic contributions, this study has important practical applications for policymakers, international organizations, and diplomatic corps. Policymakers in borrowing countries can better grasp the domestic perceptions of financial agreements with China and the political risks entailed. Chinese policymakers and financial institutions can also derive an advantage from these results by evaluating the popularity of their lending policies and adjusting their diplomatic agendas accordingly.

This study ultimately contributes to the academic literature on China's position in the world economic order, the politicization of international financial relations, and the changing governance dynamics and public trust in borrowing countries, through its analysis of the interplay among domestic political actors in influencing public

perception. Thus, the study offers an understanding of the domestic aspects of world economic relations and their wider geopolitical implications.

CHAPTER II THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1. Theoretical Framework

In politics, stories are important as they help people make sense of their environment. Citizens will rarely respond to abstract data or policy documents from the government. Instead, their reactions will most likely be based on stories that identify heroes and villains, state the stakes, and offer possible future directions. Political stories are simplified expressions of complex realities, making events both understandable and emotionally engaging.

The significance of narrative in international relations is particularly potent. States convey their selves through stories of development, security, identity, and cooperation. Similarly, narratives can impact international power dynamics, as seen in the ongoing framing contests between China and Western nations. One of the most prominent narratives in this contest is the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD), which criticizes China for employing loans as a means to trap developing countries into a lifetime of indebtedness and dependence.

However, it is often neglected how this global script is decontextualized and used within particular national political fields. This study looks at Nigeria and Zambia, where the DTD narrative is used by opposition parties not only as foreign policy criticism but as a tool for domestic political competition. In doing so, they localize a global discourse to confront incumbent governments, question the legitimacy of public debt to China, and advance their version of national sovereignty.

To understand this phenomenon, the present research employs DeBoom's Geopolitical narrative, Agency, and multiscalar risk, and Walter Fisher's Political Narrative Theory. DeBoom's work provides the basis for this study by looking at narratives from geopolitical settings and reutilizing them in a domestic context. In this case, Africa, specifically the chosen cases (Nigeria and Zambia). As for Fisher's, it will complement the work of DeBoom in trying to explore how opposition parties use the narrative, their mode of communication, and the people they target in this process. Fisher's work is a communication model that hypothesizes individuals as storytellers who base their argumentation and actions on narrative rationality and not on normative arguments or empirical proof (Fisher, 1987). Fisher's theoretical framework is particularly appropriate here since it is concerned with the criteria upon which narratives are evaluated by ordinary individuals, utilizing simple yet effective standards: coherence and fidelity.

2.1.1 DeBoom's Geopolitical Narrative Theory: Agency and Multiscalar Risk

Meredith DeBoom (2020) provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding how debt-related narratives, such as Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD), operate beyond traditional state-to-state relations. Her study focuses on the agency of domestic political actors, such as opposition parties, in framing and using global narratives for domestic political agendas (DeBoom, 2020). For DeBoom, debt narratives are not merely about debt as financial obligation but also about symbolic and geopolitical positioning. They are employed by a range of actors, opposition leaders,

civil society, and media, not just to condemn foreign lenders but to oppose domestic incumbents and shape public opinion.

One of the key arguments in DeBoom's analysis is that the threats and promises associated with Chinese debt are spread across various scales. For African governments, aligning themselves with Chinese loans entails domestic political risk, particularly when opposition parties present such arrangements as challenges to sovereignty or indications of elite capture. Here, the opposition is not simply responding to global power dynamics but is actively involved in producing and circulating geopolitical meaning. Debt narratives are turned into instruments whereby power is negotiated not only globally, but within the political contests of particular states.

This multiscalar perspective is especially applicable to the Nigerian and Zambian cases, in which opposition political parties utilize the DTD discourse to delegitimize governing elites, stir up nationalistic fervor, and rally electoral backing. DeBoom's model therefore, provides an explanation of the manner in which global scripts are manipulated by local actors in order to acquire domestic political leverage, and how both external and internal pressures influence such scripts. This theory is complemented by the work of Walter Fisher, which tries to explain the communicative dimension of the political narrative.

2.1.2 Fisher's Narrative Paradigm: Humans as Storytelling Animals

This research uses Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm as its theoretical foundation, although it adapts the model to understand the conscious construction of

narratives by political elites, rather than their reception by the general public (Fisher, 1987). Initially conceived to describe how individuals evaluate the credibility and significance of narratives, Fisher's theory rests on the argument that humans are born storytellers who make conclusions and judgments based on narratives that match their unique experience and moral beliefs.

For Fisher, the persuasiveness of a story rests on two factors: coherence (whether the story hangs together internally) and fidelity (whether the story expresses truths that ring morally or experientially true for the audience). In its original use, Fisher's paradigm leaves the work of judging these aspects to the audience. In the present study, though, I reorient the paradigm from the vantage point of political actors, opposition elites, to be precise, who design and broadcast narratives to render them ostensibly coherent and authentic. This reorientation rests on a recognition that narratives are not merely received passively but also actively and tactically created.

In this producer-centered approach, fidelity and coherence are not only measures by which stories are evaluated, but instead are explicit design components that elites strategically develop to reap political dividends. This model offers a comprehensive analytical prism to investigate how the opposition parties in Zambia and Nigeria utilize the concept of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) as a tool of rhetoric to delegitimize ruling authorities. Instead of raising questions regarding the public opinion concerning the DTD narrative, this model examines how the ruling elites construct the narrative to make it sound believable and morally upright.

Here, fidelity and coherence are objectives of political rhetoric rather than products of public opinion. They are achieved through making claims internally consistent, events sequentially logical, and in accordance with historical patterns of governmental action. Fidelity is accomplished through engaging with culturally relevant themes, such as nationalism, sovereignty, and anti-colonialism, that address the values and historical myths of the audience being addressed. This producer-centered narrative form is especially apt for examining elite political discourse in new democracies, where potentially degraded popular trust in institutions, disaggregated media landscapes, and asymmetric policy understanding prevail. In such circumstances, political contestation frequently hinges on the ability of actors to frame situations in morally compelling, affective terms that tap into public outrage and allow them to reimagine themselves as credible challengers to ruling elites.

In this framework, narratives are not only a means of persuasion but also tools of political positioning. By recasting Fisher's fidelity and coherence (Fisher, 1987) Principles as elite-driven strategies, this framework enables an exploration of how narratives are designed to achieve certain political objectives, framed for various audiences, and instrumentally used at strategic points in the political calendar, i.e., elections, during national crises, or policy debate. Nigerian and Zambian opposition leaders, for instance, commonly accuse governing parties of compromising national sovereignty due to China's non-transparent loan agreements. The rhetoric is made to sound consistent by referring to tangible Chinese-funded infrastructural projects, shifts in debt figures, or contentious loan terms. Furthermore, the rhetoric is made to sound

true through appealing to the shared experience of colonial exploitation, cultural nationalism, and local resentment of economic disparity.

The opposition's strategic goal is not merely to characterize Chinese lending, but to place it as a betrayal of national interests, a moral failing deserving of political change. This shift in perspective enables researchers to examine the process of narrative construction without undue dependence on measures of public opinion, which are frequently nonexistent, unreliable, or politically tainted. By a concentration on processes by which narratives are being built to be credible, rather than by assessment of their ultimate acceptability, the strategy effectively circumvents methodological challenges that are intrinsic to measures of effect or belief.

Rather, it examines the structure, substance, and timing of elite discourse, inquiring how political elites shape their message to suit rural constituents, urban youth, foreign patrons, or civil society organizations, each of which might be sensitive to different signals of coherence and loyalty. In Zambia, for example, opposition leaders portrayed Chinese lending as underhanded attempts to capture national assets, like ZESCO, the national electricity utility company. The accusation was made in a logical manner by connecting increasing indebtedness with the anticipated handover of strategic infrastructure. The allegation was rendered more credible by appeal to nationalist sentiments, drawing on past fights for economic freedom and casting opposition leaders as protectors of the people's interests.

This story itself can be made applicable to a younger Nigerian audience by focusing on the elements of lost economic opportunities, labor precariousness, and

corruption in the government, thereby remaining faithful through cross-generational disillusionments and attitudes towards the elite. Significantly, this strategy privileges the temporal dimension of narrative development. Narratives do not remain fixed; they change according to political cycles, strategic openings, and changing audience demands. In electoral seasons, fidelity is prioritized, as political players try to portray themselves as reliable and morally attuned to national values.

During moments of crisis, such as debt defaults, protests, or scandals, coherence is likely to be stressed, as elites try to link governmental breakdowns to sweeping patterns of mismanagement or betrayal. Such changing temporality enables frames to resonate especially when the public is most receptive to redefinition.

In addition, opposition parties are not just reactive narrators; they construct narrative frameworks proactively. Opposition parties frequently expect to face counter-narratives from governing powers and preempt them by incorporating rhetorical defense mechanisms into their narratives. For instance, governments might describe Chinese loans as unavoidable for development, but opposition leaders frame such arguments as propaganda and thus less than *ex ante* legitimate. Narrative construction here is not an objective process but a contested and strategically engaged one. The paradigm shift by the producers of Fisher's work enables the analysis of narrative audiences to be diversified. Instead of imagining "the public" as an undifferentiated and monolithic entity, this paradigm is aware that elites create several narrative channels for numerous audiences. Messages to international NGOs or donors stress the themes of transparency and accountability.

Messages to urban constituents could emphasize corruption and jobs, whereas those to rural constituencies emphasize sovereignty, preservation of culture, and delivery of basic services. Each version of these tales is edited to satisfy particular standards of coherence and fidelity suitable to the values and expectations of the intended audience. In short, the model explains not only the substance of political stories but also the rationale underlying their framing. It enables us to analyze the mechanisms by which opposition elites select specific plots, metaphors, and symbols rather than others, based on their strategic advantages. The model unveils the elites' narrative decisions, not as arbitrary or purely ideological ones, but as deliberate efforts to frame interpretation, alter perceptions, and undermine authority.

By emphasizing the construction of stories instead of their consumption, this research highlights the potential for political actors to control the symbolic terrain of governance and development. Finally, this study applies Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm by reconceptualizing fidelity and coherence as strategic design principles rather than being simply evaluative criteria. This realignment allows for a focused analysis of how Nigeria's and Zambia's competing elites build narratives around Chinese lending that appear to be coherent internally, morally effective, and politically persuasive.

Moreover, it presents a methodological benefit in pulling the analysis away from the typically ambiguous measurements of public opinion to concrete activities surrounding the production of narratives. The approach dynamically fits the overall objectives of this study: to reveal the localization of global discourses, to examine how

strategic narratives influence political contestation, and to comprehend the utility of storytelling as an instrument of power in modern African political agendas.

2.1.3 Synthesis: A Complementary Framework for Analyzing Political Narratives

DeBoom and Fisher provide complementary insights for this research. DeBoom discusses why and how opposition movements use global narratives such as DTD to rebalance power in their nations. She offers the geopolitical and multiscalar framing that places those narratives within larger political contests. Fisher, by contrast, discusses how such narratives are constructed at the rhetorical level for optimal persuasion. In combination, the two models provide a complete analysis: DeBoom explains the political rationale for invoking debt rhetorics, and Fisher sheds light on the communicative strategies for making the rhetorics persuasive. Such a combined framework makes possible a closer examination of how Chinese loans are transformed into not just economic instruments but also symbolic ammunition in Nigerian and Zambian domestic political struggles.

2.2. Literature Review

The Chinese debt-trap narrative has gained traction within geopolitical discourse as its framing and narrative constructions continue to evolve over time and across different contexts. This narrative emerges in the wake of China's alarming expansion of economic power through infrastructure investment, particularly via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This literature review examines narrative as a form of discursive and strategic power and how it is utilized in Chinese lending to Africa. By

conceptualizing narrative as not merely a means of communication but as a tool for creating political meanings, I investigate how opposition parties consciously create, challenge, and utilize narratives regarding Chinese investment. I employ a conceptual discourse strategy to analyze how narrative has influenced the formation of attitudes towards Chinese involvement in Africa. It discusses how opposition parties use such narratives within their domestic contexts to enrich their political capital and shape public opinion towards Chinese lending.

Moreover, in these narratives and counter-narratives, African agency is emphasized not merely as a passive receiver of geopolitical consequences but as an active participant. In other words, they actively construct and reinterpret global narratives according to national contexts for their personal or political interests. Finally, this review seeks to enhance understanding of the interplay between narrative, power, and political strategy. It situates the Chinese debt-trap discourse within a broader theoretical framework, recognizing elite agency and discursive construction in foreign policy and international development. The review is thematically structured based on selected themes from the relevant literature reviewed in this work. I adopted a funnel approach by drawing on literature from a general perspective on narrative construction to a specific domestic context in Africa. I utilize various databases to search for literature, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, UIII digital library sources, and Mendeley web search. I employ keywords such as narrative construction, Chinese debt trap, elite discourse, African elites, and opposition parties in these search engines.

2.2.1. Narrative: A Discursive Power and Political Function

Narratives are crucial in constructing hegemonic positions and shaping social change by creating new perspectives and legitimizing them (Montessori, 2014). In other words, narratives are not merely neutral containers of information. Instead, they are structured and impose meaning on issues with a specific intention of shaping perception and influencing action (Polletta, 2006; Somers, 1994). For instance, in an organizational context, narratives are equipped and expressed according to their ideological context and power structure (Mumby, 1987). In a political context where this study is situated, narratives are sometimes political communication tools used in storytelling techniques as strategies for persuasion. Politically, narratives serve multiple functions. Thus, its effectiveness is multipolar in political discourse as different regions and contexts use narratives for various purposes.

It is important to note that narratives work both epistemologically and strategically. Narratives give a general idea about what's going on and how we could respond. That is to say, narrative rationality resists logico-scientific paradigms by being inclined towards coherence and fidelity over empiricism (Fisher, 1984). Expanding on this claim suggests that people accept truth based on stories. Narrative construction is easy and has the potential to propagate widely because people make sense of the world not through facts, but rather, they rely on coherence and believability of the story.

The use of narrative in geopolitics has been effective in the past decades, especially in the wake of China's rise to seek global dominance. In this context, narrative construction is found to be effective as it typically operates in the realm of

perception and power rather than empirical confirmation (Fairclough, 2013). Narratives are constructed in almost all aspects of human activities. For instance, in the international development narrative, the position of Western dominance as a developing partner persisted for quite a long time. To paraphrase Escobar's 1995 work, in postcolonial societies, narratives propagated by Western elites play a crucial role in creating legitimacy for Western aid and setting normative agendas.

Having said that, it is crucial to recognize narratives as essential tools of soft power. It helps to shape world order without the use of force, instead utilizing persuasion and presentation of selective or partial truth (Nye, 2004). This is evident in the construction and propagation of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy, which is further discussed in the subsequent section. This narrative is being used by both international and national elites as a tool to counter China's ambitious initiative through the BRI. As argued by Liu (2022), narratives about the Chinese debt trap diplomacy are not simply because there is a shred of evidence to sustain it, but rather rooted in geopolitical anxieties, particularly from Western mainstream media.

2.2.2. Construction of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy Narrative

The Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy is one of the popular concepts in recent debates in International Relations (IR), Political Science, and related fields in connection with China's global lending practice. Primarily, it's a supposed strategy where China employs excessive lending to vulnerable countries as a means to gain geopolitical influence when those nations struggle to service their debt. (Chellaney, 2017) While this narrative has received considerable attention in international

discourse, its origin, evolution, and implications are multidimensional and contesting, further obscuring any essential representation of China's international financial engagements.

As mentioned above, the "Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy" was originally coined in 2017 by Brahma Chellaney, who based his analysis on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (Mahmood, 2018). Through this framework, Chellaney criticized China's lending as a deliberate entrapment strategy into unsustainable debt, coercing developing nations into political and strategic concessions. Chellaney referenced Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port as an example, where China is believed to have strategic interests in the asset. From this point forward, the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative has traction, especially among the elites, by exploiting the narrative for their gain. On the subject of Sri Lanka, it has been contended that its government gave the port due to its inability to service its debt obligations for 99 years on lease to a Chinese state-owned enterprise.

According to Chellaney, this was symbolic of China's so-called strategy to assume control over strategically valuable assets under the garb of economic aid (Chellaney, 2017). The moment Chellaney's analysis appeared, it evoked interest among policy analysts, academics, and the media, especially in the West. Two students took this further in a series of articles and academic discussions, giving wider articulation to the narrative (Brautigam, 2019; Singh, 2020). Along with general critiques of China's growing influence across the world, their work helped catalyze the integration of DTD into mainstream geopolitical discourse.

Western think tanks, media outlets like The New York Times and The Economist, and even policymakers started framing China's global lending practices as a calculated geopolitical move. They often linked those claims with broader narratives about China's rise as a global power. The concept evolved in international relations once the BRI projects of China began to spread across the developing world. Between 2013 and 2020, China invested billions of dollars to construct energy plants, ports, highways, and railways (Singhaal, 2022). At the same time, these promises of economic development have also raised questions about debt sustainability. Countries like Pakistan, Djibouti, Laos, and Zambia were heavily indebted to Chinese lenders, raising a red flag that they would lose sovereignty over critical infrastructure in case of defaults (Condon, 2023). Fears like these were driven by high-profile cases, such as Hambantota Port. The deal to lease the port was framed by Western media and think tanks as evidence of China's predatory lending practices (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021). Stating that Beijing was creating deliberate debt vulnerabilities to extract strategic concessions. The narrative construction was most relevant in the Indo-Pacific region, where the rapidly growing presence of China was considered an outright challenge to the influence of the United States. The Chinese DTD narrative thus emerged as a principal tool for the West to counter China's soft power and influence in the developing world (Brautigam, 2019; Himmer & Rod, 2022; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Singh, 2020).

However, the idea of debt trap diplomacy is not without criticism. Many critics maintain that the Chinese debt-trap diplomacy narrative generally oversimplifies a

complex economic reality. For instance, many debt-distressed countries have a range of creditors, with China often not being the leading cause of their distress, as several studies have shown (Carmody, 2020). Just around 10% of Sri Lanka's external debt was owed to Chinese companies at the time of the Hambantota lease. The majority of the debt was owned by foreign lenders and Western financial institutions. This suggests that domestic fiscal mismanagement, corruption, and broader economic vulnerabilities played a more significant role in Sri Lanka's debt crisis than Chinese lending practices alone (Brautigam, 2019; Carmody, 2020). However, China-Sri Lanka relations attract major news headlines as the narrative continues to gain relevance in geopolitics, but it does not lack critics or counter-narratives to justify China's lending practices, especially in Africa. This is further discussed in the next section.

2.2.3. Counter Narratives on the notion of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy

The discourse around DTD has been marked by sharp debates about China's intentions and the empirical evidence supporting the narrative. The advocates of the concept, mainly Western, argue that China's opaque lending practices and desire to finance large-scale infrastructure projects with questionable economic viability are evidence of a deliberate strategy to create dependency. Accordingly, China relies on bilateral agreements and avoids participation in multilateral debt frameworks that would bring more transparency and fairness. The critics of China's lending practices refer to examples of Djibouti, where the latter's debt-to-GDP ratio has gone up with Chinese loans, thus making many worry about asset seizures (Himmer & Rod, 2022).

On the other hand, those disagreeing with the validity of the Chinese DTD argue that this narrative represents a geopolitical agenda and not an evidence-based economic critique. Scholars like Deborah Brautigam and Lee Jones maintain that Chinese debt trap diplomacy is a concept largely driven by political purposes to discredit China and justify Western alternatives to global development finance. Brautigam's research has shown that Chinese loans are often used for economically beneficial infrastructure projects and that cases of asset seizures, such as Hambantota, are rare and result from unique domestic circumstances rather than a coordinated Chinese strategy (Brautigam, 2019). Moreover, Jones and Hameiri have critiqued the DTD narrative for ignoring the agency of debtor nations. They argue that many governments willingly engage with Chinese lenders to secure funding for infrastructure projects that traditional Western institutions are unwilling to finance due to their higher risk aversion. This dynamic highlights the limitations of existing global financial frameworks and the need for more inclusive development finance options (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

2.2.4. Broader Implications of the Narrative

The debt trap diplomacy narrative has huge implications for the ongoing debate on global politics and economics. It works against how China wants to be looked upon as a benign partner in the Global South and diminishes its effort to achieve soft power with long-term economic partnerships. To this end, China has tried to allay these fears through loan restructuring, debt relief for the least developed countries, and rhetoric of win-win financial engagements. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China

granted several African countries debt suspension under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (Singh, 2020).

The DTD narrative is thus a tool of containment wielded by the Western elites predominantly against the rise of China, particularly in such strategically important regions as Africa, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. The construction of narrative on Chinese lending practices as predatory thus works as one of the ways through which Western elites tend to portray their financial institutions, like the IMF and the World Bank, as more responsible alternatives for development finance.

It has also triggered wider questions about the morality and sustainability of international borrowing. Hence, an exclusive focus on China's role in debt crises diverts attention away from problems systemic to global finance, including the lack of a fair process for restructuring debt and the monopoly position Western financial institutions enjoy in defining international development. The path ahead requires nuanced thinking about debt dynamics, beyond simplistic binary constructs of predatory versus benevolent lending.

2.2.5. Strategic Use of Debt Trap Narrative by Elites

The Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy has evolved into a powerful geopolitical narrative that is strategically used by governments and institutions to counter China's rise across developing regions. The framing of Chinese loans as inherently predatory reinforces the strategic interests of Western elites while weakening the legitimacy of China as a global development partner. The debt trap narrative not only redirects attention from systemic issues in global finance but also reinforces the dominance of

Western-led initiatives such as the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) and the European Union's Global Gateway projects, which are designed in response to China's growing influence (Peng & Cheng, 2024).

The narrative of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy is constructed and utilized in various ways by elites, especially in the West, like the United States' Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who portrayed China's activities in the developing world as a means of employing corruption techniques and non-transparent behaviors in dealings with Africa. Pompeo further states that this was aimed at influencing the borrowing state's critical infrastructure to undermine its political functioning by creating an enormous debt. Statements of this nature gave breathing space to the narrative of the Chinese debt trap. Considering Africa's colonial history, statements like "neo-colonialism" have the potential to resonate with Africans, consequently turning away from Chinese loans (Himmer & Rod, 2022). In the same vein, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Africans to be aware of "the new colonialism" championed by China (Brautigam, 2019). These elites were very careful in their choice of words, as narrative works well if people can align with the story. For instance, Mike Pence's use of "rogue aid" (Carmody, 2020) and Rex Tillerson's use of "predatory lender" (Brautigam, 2019) are indications of strategic framing. Both these utterances are strategic ways of constructing a narrative that portrays China as the bad guy, further solidifying the narrative of the debt trap diplomacy. Hence, China's "predatory actions" were part of broader strategic initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This was defined as a strategy to create sequences of trade routes leading to and from

China, with the primary objective of advancing its global dominance (Bolton, 2017; Brautigam, 2019).

Through this narrative, it is observed that Western governments have strategically weaponized the debt trap narrative to paint China as a destabilizing force in international development. These framing positions Western-backed initiatives as moral, transparent, and equitable alternatives to China's BRI. Explicitly, the 2021-launched B3W initiative hopes to provide developing nations with sustainable infrastructure financing while underlining values on democracy, transparency, and environmental sustainability. In addition, the Global Gateway project presented by the EU strives for high-standard infrastructure investments and thus demarcates against the so-called risks of Chinese financing. By emphasizing these differences, Western elites seek to retain their hegemony in global financial governance and development finance and, by implication, the relevance of institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, among others.

At the heart of the debt trap narrative has been a set of influential think tanks and media outlets that amplify selective accounts of Chinese lending. Various reports by institutions such as Chatham House and the Center for Global Development have identified the risks of Chinese loans, usually focusing on high-profile cases, like that of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port or Zambia's soaring debt levels. Most of those reports tend to stress debt vulnerabilities without considering the economic benefits of infrastructure projects financed by China. Although Hambantota Port is often cited as a cautionary tale of Chinese predation, studies indicate that the project's debt distress

stemmed from domestic financial mismanagement rather than deliberate Chinese coercion. Nonetheless, the selective framing of such cases sustains the perception of China as a neocolonial actor (Horn et al., 2020, 2021).

Furthermore, in Africa, where China's expanding power has directly challenged Western dominance, this framing is in line with the West's broader geopolitical objectives. Portraying Chinese financial engagements as exploitative, Western elites have sought to delegitimize Beijing's partnerships with African nations. This approach also aims to undermine the attractiveness of China's BRI, which has facilitated big investments in road, port, railway, and energy projects across Africa. Whereas BRI no doubt has improved infrastructure in this part of the world, the debt trap narrative conceals these achievements by way of disproportionate rhetoric over debt risks (Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Lai et al., 2020).

Another dimension of this narrative discourse is related to agency on the part of the borrowing nations. The debt trap narrative often portrays developing countries as passive victims of Chinese exploitation, which neglects their active role in engaging and implementing this infrastructure development. Many governments engage with China precisely because traditional Western financial institutions are unwilling to fund high-risk infrastructure projects. Countries like Ethiopia and Kenya have been able to unlock critical transportation networks with Chinese loans, significantly boosting their economic prospects (Horn et al., 2021). However, such narratives have often been overshadowed by narratives that focus on the risks related to debt dependency. This selective telling not only denies the sovereignty of the borrowing countries but also

sustains a protective perception of the development of Western-centric models (Horn et al., 2021).

Additionally, the strategic use of the debt trap narrative also reflects broader geopolitical rivalries. In the increasingly competitive phase of the China-West rivalry and other regional blocs, narratives such as debt-trap diplomacy have become a tool to shape international perception and align global opinion with their strategic interests. More precisely, this narrative has served to shape policy debates in the United States, Europe, and allied nations, with growing concerns over China's rise leading to increasing demands for more investment in development finance to act as a counterbalance to the BRI. The projects in question, the B3W or Global Gateway, therefore, would also serve other purposes than being simply an economic investment. Geopolitical tussles over rebuilding the West's influence within the developing world. Aside from the global elites, a sharp diversion has been observed with the borrowing regions, as domestic actors equally played a crucial role in the propagation of DTD, leading us to the next section of our discussion.

2.2.6. Domestic Utilization of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy in Africa

The narrative of Chinese debt trap diplomacy has taken a rather unprecedented direction in Africa, as domestic elites tend to use it for their gain. Recently, African political leaders have been selectively deploying narratives about Chinese funding to manage legitimacy, deflect criticism, or in the opposition camps around nationalism framing, to the pretext of protecting national interest against foreign intrusion. As Liu (2022) and Soulé et al. (2024) argue, the elites in either camp might employ the

narrative to portray China as a “generous partner” or a “neocolonial threat” based on the political climate and its rhetorical needs.

In Kenya, for example, President Uhuru Kenyatta faced internal pressure regarding Chinese fish imports, demonstrating that geopolitical alignments must continually be weighed against national constituencies (DeBoom, 2019). Carmody and Taylor's (2010) "flexigemony" concept captures such transactional, adaptive relationships. African elites can utilize Chinese loans to fund highly visible infrastructure projects that enhance their developmental capacities. However, this also exposes them to criticism from civil society and the opposition, who can label such projects as elite self-enrichment disguised as South-South cooperation.

Against this backdrop, in many African nations, Chinese loans and investments have turned into a double-edged sword in the context of domestic politics. Often, opposition parties and other civil society actors contextualize the financial engagements with the debt-trap diplomacy narrative as mechanisms for exploitation that threaten national sovereignty (Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2024). This framing is often politically motivated, with opposition leaders using the narrative to discredit incumbent governments and highlight alleged mismanagement of resources. In the case of Zambia, opposition leaders have repeatedly accused the government of mortgaging national assets such as copper mines and critical infrastructure to China, claiming that the loans pose a long-term economic threat (Oxford Analytica, 2023).

As stated earlier, the Hambantota Port's leasing to China, due to extensive debt as a result of Chinese loans, has been the cause of the country's debt crisis. Such accusations resonate with the public, especially in economically vulnerable regions where citizens are already burdened by unemployment and underdevelopment. By using such narratives, opposition groups strengthen their positions and bring attention to perceived failures in governance, portraying ruling administrations as complicit in or negligent toward the consequences of growing Chinese influence.

The media's involvement in framing and spreading these stories is equally important in this respect. These are usually the stories of the risk of loss of sovereignty through asset seizures, dramatized by high-profile cases such as Hambantota. However, this replication of Western perspectives can distort local discourse, sometimes fueling intolerant sentiments against Chinese communities living in these countries (Carrai, 2019). For instance, the building of the Chinese-funded Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya came under intense public criticism, with opposition leaders asserting that the project's economic benefits were much overshadowed by the debt accrued (Alden & Otele, 2022).

This interplay of politics and media narratives shows how Chinese financial engagement is utilized domestically, often at the expense of objective discussions about development outcomes. Added to that, most Chinese investments in developing countries share boundaries with bigger economic and political issues, which further makes their usage even more complicated.

Large-scale infrastructure projects such as highways, railways, and energy facilities often boast of propelling economic development (Aluko & Ngubane, 2024; Meka'a et al., 2024). While these projects do present some opportunities in terms of offering employment and connectivity, they rarely respond to localized economic needs or emphasize inclusive development. Some regimes might focus on large projects that are highly visible internationally and earn a national status while neglecting such basic needs as health care, education, or access to water (Zreik et al., 2024).

Disconnections between macro development and grassroots needs reinforce public discontent and supply an opposition party with rich soil for cultivating dissatisfaction. In recent trends, Zambia has become central in the Africa-China discourse. Domestically, arguments were made sustaining that Chinese loans were siphoned into projects like airports and stadiums when the rural areas needed infrastructure and basic services (Wang, 2024). This imbalance also perpetuates perceptions of elite capture and neglect, further undermining public trust in ruling administrations.

The strategic nature of the loan shapes domestic political alignments as well. Often, host governments align themselves with the Chinese partners with the hope of earning financial and technical support for their development agendas. However, most of these alignments are hardly consistent with public sentiments, hence creating a degree of friction between political elites and ordinary citizens. This is very visible in

authoritarian regimes that may use such Chinese aid to consolidate power rather than to respond to developmental challenges.

In Zimbabwe, Chinese investments in the mining and energy sectors have been blamed for merely reinforcing the ruling elites, with minimal trickle-down effects on the large population (Kuo, 2016). Such arrangements deepen public disillusionment with both domestic leadership and external actors, thus nurturing a narrative of exploitation that oppositionist voices would only be too eager to harness.

2.2.7. Research Gap (Novelty)

Despite extensive academic debate on Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD), most literature available has addressed its geopolitical importance and whether or not the debt trap narrative is credible. Or how the narrative is used in a broader geopolitical context. Most studies attempt to determine if China's credit behavior is malicious debt entrapment or exaggerated and politically motivated (Brautigam, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020). However, that pivotal understanding of how the Chinese DTD narrative is rhetorically invoked by domestic elites in borrowing nations for domestic politics and governance ends is missing to date.

This study breaks away from previous studies by shifting attention away from how China's lending exploits African nations to how domestic elites, particularly opposition parties, domesticate the narrative in local politics. As opposed to the majority of the studies of China's foreign policy and economic diplomacy, this study investigates how opposition parties use the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative. Who do they target in their narratives? When and how do they deploy the narrative to

counter-governance legitimacy and mobilize political opposition? The strategic utilization of this narrative has profound consequences for domestic politics, policy discourse, and electoral politics, which is under-explored, particularly in African literature.

By bridging these gaps, this study makes a new contribution to international relations, political science, and governance. It is adding to the discussion on how narratives are used for political gain, in this case, the narrative of the Chinese DTD by moving from being a purely externally driven phenomenon to one that is actively constructed and contested in borrowing nations. Hence, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between global financial discourses, domestic political disputes.

CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore opposition parties' strategic use of the narrative of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy in political and public discourse in Africa. The qualitative approach is suitable for breaking down the complex, socially constructed nature of political narratives, particularly where meaning, strategy, and symbolic framing are central. (Auriacombe & Schu, 2012). From a discourse and interpretation perspective, this approach enables a nuanced examination of how the opposition elites invoke the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative and what it signifies. Instead of assessing the frequency with which the narrative is evoked, this study seeks to understand how, when, and for what purposes.

The current research is grounded in the interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, which views reality as mediated by language, culture, and power relations (Schwandt, 1994). These paradigms are central to political discourse, where narratives are descriptive and performative; they construct meaning, frame public opinion, and legitimate specific positions. So, the study is drawn towards inductive and exploratory, allowing analysis to be directed by data and not preconceived hypotheses. It explores how opposition parties use Chinese loans and/or Chinese-funded projects in speeches, interviews, press releases, opinion editorials, and parliamentary debates. These elite messages and statements are not simply seen as honest expressions of their political beliefs. Instead, they are viewed as deliberate and strategically chosen words designed

to influence others within a larger and often competitive field shaped by domestic political processes.

The qualitative approach also provides contextual sensitivity. (Lim, 2024). Bearing that in mind, I recognised that the employment of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative can vary in countries, political regimes, or even language communities in Africa. As such, the study adopts a multiple case study approach to uniquely explore and compare cases. As a result, I purposefully chose strategically selected countries to allow for depth and contrast.

3.2. Research Design

To facilitate contextual comparison and deepen understanding, the study adopted a multiple case study design to ensure a thorough study of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative against particular domestic political settings in Africa. Case studies help analyze in detail how there is a dynamic interplay between elite strategies in the political field and how this mobilizes public sentiments about Chinese loans. Thereby permits a greater detail into which the respective variables condition views toward domestic governments as well as toward China.

Emphasis was placed on the chosen countries (Nigeria and Zambia). These countries were selected as a case because they have been subjected to more Chinese loans and have significant political and media discussions regarding Chinese investment. These cases offer a chance to examine how opposition parties tactically employ the Chinese DTD narrative to affect governance, shape public opinion, and confront domestic governments. Through the comparative examination of these cases,

the research seeks to determine the overall patterns, variations, and political and economic forces that shape the construction and utilisation of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative in Africa.

Multiple case study design is appropriate in this study since it enables the researcher to analyze complex phenomena in their real-life contexts. (Yin, 2009). Hence, it enables context-sensitive examination of the framing of political discourse in particular national contexts. The comparative aspect of the research enables systematic exploration of the commonalities and differences in the framing and strategic use of Chinese debt investments in respective countries. This indicates a broader understanding of the narrative as an instrument of political gain.

3.2.1 Justification for Case Selection: Nigeria and Zambia

Table 3.1: Rankings of the top 10 African countries by debt to China

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Loan Amount (USD)</i>
1	Angola	\$46.0 billion
2	Ethiopia	\$14.5 billion
3	Egypt	\$9.7 billion
4	Kenya	\$9.6 billion
5	Nigeria	\$9.6 billion
6	Zambia	\$9.5 billion
7	South Africa	\$6.9 billion
8	Sudan	\$6.3 billion
9	Ghana	\$6.1 billion
10	Cameroon	\$5.9 billion

Source: africa.businessinsider.com.

Although Nigeria and Zambia are not among the top African countries with the highest amount of debt owed to China between the period 2000-2023, their choice to be included in this study is deliberate and of considerable analytical importance. The likes of Angola, Ethiopia, and Kenya top the list in terms of total Chinese indebtedness. However, the prime concern of this research is not the measurement of indebtedness, but an inquiry into how opposition political parties in Africa frame and leverage the theme of Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) within the milieu of domestic political competition. In this regard, Nigeria and Zambia provide unique and representative case studies that align with the research goals.

Both Zambia and Nigeria are democracies with comparatively vibrant and vocal opposition parties that have been active in publicly commenting on Chinese lending. In Zambia, opposition parties, specifically the United Party for National Development (UPND), prior to its taking office, harshly attacked Chinese loans, particularly at times of debt distress and economic stagnation. Zambia is probably the most iconic African nation in which Chinese lending was at the forefront of national political discussion, thanks in large measure to its default on foreign debt and the controversy surrounding potential Chinese takeover of strategic assets such as ZESCO. This makes Zambia a prime case to examine crisis-driven opposition framing of the DTD narrative.

Nigeria, by contrast, has a complicated but strategic case, in which opposition parties have tied Chinese loans to concerns over sovereignty, corruption, and fiscal irresponsibility, despite Nigeria's comparative ability to service its external debt

obligations. Opposition parties like the PDP and ADP have used public fear of debt terms and opacity to challenge the legitimacy and competence of the governing APC. What is especially interesting about Nigeria is how its opposition parties employ the narrative in a more symbolic and anticipatory manner, warning of potential risks down the road rather than reacting to imminent economic meltdown. This forward-looking rhetoric has a strong appeal to Nigeria's expanding youth population, urban professionals, and civil society organizations.

3.3. Data Collection

This research will use multiple qualitative sources of data to provide triangulation and analytical depth through media content, political speeches, campaigns, and documentation. The process of collection requires an extensive review of news media reporting and elites' rhetoric, campaign speeches, and parliamentary debates relating to Chinese loans to permit a multidimensional analysis of how the Chinese DTD is discursively constructed strategically and spread.

Media content is an integral part of the data collection exercise, whereby news reports, editorials, and opinion columns from various sources are analyzed, including but not limited to Western media houses like The New York Times, The Guardian, and CNN to Chinese state media like Xinhua and Global Times, and African regional media like Daily Nation, The Standard, The Africa Report, and Youtube contents relevant to these cases. The study focuses on how different media outlets frame Chinese investments with close attention to narrative frameworks, linguistic features, and

thematic patterns that shape China's image either as a development partner or an economic predator in Africa.

Political discourse forms another valuable source of data that involves an analysis of publicly made statements, press releases, speeches, and policy documents publicly authored by opposition leaders. This aspect of the study will explore if political elites craft and employ the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative to serve certain strategic interests in the publicized perception of the ruling governments and how they are faring with China.

Policy and government documents are supplementary sources of data, containing critical insight into the financial and legal dimensions of Chinese investments. These consist of loan agreements where available, government reports, and official economic strategies on Chinese-funded infrastructure projects. Adding these sources is crucial to ensure that the analysis relies more on empirical evidence so that a critical analysis is possible about whether the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative is aligned or diverges from economic realities.

3.4. Data Analysis

The research uses a multilayered discourse analysis approach, blending textual, contextual, and comparative analysis to investigate how the narrative of the Chinese DTD gets framed and utilized locally. The analysis starts with textual analysis utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to detect the linguistic structure, framing devices, and ideological signifiers contained in the media reports and political discourses (Fairclough, 1995). The focus is on significant words such as national interest,

exploitation, debt burden, threat to national sovereignty, corruption, transparency, debt trap, economic sovereignty, and Chinese influence, which are metaphorical frames such as neocolonialism, Predatory, and financial stranglehold. To systematically code and structure discourse patterns, software programs such as Quirkos are employed.

This stage of analysis focuses on single cases on a country-by-country basis. This allows research to examine the use of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy narrative based on political context and climate. Considering that these countries have their unique characteristics and political nature, it is appropriate that I commence with individual case analysis to uncover context-specific narration of Chinese loans.

Finally, I use a comparative analysis that makes it possible to identify the points of similarity and difference in the construction of the Chinese debt narrative by opposition parties across Nigeria, and Zambia, Cross-case comparison through this study draws attention to how domestic political, economic, and social contexts affect the framing and reception of the Chinese debt trap narrative so that it becomes possible to achieve a richer appreciation of its strategic roles and meanings.

By this methodological strategy, the research explored the political agenda behind using the Chinese DTD narrative, actors involved in its spread, and broader governance implications for borrowing nations. Based on the information obtained from the data collection and analysis, themes are generated to present the findings and draw a conclusion for the study.

CHAPTER IV FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

This chapter presents the key findings of the study, which are later interpreted and discussed in the subsequent sections. The primary aim of this study is to explore how opposition parties in Nigeria and Zambia frame narratives regarding Chinese loans within the context of the debt trap. One main research question was formulated to guide this investigation into the phenomenon, which is further complemented with two additional sub-questions. These questions are as follows: RQ1, how do opposition parties construct and deploy narratives of the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy to challenge the ruling governments for political advantage? RQ2: Who are the targeted audiences? And, how and when do they communicate these political narratives? Presenting the findings, trying to answer these questions, data was retrieved from political speeches, media content, national assembly debates, editorial reports, and public discourse across various search engines. This data was analyzed using Quirkos, a thematic analysis technique, to generate themes that guide the reporting of the findings.

Recurring themes emerging from the narratives of the opposition parties revolve around sovereignty, economic mismanagement, corruption, exploitation of natural resources, disposing of local businesses, debt burdens, nationalistic rhetoric, and neo-colonialism framing. These themes allow a better understanding of the construction of oppositions' political narrative and their functions in a local political context. The

themes were further synthesized into broader themes based on the cases explored. For clarity and depth, findings are presented on a case-by-case basis. Findings of each country were presented separately, guided by the research questions. This allows for a nuanced presentation of the political and socio-economic factors influencing narrative construction and public opinion in each context. Furthermore, the comparative focus highlights common patterns and distinct variations among the countries in the politicization of Chinese loans by opposition parties. The following sections present the findings thematically, starting with RQ1.

4.1.1 Findings for Research Question One

Nigeria:

4.1.1.1 Use of Political Narratives Around Economic Mismanagement and Sovereignty Threats

Nigeria is among the top five African countries with the highest debt to China (Oparada, 2023). Making it one of the most interesting cases in exploring domestic elites' contestation about Chinese financing. Through this study, the data shows an interesting perspective about how opposition political parties in Nigeria use narratives around Chinese loans. At the developing stage of this study, I was determined to explore how elites use the Chinese debt trap narrative by Abraham Chellaney. However, the data shows that the narrative framing in Africa by the opposition political parties does not purely align with the mainstream narrative of the Chinese debt trap. It is essential to reflect on the premise of Chellaney's debt trap narrative, which positions China as deliberately using loans to entrap developing countries. This is not a common

belief among African elites; however, Chinese loans are primarily used in narrative framing based on the context and needs of the political actors for political gain.

Like in this case, the opposition parties in Nigeria, such as the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Action Democratic Party (ADP), and the Conference of Nigeria Political Parties (CNPP), as well as notable personalities such as the former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, have repeatedly utilized the increasing debt burden of the nation, particularly debts owed to China, to demonstrate the fiscal irresponsibility shown by the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) (The Nation Newspaper, 2020).

For instance, Yusuf Yabagi, the ADP National Chairman, cautioned that Nigeria may face an unfortunate financial situation with its non-stop borrowing. Consequently, more than ₦2.3 trillion would be used to service debt in the 2020 budget of ₦10.3 trillion. He criticized the provision of more than 30 percent of the budget for recurrent expenditure and operational charges, describing the Buhari administration's fiscal policy as unsustainable. (Abuh & Daka, 2019).

Similar rhetoric was found to be magnified in statements by members of the PDP. They not only portray the loans as irresponsible but also as threats to national survival. In a statement on Sunday in Abuja, the PDP spokesman, Kola Ologbondiyan, said:

“Nigerians can recall that our party had, on May 28, 2020, alerted that the Muhammadu Buhari administration and the APC had placed our nation on the international auction market with the accumulation of foreign loans under nebulous terms (Vanguard, 2020a).”

According to the PDP, loan agreements entered into under the Buhari administration effectively compromised Nigeria's sovereignty. In this line of narrative

framing, the opposition parties position themselves as defenders of Nigeria's sovereignty using rhetoric like this;

“As a Pan-Nigerian party, the PDP declares that our sovereignty as a nation remains non-negotiable. Nigerians reject such a sovereignty-pawning clause and are unwilling to mortgage parts of our country under any guise whatsoever (The Street Journal Nigeria, 2020).”

Furthermore, Atiku Abubakar warned that the loans might result in the ceding of national infrastructure to China upon default. Through his media office, he made a statement, and this is what he had to say:

“Now, we are all aware that Nigeria's sovereignty may have been traded for foreign loans. And God forbid our inability to service those loans; the lender country would take ownership of the choice infrastructure on Nigerian soil. No negotiation could be weaker than that (The Street Journal Nigeria, 2020).”

This perception of Nigeria's sovereignty being sold was shared by the CNPP, which commended the House Committee on Treaties and Agreements for probing the \$400 million ICT Infrastructure Backbone Project financed by the Export-Import Bank of China. Chief Willy Ezugwu, the Secretary General of the CNPP, alleged that the previous Transport Minister tried to stop the inquiry to avert a diplomatic row, labeling this action as a cover-up attempt that should be fought tooth and nail (The Street Journal Nigeria, 2020).

Narrative framing about public debt in Nigeria, opposition parties' rhetoric revolved around how the APC government has raised the country's external debt from \$7.02 billion in 2015 to \$23 billion in 2020 (Vanguard, 2020b). Despite the worries about the country's debt burden, it has been recognized that borrowing is not bad in foreign relations, but how you put it to use matters, as portrayed by Atiku.

“Debt, by itself, is not a bad thing. But the debt budgeted for such unproductive ventures, like the proposed \$500 million upgrade of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and other sundry bogus contracts, is debt that leads to death. Trading Nigeria’s sovereignty for this type of profligacy is the height of irresponsibility (Nigeria Daily Post, 2020).”

Analysts have described this as a potential “second debt trap,” likening the economic realities that one warranted debt relief back in 2005 (Latest in Nigeria News, 2020; Premium Times; Ukwu, 2022). They warned that the “debt-to-GDP ratio has risen to 22.47 percent, with debt servicing absorbing 90 percent of revenue,” thus leaving little room for capital projects.

Shaibu, another dissenting voice, a publicist and special assistant to Atiku Abubakar, PDP Presidential candidate, alleged that under the APC and Buhari’s presidency, debt has been increasing exponentially, stating that;

“The national public debt rose by 20.17 percent year-on-year to N39.55 trillion in 2021 from N32.91 trillion the previous year, driven by increases in external debt and total domestic debt. The total external debt rose to \$38.39 billion in 2021 from \$33.34 billion in 2020; federal domestic debt rose to N19.24 trillion from N16.02 trillion in the same period (Latest in Nigeria News, 2020; Premium Times; Ukwu, 2022).”

This characterization portrays borrowing as a fiscal problem and, more significantly, as an indicator of the APC’s bad economic policy. The critique takes it a step further to imply that the administration is devoid of initiative and determination to reform, claiming that:

“He said solutions to our problems are a no-brainer, but it is obvious that the APC lacks both initiative and will to solve them (Latest in Nigeria News, 2020).”

Moving on, the narrative on the issue of transparency and accountability has been emphasized as the most essential ingredient in governance. For instance, Osita Okechukwu demanded a panel of inquiry into Nigeria’s current financial state, particularly in its borrowing practice, urging President Bola Tinubu to step up and

address the issue head-on as promised to the Nigerian people. He continued by quoting Benjamin Franklin:

“He who goes a borrowing goes a sorrowing,” and called for the establishment of a high-powered panel of inquiry to thoroughly review Nigeria’s debt portfolio and identify any non-transparent transactions (Punch Newspaper, 2024).”

Furthermore, he invokes rhetoric like threats by characterizing Nigeria’s present debt as a serious threat to Nigeria’s democracy, indicating that the burden deprives essential sectors such as health, education, and poverty alleviation of the funds they require. The context here is more than fiscal criticism; it connects the debt to broad systemic failures undermining governance and development. Key factors associated with these failures or potential threats to national sovereignty are a lack of transparency, accountability, and corruption, which are further discussed in the next section.

4.1.1.2 Lack of Transparency, Accountability, and an Avenue for Corruption

The narrative framing is found in the engagements of the legislative arm of government on the politicization of Chinese loans. Opposition parties have accused Nicholas Ossai, who chairs the House Committee on Treaties, of single-handedly investigating Chinese loans without involving other committees that were mandated to do so, against a resolution passed by the House (The Herald News, 2020; The Nation Newspaper, 2020). These claims were countered by the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), which said that the committee was hijacked by the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to stain the government of President Muhammadu Buhari. (The Street Journal Nigeria, 2020). Through such contestation, the APC members emphasized adherence to procedural norms, but the PDP members persistently insisted

that the inquiry had to go on unrestricted. They questioned the APC's sudden protest about the committee's enquiry into Chinese loans, viewing it as a potential ploy to impede transparency and accountability (The Street Journal Nigeria, 2020). The wider public opinion highlighted the need to safeguard Nigeria's sovereignty and secure the nation's future from predatory debt arrangements (ibid).

Ebere Onwudiwe's analysis highlights increasing concern over loan deal transparency. He maintained that Nigerian leaders, particularly those from the ruling APC, signed documents written in Chinese, a language they did not understand either verbally or in writing, which was indicative of accountability gaps (Onwudiwe; Pilot News, 2020). He noted that the opacity of the deals concealed significant provisions, and it was hard for Nigeria's actual debt burden to be approximated. Onwudiwe contends that a failure to transparency can be "catastrophic" to good governance and economic development, thus creating an environment of corruption and impunity (ibid).

Additionally, the subject of economic hardship also energized the rhetoric of opposition parties. The sudden crash in crude oil prices, burdensome debt servicing obligations, and a national budget predicated on high oil price assumptions exacerbated the country's fiscal weaknesses (ibid) After 2023 presidential election, APC party lead by president Bola Tinubu came under heavy criticism by the People's Democratic Party leader Atiku Abubakar, and his New Nigeria Peoples Party counterpart, Senator Rabiu Kwankwaso, among other members of the opposition parties accused the government of recklessness, citing the continuation of the borrowing spree while infrastructure

collapsed. Poverty deepened (Folorunsho-Francis and Zakariyau, 2024). The opposition parties essentially condemned the Tinubu regime for purchasing extravagant properties, including a presidential aircraft and convoy vehicles, during a period of national austerity (Ibid).

In the absence of compensatory policies, removing the fuel subsidy was equated to a poor leadership example. According to the opposition, the government's policies intensified mass suffering, leading to food shortages and economic hardship nationwide. Similarly, Kwankwaso, through his party's National Publicity Secretary, Ladipo Johnson, stated,

“We believe that the budget sent to the National Assembly about a week ago shows that this administration has failed to acknowledge the pains and sufferings of Nigerians. They do not seem to comprehend the gravity of the situation we are in at the moment (Folorunsho-Francis and Zakariyau, Punch Newspaper 2024).”

Additionally, Senator Kwankwaso did not relent in challenging the ruling APC on its reckless financial management. In a joint press briefing with Atiku, he made the following statements:

“This Christmas will be the hardest for most Nigerians due to the economic hardship and hunger in the land. If he says he's borrowing to improve infrastructure, where are they? You can't borrow to pay salaries for specific purposes and targeted projects. Tinubu has failed to demonstrate that over time. The government has been borrowing and imposing taxes on ordinary Nigerians, who are suffering. They are lending for no reason. He hasn't done enough as expected of him to reposition the country (Folorunsho-Francis & Zakariyau, Punch Newspaper 2024).”

Furthermore, they contended that whereas everyday Nigerians were asked to observe austerity, the political elites still floundered in luxury, hence an indication of disconnection with suffering citizens (Ibid).

Moving on, the opposition parties continued using narratives that equate Chinese loans with national exploitation, unaffordable debt burdens, and potential loss of sovereignty. Our Tributes report, published in 2020, condemned the process of acquiring Chinese loans as inherently flawed: “The process of packaging and operating the loans is inherently corrupt and breeds inefficiencies that have favored capital flights and labor loss from Nigeria.” (Tribute, 2020). The report warns against over-invoicing and price manipulation “to benefit their home country despite the Debt Management Office (DMO) assurances” (Ibid).

These rhetorics by the opposition parties are not mere criticisms but narratives used as political tools for domestic political competition. For instance, the PDP compares its governance style with that of the APC, stating that:

“A PDP administration would “slash cost of governance, mitigate the fiscal burden, and enhance revenue generation (Ukwu, Legit.com, 2022).”

The opposition parties' characterization is based on a hope to demonstrate their integrity and sensitivity to people’s concerns, further appealing to the public's sensitivity.

Zambia:

4.1.1.3 Indebtedness, Sovereignty, and Patronage

Opposition framing of Chinese loans in Zambia has centered on fear of an escalating debt crisis, sovereignty loss, and enrichment of elites. This has occupied a considerable space in Zambia’s national discourse, particularly among the opposition camp. For instance, on September 26, 2018, a heated debate was sparked among the

national assembly members. The critical voices on this debate were the opposition, who generally expressed concern about the government's management of Chinese debt. Dr. Musokotwane, upon being recognized by the speaker, spoke at length about Chinese loans and reacted to how the president addressed the loan issue. He accused the president of being deceptive in addressing the country's debt situation and criticized the time he spent addressing the problem, and this is what he had to say:

“The biggest issue in Zambia today is the debt crisis, whether the Government denies it or not. Therefore, we expected the President to come here and articulate how this debt crisis would be resolved. What did we see instead? The President came here and spent only about fifteen seconds talking about debt. If the President is spending fifteen seconds to address the biggest problem of the day, then that speech is irrelevant (National Assembly of Zambia, 2018, p.26)”

This was a shock for many opposition members, for President Edgar Lungu took merely fifteen seconds to talk about the country's debt crisis during a major speech, considering the magnitude of the problem (National Assembly of Zambia 2018). Arguing that the debt crisis was a top agenda for discussion in international financial centers, while it was trivialized locally. Dr. Musokotwane, the most critical voice among the opposition at the time, reminded members of the assembly about the severity of Zambia's debt crisis. Addressing the speaker of the house, he said:

“Sir, the issue of debt is very serious. The debt or nkongole is the most important economic problem facing the country today. If you read The Economist, The Financial Times, or ¹Bloomberg, you will see that all they are talking about is the impending debt crisis in Zambia. If you go to the financial capitals of the world like New York, London, Washington, or Johannesburg, everybody is talking about the impending debt crisis in Zambia (Ibid., p.26).”

Zambia's loan portfolio with China has caught global attention as it is featured in international newspapers. A national assembly member uses this situation in his remark during the debate. Musokotwane's references on the above could be found in the following articles.

¹The Economist, (2018), September; Zambia's looming debt crisis is a warning for the rest of Africa

²The Financial Times, (2018), TV tax stirs Zambian fears over Chinese 'debt-trap' diplomacy

³ Bloomberg (2018), Zambia to Seek Restructuring of Debt to China After IMF Warning

Despite the global attention on Zambia's debt crisis, Musokotwane believed that the ruling party of Zambia is not aware of the situation, as quoted:

“However, something is interesting. There is one important institution in the whole world that does not know that Zambia has a debt crisis, and that institution is called the PF Government. They do not know that there is a debt crisis in the country (Ibid., p.26).”

This statement was followed by laughter, but the most important question that remained lingering among the opposition parties was, what was China interested in about Zambia? Knowing they could not pay their loan, they still kept giving money. This provoked the concern among the opposition parties that Zambia might lose strategic assets, including the Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation (ZESCO), to China if care is not taken (Lusakatimes, 2018a). Rhetoric similar to the mainstream narrative about China's deliberate act to entrap developing nations for strategic concessions was invoked by some opposition parties, citing cases like Sri Lanka. A major opposition leader submitted by saying:

“Mr Speaker, the people of Zambia cannot be blamed for their fear because some countries in this world have defaulted on their loans, and their assets have been grabbed. For example, Sri Lanka constructed a very expensive port, but failed to service its debt. Consequently, the port was handed over to the Chinese for management. The same thing happened to Djibouti. Venezuela got huge loans from China and promised to pay back in the form of oil. Today, Venezuela is paying double the quantity of oil contracted for the loan (The National Assembly Order Report, 2018, p.27).”

He further stated in the debate session that:

“Mr Speaker, when the people of Zambia ask what it is that China is interested in by giving us money even when it knows that we cannot pay back, we cannot blame them. What is China's interest? The people of Zambia are also concerned about the economic relationship between our country and China. I repeat that I have a lot of respect for China, but it does not mean that the Government of Zambia must abdicate its responsibility and think that everything that comes from or is done by China is alright. It cannot be (Ibid., p.27).”

In expressing their respect for China, opposition voices argued that respect should not translate into uncritical acceptance of all bilateral agreements. They called

upon the government to prioritize Zambia's interests over geopolitical allegiances (Lusakatimes, 2023). Additionally, another important angle reiterated by the opposition parties is about the debt restructuring. As debt restructuring talks stayed at a standstill under the G20 Common Framework, the opposition pushed for immediate bilateral talks with China, warning that delay would lead to dire consequences for the ordinary Zambian (Reuters, 2023; The Financial Times, 2023).

Steve Hess (2022) contends that opposition parties in Zambia used the ruling Patriotic Front's (PF) close relationship with China to rally support. They charged PF with holding political rallies disguised as "development project inspections" and selectively implementing COVID-19 restrictions to suppress opposition campaigns. This "pro-China" label for the ruling party was a double-edged sword, allowing opposition leaders to portray incumbents as too dependent on a foreign power (Hess, 2022).

Hess also cited growing voter disillusionment with corruption, rising poverty, hunger, and inflation. As the first African nation to default on sovereign debt during the pandemic, Zambia saw public discontent hasten. Such economic facts made fertile ground on which the opposition could link the debt crisis to Chinese involvement and the government's fiscal policies (Africanews, 2020; News, 2020).

4.1.2 Findings for Supplementary Research Questions

Nigeria

4.1.2.1 Target Audiences and Modes of Appeal by OP

In Nigeria, opposition political groups' narratives about Chinese debt primarily aim at citizens struggling with economic hardship, urban youths, middle-class professionals, and. In addition, the message also attempts to appeal to nationalist elements and civil society organizations already wary of foreign control. All these demographic segments are described as the true defenders of Nigerian sovereignty and as victims of a predatory financialized system brought about by the governing party (Onwudiwe, Pilot News, 2020). The narratives have a strong resonance with people's concerns about unemployment, inflation, corruption, and bad governance, which the opposition explicitly attributes to Chinese loans.

Opposition leaders describe Chinese loans as financially irresponsible and unpatriotic. Their narratives suggest that the loans are agreements shrouded in secrecy and ultimately benefit a privileged government elite at the cost of exposing the nation to foreign exploitation. For example, PDP Publicity Secretary Debo Ologunagba condemned the APC ruling party for the failure to account for subsidy savings, stating:

“The statement by President Tinubu that he does not regret the abrupt withdrawal of fuel subsidy without any cushioning effect. Is a confirmation of APC's detachment from the ultimate essence of government, which is the welfare and security of the people? (Punch Newspaper, 2024)”

This framing strategy constructs a moral binary: opposition parties present themselves as defenders of economic justice and national pride and characterize the governing party as irresponsible, unpatriotic, and engaged in selling off national assets.

4.1.2.2 Timing of Narrative Deployment

Nigerian opposition parties often maximize their messaging in the event of an economic crisis, such as cases of increasing inflation, subsidy removal, or negotiations for foreign loans. Such circumstances are seen as opportune times when public sensitivities are highly strung, and the construction of narratives can have maximum political effect. For instance, Atiku Abubakar warned in 2019, Endless borrowing will bring about endless sorrow, reflecting the widespread disapproval of Nigeria's increasing debt (PM News, 2019).

Election seasons also witness a rise in anti-China sentiments. Opposition parties use campaign manifestos to highlight the failures of the governing party, with Chinese loans being portrayed as representative of governmental neglect. An open letter to the Chinese government was written by ex-Governor Ayodele Fayose, where he said,

“Nigerians cannot accept the increasing debt burden of the country. Most of these loans end up in private pockets. Our future generations must not be bound on account of greed today (Ripples Nigeria News, 2016).”

This was addressed to the general populace at large while also trying to attract global attention, thus reflecting that the issue of Chinese loans had extended into both local and diplomatic domains.

4.1.2.3 Narrative Mode: Crisis, Election, and Populist Framing.

At times of crisis, opposition politicians present Chinese loans as deepening poverty and insecurity. They make populist claims that, while ordinary Nigerians are suffering, political leaders are enriching themselves with shady deals. The Human

Rights Writers Association, a group that frequently aligns itself with opposition positions, stated:

“These Chinese loans must have been pocketed by top government officials because there is no evidence of any satisfactorily executed national strategic infrastructures (Nwachukwu; Nigeria Daily Post, 2022).”

During parliamentary debates, opposition party members speak in plain language. A Member of Parliament questioned,

“We are obtaining loans. The Nigerian people are not engaged in work. It will be the same Chinese individuals who will come and work here. So, what are we benefiting? (Abuh, 2020).”

These rhetorical moves are tactical. They mix economic discontent with nationalism and suggest that Nigeria's sovereignty is progressively being mortgaged to China.

The narrative mode subtly shifts during formal political campaigns, when it becomes solution-oriented. The opposition highlights its determination for transparency, fiscal accountability, and restoring Nigeria to economic self-sufficiency. Yabagi Yusuf Sani, a prominent opposition figure, stated,

“There must be a deliberate policy that will effectively translate the budget into fulfilling the aspirations of Nigerians, rather than paying foreign debts (Abuh & Daka, 2019).”

Overall, the Nigerian opposition's strategic narrative is contingent. It becomes stronger in times of fiscal crisis or election seasons, portrays Chinese loans as economic sabotage, and positions the ruling party as abettors of foreign domination.

Zambia

4.1.2.4 Target Audiences and Rhetorical Devices

The opposition narratives in Zambia are most focused on a general audience comprising urban workers, government officials, rural communities, and an aggressive youth population. The opposition appeals to past anxieties over foreign domination and

strongly held nationalist sentiments. The opposition is careful to strengthen its position as the guardian of Zambia's sovereignty, stirring up fears that Chinese lending risks compromising national ownership of key infrastructure.

The general public is made to see Chinese loans not only as economic instruments but as instruments of recolonization. This was encapsulated by one legislator when he stated:

“Here we are being colonized again, but we are being colonized with all our wits about us. These loans are not loans; they are traps (Solomon, 2018).”

This form of rhetorical dramatization characterizes China as a strategic predator whose facilitator is the governing Patriotic Front (PF) administration. Opposition party leader Hakainde Hichilema once commented:

“PFs romance with Chinese finance has led us into a mess we may never get out of. They borrow in our name; we, however, bear the brunt (National Assembly of Zambia, 2018).”

These statements demonstrate an intentional attempt to rile the public into a defensive reaction and strengthen support for the patriotic reputation of the opposition.

4.1.2.5 Timing of Narrative Deployment

In Zambia, Chinese lending becomes highly relevant in terms of debate at times of debt restructuring negotiations, street protests, or when rumors about asset forfeiture are rife. Moreover, debate is heightened in election campaign periods, as opposition parties struggle to emphasize government mismanagement and corruption. One such moment arose in the debates within the national assembly in 2018, when opposition Members of Parliament raised fears that China could take over the state-owned power company, ZESCO. Dr. Situmbeko Musokotwane had this to say:

“The Zambian people have genuine concerns that, in the event of our failure to repay the debt, the Chinese will seize ZESCO and other economic assets (National Assembly of Zambia, 2018).”

Another lawmaker contributed:

“If we keep accumulating these debts without well-detailed repayment schemes, we are effectively selling Zambia to the Chinese.”

These claims are aimed at alarming citizens and urging them to resist Chinese influence as well as the debt policies of the ruling party.

4.1.2.6 Narrative Mode: Crisis of Sovereignty, Control of Resources, and Populist Resentment

Zambia's opposition is increasingly turning to the language of a sovereignty crisis. The account draws on colonial history and amplifies recent anxieties about economic invasion. The opposition also uses visual and symbolic protests, such as James Lukuku's demonstration with a signboard that reads,

“China EQUALS Hitler,” for the sake of maximum emotive impact. The conspiracies also center on secrecy and elite collusion. An opposition MP complained:

“Most of these agreements are made in secret. We don't know what we're signing. We don't know what we're giving up. (France, 2018).”

This secrecy framework is essential in constructing a moral dichotomy: the government is secretive and self-serving, while the opposition is transparent and patriotic.

The local TV and radio stations also disseminate the opposition propaganda, where the speakers assert:

“China is not helping us. They are helping themselves. They are here for our copper, our land, and our industries. (Lusakatimes, 2023).”

The opposition also utilizes unemployment to make their point, blaming Chinese contractors for bringing in labor and denying Zambians opportunities for work. According to one MP:

“Zambians are witnessing the labor importation from Chinese companies. What do we benefit from? Unemployment and debt (Solomon, 2018).”

Overall, the opposition discourse in Zambia is context-specific, emphasizing national security during economic downturns, colonial heritage during electioneering, and elite betrayal during moments of popular outrage. These discourses are framed not only to delegitimize the PF government but to entrench the opposition's position as the genuine voice of the Zambian nation.

4.1.2.7 Ruling Parties' Counter-Narratives: Framing Chinese Loans as Developmental

Ruling parties in borrowing countries like Nigeria and Zambia countered opposition narratives by defending Chinese loans as tools for national development and economic modernization. They tend to characterize Chinese financing as a strategic partnership that facilitates the execution of key infrastructure projects in the absence of sufficient domestic resources or flexible alternatives from Western lenders. In Nigeria, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) has consistently argued that Chinese loans are concessional, tied to tangible development outcomes, and instrumental tied to tangible development outcomes, and essential for closing the infrastructure gap, particularly in transportation, energy, and ICT sectors (The Guardian Nigeria, 2016). Similarly, Zambia's former ruling party, the Patriotic Front (PF), characterized Chinese engagement as a keystone of its development agenda, highlighting job creation and infrastructure delivery as proof of successful South-South cooperation (Lusakatimes, 2018b). Ruling elites also frequently encounter opposition voices on sovereignty and

transparency issues as politically or externally influenced, and accusing the opposition of fearmongering and undermining national interests for electoral gain. In official communications, they emphasize that loan agreements follow to due legal process and parliamentary review as well as public accountability mechanisms. This counter-narrative positions the ruling parties as pragmatic actors concerned with delivering development, while framing the opposition as opportunistic and alarmist. In doing so, incumbents seek to neutralize the political salience of the debt trap narrative and restore public trust in their governance.

4.2 Discussion

This research explores how Nigerian and Zambian opposition parties interpret and use the narrative of the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) within their national political spaces. Unlike literature targeting China's intentions or the global agenda, the current research examines how opposition actors reinterpret global debates to achieve internal political goals. Drawing on DeBoom (2020), Geopolitical Narrative Theory, and Fisher's (1987) Narrative Paradigm, political narratives here are not conceived as objective portrayals of reality or spontaneous responses, but as deliberately constructed narratives that are framed to fit the public sentiment and legitimize political authority.

DeBoom's model serves well to position these narratives in a multiscalar geopolitics in which global discourses are remobilized through the agency of domestic actors. In this case, African opposition parties are not so much passive receivers of international rhetoric but actual producers of local meaning. They leverage the

symbolic and political weight of the DTD narrative to challenge incumbent legitimacy, appear as guardians of national sovereignty, and tap into fears of economic dependence.

Adding to this is Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, which enables us to know how these narratives are developed in terms of rhetorical effectiveness. According to Fisher, the persuasive potential of any narrative resides in its coherence (internal consistency) and fidelity (conformity with audience values). Nigeria and Zambia's opposition elites thus develop stories that associate Chinese loans with national failure or elite betrayal, such that they are logically ordered and emotionally engaging. These accounts are not merely stories; they are carefully constructed political tools meant to appear truthful, urgent, and morally convincing to specific parts of the electorate.

Thus, this discussion section is structured thematically and by country, Nigeria first, then Zambia, prior to comparative reflection. It examines the strategic construction of the DTD narrative, its targeted audience, and the timing at which it is evoked. Combined, DeBoom's and Fisher's theories offer a useful framework for understanding how international economic narratives serve domestic political purposes in the context of democratic conflict in Africa.

Nigeria

Opposition framing of the DTD narrative in Nigeria is predominantly centered on national pride and sovereignty themes. The ADP and PDP apply emotive language in describing Chinese loans as endangering Nigeria's sovereignty. Framing Chinese loans as "auctioning the country" or "mortgaging our sovereignty" is politically used

to evoke fear and to portray the ruling APC as irresponsibly stripping the nation of its integrity. This aligns with Fisher's (1987) concept of fidelity because the stories are true in terms of historically grounded concerns about foreign domination and postcolonial exploitation.

The initial narrative on DTD articulated by Chellaney (2017) is predominantly about China's geopolitical agenda, but the Nigerian opposition reworks this broad context to fit local circumstances. The focus shifts from China's motives to the incumbent government's questionable decision-making and propensity to undermine the nation's sovereignty. This supports DeBoom (2020), who contends that international narratives are reframed by domestic actors for specific domestic political goals.

One of the dominant narratives in Nigeria is the presentation of debt as a marker of fiscal incompetence and elite mismanagement. Opposition narratives point to the increasing debt-to-GDP ratio, ineffective utilization of loans, and wasteful expenditure on non-core projects like planes and luxury vehicles. This is compared with widespread economic difficulties among the populace, which is utilized to construct a narrative that the government is corrupt and out of touch.

In the model that Fisher envisioned, the narrative achieves coherence through a consistent connection between borrowing choices, non-economic advancement, and apparent indications of elite extravagance. Moreover, it achieves fidelity through resonance with popular complaints about continuing economic suffering. This is in

agreement with Martorano et al. (2021), who argue that African elites tactically use debt narratives to recast governance as betrayal, thereby establishing their legitimacy.

The use of such narratives is varied. Nigerian opposition parties magnify their rhetoric during election cycles, budgetary debates, or as reactions to economic crises like subsidy removal. For example, the narrative becomes more salient during protests and when public grievances are on the rise, especially after fuel price increments. The narratives are propagated via multiple sources such as press releases, campaign speeches, and social media platforms that serve to amplify political discontent in moments of reckoning.

This tactical timing demonstrates the opposition's application of narrative strategy to political impact, as discussed by Fisher in his emphasis on the manner in which narrators shape messages to specific audiences and contexts. The Nigerian opposition leadership addresses professional classes, youths, and the middle class, who are most prone to appeals to sovereignty, governance failure, and openness.

Zambia

As opposed to Nigeria, Zambia's opposition framed the story of DTD within a live economic crisis. During the Patriotic Front government, Zambia experienced mounting pressure from debt, including default risk and payment backlogs. Opposition leaders like Dr. Musokotwane, who was then in the UPND, explicitly blamed Chinese loans for the crisis. The government was said to have mortgaged national assets like ZESCO in exchange for unsustainable credits.

This narrative took a more direct and crisis-driven tone, leaning heavily on real events to weave a story of betrayal. As put by Fisher (1987), effective stories must demonstrate both logical and moral coherence. Zambian opposition leaders achieved this by tracing economic suffering to specific loan agreements and suggesting parallels with the Hambantota Port case in Sri Lanka. DeBoom (2020) also notes that borrowing elites often use such analogies to give their critiques greater legitimacy and urgency.

A second theme in Zambia discusses elite patronage and misallocation of resources. The opposition claimed that the PF government was preoccupied with prestigious infrastructure projects, such as airports, roads, and stadiums, at the cost of essential services, such as health and rural development. The critique not only spoke to the high debt levels but also to their uneven distribution. This refrain spoke to popular anxieties regarding inequality and general marginalization.

This aligns with Carmody and Taylor's (2010) “flexigemony” concept, in which governments cherry-pick foreign partners for political survival, and opposition parties use such involvement to depict them as being complicit in elite enrichment. The narrative coherence lies in its ability to link debt to moral failure, while fidelity is achieved through resonance with popular resentments over unequal access to development benefits.

The Zambian opposition also moved in concert with politically evocative moments. During debates in parliament or addresses to the nation, they openly challenged the silence of the PF government on debt issues. The opposition connected with rural voters, civil servants, and working-class individuals, groups that were

already experiencing the direct effects of economic recession. Unlike Nigeria, whose story risked being speculative, Zambia's was grounded in experiential truths and thus grew more urgent and credible.

Fisher's paradigm is helpful again; Zambian opposition stories achieve fidelity through suffering in real-time and coherence through careful reference to policy failures. The performative strategy of opposition parties assisted the UPND in gaining legitimacy, ultimately leading to their electoral success in 2021.

4.2.1 Converging Strategies Vs. Diverging Contexts

Nigeria and Zambia illustrate how opposition political parties construct strategic narratives around Chinese loans, with varying framing and timing contingent on context. There are sovereignty, elite failure, and transparency narratives in both countries that serve to delegitimize incumbent governments. This reinforces Miskimmon et al.'s (2013) argument that strategic narratives are central in framing political results and reshaping public arguments.

Yet whereas the Nigerian story is anticipatory and symbolic, that of Zambia is reactive and crisis-oriented. Nigeria's opposition threatens what may be if borrowing is not curbed; Zambia's opposition refers to what is already occurring. Narratives are thus informed by the intensity and form of narrative through the urgency of the debt issue and the presence of observable events upon which to build.

In each country, the political narratives are framed to appeal to specific constituencies. Nigerian opposition elites engage younger, urban, professional voters

through the media and public rallies. In Zambia, in contrast, the message is more institutional and community-oriented, based on parliamentary debate and regional outreach initiatives. These variations are indicative of deeper differences in political culture, institutional involvement, and opposition strategy.

The findings support Jones and Hameiri's (2020) contention that a narrative like DTD is not significant universally, but only within particular local contexts. The success of the debt trap narrative lies not in its general truthfulness but in its potential for local modification. Political opposition parties transform this narrative into a political tool by embedding it in schemas that are meaningful to domestic audiences, timed strategically for political gain, and directed at reformulating power relations.

The table below shows the convergence and divergence in both cases in a comparative manner.

Table 4.1: Summary of Comparative Analysis Similarities and Differences

<i>Category</i>	<i>Nigeria</i>	<i>Zambia</i>	<i>Similarities</i>	<i>Differences</i>
<i>Narrative Orientation</i>	Symbolic and anticipatory focuses on future risks	Empirical and crisis-driven focuses on present consequences	Both narratives serve to delegitimize incumbents and frame Chinese loans as threats	Nigeria warns about potential loss; Zambia emphasizes ongoing losses
<i>Narrative Framing Themes</i>	Sovereignty, corruption, elite irresponsibility	Sovereignty, corruption, elite irresponsibility	Common themes in both contexts	Framing in Nigeria is preventative, while in Zambia it is retrospective
<i>Trigger For Narrative Deployment</i>	Mainly election seasons, fiscal debates, or future planning	Triggered by economic hardship, infrastructure	Both respond to politically sensitive moments	Nigeria: Proactive messaging; Zambia: Reactive messaging

		seizure fears, and public backlash		
<i>Target Audience</i>	Urban youth, middle class, professionals, active voters	Rural communities, economically affected populations, working class	Both target vulnerable or politically significant groups	Audiences differ by demographic and socio-economic profile
<i>Communication Channels</i>	Media, press conferences, rallies, online platforms	Parliamentary debates, community outreach, radio, and institutional hearings	Both use public political discourse	Nigeria is more media-driven, and Zambia is more institutional and localized.
<i>Tone And Rhetoric</i>	Uses symbolism and emotive language (selling national sovereignty)	Uses factual examples (“ZESCO may be seized,” “Chinese control of mines”)	Both rely on emotionally charged rhetoric	Nigeria: more thematic and abstract; Zambia: more concrete and issue-specific
<i>Strategic Narrative Design</i>	Based on fear of dependency and future harm	Based on visible consequences and crisis escalation	Both design narratives are to maximize political gain and appeal to public values	Nigeria: Preventive storytelling; Zambia: Blame and accountability storytelling
<i>Political Culture Influence</i>	Competitive, media-savvy, and campaign-centric opposition	Institutionally grounded, parliament-focused opposition	Both reflect the political culture of their respective countries	Nigeria's opposition: more populist and press-based; Zambia's: more formal, using state channels
<i>Timing Strategy</i>	Deployed during campaign cycles and policy discussions	Deployed during debt crises, IMF negotiations, or controversial Chinese project revelations	Both use strategic timing to maximize visibility and public anger	Nigeria: Cyclical timing (elections); Zambia: Crisis-responsive timing
<i>Theoretical Implication</i>	Shows narrative flexibility in political persuasion	Shows narrative localization for political leverage	Both confirm Miskimmon et al. (2013) and Jones & Hameiri (2020): narratives are contextual	Nigeria: illustrates an anticipatory strategic narrative; Zambia: illustrates a reactive strategic narrative.

4.3 Implications

This study has significant implications for the political and domestic framing of foreign economic stories, like the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD). Instead of establishing the empirical truthfulness of DTD, the study demonstrates how opposition elites in Zambia and Nigeria strategically employ this narrative to contest incumbent legitimacy. Employing Fisher's narrative paradigm, the analysis demonstrates how such narratives acquire political relevance from internal coherence as well as moral positioning.

The key argument is that Chinese loan narratives serve less as objective examinations of foreign policy and more as rhetorical tools. These allow the domestic elites to cast themselves as guardians of national sovereignty, budget discipline, and public interest. International economic relations, therefore, need to be explained not just in terms of global imbalances but also in terms of locally produced and politically mobilized narratives.

In addition, the study finds that political stories are highly contingent, developed for specific audiences (e.g., youth, professionals, rural voters) and released at politically exposed times such as elections or financial crises. This reveals the interactive dynamic between global finance and national political timing, and it lays bare stories as tools of elite competition.

These results compel scholars and policymakers to take more serious notice of the narrational aspects of development financing. Under circumstances of contested legitimacy and high-stakes electoral contestation, the political sustainability of Chinese

or, for that matter, foreign-funded projects can depend as much on local rhetorical framing as on the terms of economics itself.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

This research thoroughly examined how opposition political parties in Nigeria and Zambia use the Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) rhetoric. The goal was to understand how global economic discussions are reinterpreted and applied in local political contexts. Guided by Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, the study went beyond simple content analysis of opposition rhetoric to explore how narratives are intentionally crafted, contextually adapted, and aimed at achieving specific political goals.

In analyzing the initial research question of how opposition parties frame and use the DTD narrative, the evidence shows that opposition parties in Nigeria and Zambia intentionally depict Chinese development financing not just as neutral or positive economic cooperation, but as a sign of the incumbent party's failure, elite misconduct, and the undermining of national sovereignty. The way this story is told is guided by prevailing local political and economic realities. In Nigeria, the opposition presents a cautionary yet future-oriented story about the perceived loss of sovereignty by the current government. In Zambia, the opposition frames the story around the urgency of an escalating debt crisis, offering a more immediate, crisis-focused narrative. These differences highlight the importance of local context in shaping the coherence and effectiveness of political narratives, which is a key part of Fisher's theoretical model.

To the second research question regarding the target publics of the narratives, it is clear from the research that opposition parties do not communicate messages to all people uniformly. Rather, they practice strategic segmentation of audiences and craft narratives in a way that appeals to particular social groups. In Zambia, significant attention is given to socio-economically disadvantaged segments of the population, disproportionately affected by public debt and ineffective service delivery. In Nigeria, by contrast, messages are framed to appeal particularly to urban elites and youth, and often distill matters of national pride, economic mismanagement, corruption, and demands for transparency. The strategic targeting indicates the opposition's recognition of the electoral and symbolic influence these groups possess. The strategy is in line with the principle of narrative fidelity in Fisher's theory, which states that to be effective, narratives must be similar to the values and common experiences of their target public.

The third research question, when and how these narratives are deployed, finds that opposition parties use timing as a strategic dimension of narrative influence. The DTD narrative is intensified during election seasons, economic uncertainties, policy changes such as the withdrawal of subsidies, and when loan agreements are being debated in parliament. Such moments of heightened political attention present fertile grounds for oppositional narratives to gain traction, shape public opinion, and possibly reconfigure political allegiance. Political strategic timing is an indication of a mature sense of the moments at which stories are most likely to be listened to, accepted, and enacted.

The research makes some important contributions collectively. Firstly, it defies the prevailing analytical emphasis on China's intentions in the debt trap narrative by refocusing on the agency of the political elite in African nations. It reveals not only that Chinese loans are economic instruments but also discursive instruments employed for domestic political gain. Secondly, by applying the narrative paradigm in a field of African opposition politics, the study demonstrates the central role of narrative in the building of political meaning, the struggle for legitimacy, and political support mobilization. Ultimately, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views global economic narratives as dynamic, context-dependent, and deeply entwined with the exercise of power involved in local political struggles. In conclusion, this research highlights the contention that stories, particularly those related to foreign debt, are inherently politicized. They are designed, managed, and performed with strategic intent, founded on both international dialogue as well as local necessity. This story-making is important for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who must meaningfully interact with the intersections of development finance, political discourse, and democratic contestation in Africa.

Overall, this study concludes that Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy as a political narrative seems to be more successful in Zambia compared to Nigeria. In the Zambian situation, the opposition party United Party for National Development (UPND) effectively utilized the DTD narrative to enhance public discontent with the increasing debt, economic suffering, and foreign asset takeover fears. By matching the narrative to real economic complaints such as increasing debt stocks, inflation, and strategic asset

giveaways like ZESCO the UPND managed to portray the Patriotic Front (PF) government as financially irresponsible and engaged in compromising national sovereignty. This resonated well with economically hard-pressed groups, particularly rural and poor urban dwellers, to the extent of ensuring UPND won the 2021 general elections.

Conversely, the narrative did not have identical political effects in Nigeria, where opposition parties such as the PDP and ADP also tried to counter the ruling APC government by calling upon the DTD discourse. Yet their utilization of the narrative was mostly symbolic and anticipatory, cautioning against future dangers instead of being founded on instant, pervasive economic crises or apparent effects of Chinese lending. The rhetorical appeals of the opposition in Nigeria were frequently aimed at urban professionals, youth, and civil society actors, constituencies that are vocal but divided. Further, Nigeria's wider and more diversified economy, relative to Zambia's narrower fiscal base, might have weakened the impact of the DTD narrative. In the absence of an evident crisis moment or collective opposition voice, the narrative could not galvanize mass political transformation or shift the balance of power within the electoral cycle.

These results confirm the importance of context in the success of political narratives, supporting both DeBoom's emphasis on domestic agency in multiscalar narrative development and Fisher's point about adapting stories to local values and daily realities. In cases like Zambia, where economic hardship is severe and discourses are closely linked to public experience and moral judgment, the DTD narrative gains

political influence. On the other hand, in Nigeria, where these conditions are less pronounced or only partially present, the narrative fails to persuade despite rhetorical skill. This comparison underscores the crucial role of audience connection, narrative timing, and socio-economic context in determining how well global discourses resonate within local political environments.

5.2 Limitation

While this study makes a valuable contribution towards appreciating the strategic exploitation of the Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTD) narrative by opposition parties in Nigeria and Zambia, it is not without shortcomings. To begin with, the analysis is limited to two cases. While these cases were selected for their political significance and history of Chinese loan exposure, they may not capture the diversity of Africa's politics. As a result, the conclusions drawn from the study are not suitable for generalization across all borrower countries on the continent. Secondly, the scope of the study primarily relies on political speeches and media coverage, which are complemented by archival records of parliamentary sessions. Such sources omit some unofficial power plays and behind-the-scenes factors that would largely shape consideration narratives. Third, the study is restricted to works published in English because of accessibility issues and restrictions in the research area; thus, it overlooks local languages and grassroots, politically motivated communication. Lastly, while the study utilizes discourse analysis to examine elite narratives in action, it does not investigate what segments of the population have accepted or how these narratives impact voting behaviors, which future studies can examine through surveys and

audience analysis. Despite these shortcomings, the thesis offers a foundational insight into how political actors manipulate global economic narratives within local struggles for authority and legitimacy.

5.3 Recommendations

This study offers some key recommendations to ruling governments, policymakers, opposition parties, and future researchers. First, ruling parties in borrowing countries ought to ensure more transparency and accountability in their foreign lending agreements, especially with China. They must prioritize open dialogue, parliamentary oversight, and the involvement of the people in the negotiation process of foreign finance contracts. Without transparency and accountability, opposition parties can easily exploit the situation for political gain, and the public may lose trust in the loan process, even if the loan has real economic benefits.

Second, opposition parties need to be urged to take an active and constructive role in the debate on development finance. Though criticism is a healthy aspect of democratic accountability, the reduction of sophisticated financial mechanisms into narrative caricature can stand in the way of public understanding and misshape national policy debate. Party politics should not stand in the way of evidence-based argument and the national interest.

Third, Chinese financial and diplomatic institutions must recognize that their operations in Africa are situated within the nation's internal political processes. In order to reverse reputation risks, China must adopt more transparent lending practices, foster cooperative public relations with host governments, and promote community

involvement in financed projects. Such measures could minimize the exposure of Chinese investment to being manipulated politically.

Finally, future academic and policy research needs to examine more closely the internalization of such global scripts and their deployment as political tools in electoral politics. An extension of this comparative study to other foreign policy and political narrative dynamics in other high-debt-involvement African nations could shed more light on evolving patterns between foreign policy, political narratives, and domestic legitimacy. In short, Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy in Africa is an over-the-top-than-usual geopolitical tale; a hybrid, homegrown one propelled to a significant degree by political competition. The critical examination of how competing political forces use it as a strategic resource is valuable for an analysis of the intersection between global development lending and performative aspects of democratic governance in the Global South.

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