

# **XENOPHOBIA AND THE CHANGING PATTERN OF SINO-NIGERIA RELATION: THE WAY FORWARD**

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## **Abstract**

*The strategic advantage of Africa in the global economy because of abundance of natural resources has made it the bride of international community. Contenders such as China with huge investment capital and development advantage are more than before attracted to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular because of its advantages. However, interactions with China in recent time have become a subject of contestation as regards the treatment of Africans and Nigerians such as racist and xenophobic attack which is on the increase across the world. Given the foregoing, this paper examines the plight of Nigerians in within the global community as recorded in China in recent times and situates this event within the plans and programmes of development partnership available in Nigerian's relation with China. The research work relied solely on secondary and historical source of data collection. An in-depth analysis of existing material was also carried out and were analysed quantitatively. Findings revealed that Sino-Africa and Sino-Nigeria relations are undergoing a redefinition with noticeable development and cooperation outcomes in critical infrastructure, security trade and investment. These outcomes are however threatened when considered within the light of unwholesome treatment melted on Africans and Nigerians within and outside by Chinese national contrary to international law and conventions. It recommends amongst other things that; the Nigerian government through the instrumentality of its economic advantage reaffirm a collective action that will clearly spell out the basis of their cooperation and engagement with Chinese government and their many businesses outlets that are often found abusing the fundamental rights and dignity of citizens.*

**Keywords:** Sino-Africa, Racism, Maltreatment, Diplomacy, Reciprocity

## **Introduction**

The dawn of the new millennium has ushered in Africa a redefined partnership, cooperation and engagement with the outside world and new comers from emerging economics of Japan, Malaysia, India and China. The strategic place of the continent which is adjudged to be home to

abundance of mineral resources from iron ore to crude oil in commercial quantity have endeared states in Africa to development partners with robust bilateral relations. Despite this advantage, Africa and Africans are ranked as the home of unimaginable poverty and all forms of inhuman treatment.

The plight and condition of Africans across countries of the world and from fellow Africans as seen in South Africa in recent times with regards to racist and xenophobic attacks have raised fundamental question on the place of human right and dignity of human person and basically within the provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) 1947, International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and other international conventions that specifies protection of human against racist and inhuman treatment wherever they may reside.

Specifically the UDHR in its Article two states that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty”.

The above position has however become more important in contemporary times given the multidimensional interactions between states, continents, Multinational Cooperation’s, Multilateral Universal and Regional Organisations and relational posture of the contemporary international system driven by the forces of globalization and the inherent nature of man which drive abuse and discrimination against fellow humans on the grounds of perceived inferiority or superiority complex.

The African Union estimates that the African diaspora is about 112.6 million people in South America (primarily Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela); 39.2 million people in North America (United States, Mexico, and Canada); and 13.5 million people in the Caribbean (Obiageli, 2007). In 2012, the African Diaspora was at 38 million people in the United States (12 % of the total American population) (World Factbook, 2012). Now, it’s over 46 million (World Factbook, 2018). Canada has a smaller African diaspora in 2010, it was around 800,000 people or 2.7 % of the population (Statistics Canada, 2010); by 2016, 13.4% of recent immigrants were born in Africa (Statistics Canada, 2016).

With Nigerians resident across the world and the availability of abundance natural resources, the scramble for functional engagement with the continent as a whole cannot be overemphasised. According to Ogwu (2007), the new dynamics of the world’s relations with African countries is more than ever driven by the pursuit of its enormous natural resources which has also informed most emerging economies in Asia such as Malaysia, Korea, India, Japan and Chinese increasing engagement and presence with the continent

The dawn of the new millennium significantly raised a new high and improvement in China's relations with the countries of Africa and specifically in the discourse of state to continent relations and engagement as seen in Sino-Africa relations. On a large scale, the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 which defines the comprehensive relations, cooperation and engagement between the continent of Africa and the People's Republic of China was largely understood as Chinese strategy aimed at improving its relevance and presence in the world politics.

Despite the above, Sino-Nigeria relation especially within the light of the progress made, has been criticised from the standpoint of China's agenda towards Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, given increasing funding, trading, investment, aid and all forms of cooperation with the continent. Specifically, Sanusi (2013), Utomi (2008), viewed Chinese presence in Africa as an agenda that is aimed at furthering neo-colonialist tendencies; these views according to Ubi (2014) are referred to as Sinoskeptics.

Corroborating the above conflicting contentions, Osita (2010, p.5) avers that "... while the old scramble focused upon the acquisition and demarcation of territory, the new scramble is not interested in redefining national borders but rather in defining access to the continent's natural resources. These include oil, diamonds, timber, gold uranium, ivory, natural gas and host of other resources across the countries in the continent".

Within the forgoing position, Nigerians across the world are daily becoming victim of inhuman treatment from their host communities against international laws and conventions on the one hand and on the other, the increasing spate and reoccurrence of racist and xenophobic attacks against Africa nationals in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and specifically China whose economic interest with African countries are visible across all sectors of human life.

Basically, recurring challenges of the contemporary international system are racism and xenophobic attacks against blacks across the world with grave consequence on diplomatic relations between nations particularly developed and developing. Therefore, the fundamental concern of this paper is to raise core issues as regards the changing pattern of Sino-Nigeria relations which is currently under attack. Interrogate racist abuses and xenophobic attacks on Nigerians particularly outside the continent and within this position x-ray the recent actions of Chinese nationals against Nigerians with reference to these recent attacks. Place same within the light of Sino-Africa and Sino-Nigeria relations and the danger this and many others portends for the gains of development made thus far in the Nigeria-China relations and the projected implications for the relations. Also, questions relating to Africa's capacity for reciprocity and corresponding diplomatic responses will be interrogated within existing light of the continents drive for Chinese investment, infrastructural, trade and aid assistance in the coming years of its relationship.

## **Racist and Xenophobic Attacks on Africans: A Historical Analysis**

The global economy and the process of relations between people and nations have negatively affected Africans in their individual and collective capacity when viewed from an historical standpoint of the contact of the continent with western powers and colonial masters. The horrible experience of slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, pillage and exploitation of the continent by their erstwhile colonial lords in connivance with the local institution are fundamental experience in Africa's existence and history. However, with the attainment of political independence of respective African countries starting from the 1950s, Africa was projected to within this new development drive the much needed and desired development of the continent and by implication propel the satisfaction of its citizens, but situations in most countries of the continent still points to gross inequality, absence of basic health facility, poor educational institutions, high youth unemployment, ravaging diseases, poverty, bad leadership, ground corruption and above all over reliance on foreign aid and guided donations from its exploiting partners, (Edun & Otumala, 2020) .

The above stated positions have forced Africans in their large numbers estimated at about 43% to live outside the shores of their countries of birth (Obiageli, 2007). Also, the remaining migrant across the world for event such as slave trade and birth has become resident across countries of the world with horrible experiences such as, religious discriminations, sexual abuses, modernized slavery, racist and xenophobic attacks have raised fundamental questions on the plight of Africans in Diaspora especially within the light of past and present experiences especially from countries with established relations and agreement with countries in Africa and against international codified agreement such as the UDHR.

The legacy of the over 400 years of Atlantic slave trade which led to the kidnapped of millions of Africans from their respective countries and transported through the sea to North America and the Caribbean's for slave on cotton, sugar and tobacco plantations owned by Europeans was the foundation of abuse of right and dignity of Africans. The societies from which they were exported like commodities as a result of this action became centres of poverty and underdevelopment, because the most productive section of the societies that were taken and subjected to long and harmful journey through the Atlantic Ocean. This event left Africans in severe and unimaginable position in the global economy and still accounts for their experiences with the people and places they found themselves today (Nwoke, 2010).

This negative experience and the consequence of dislocation through slavery of the continent with the outside world have greatly incapacitated the continent and it is largely responsible for all forms of inhuman treatment melted on its citizens today. Specifically, Rodney cited in Nwoke (2010:p.67) notes that "...it was this thoroughly dispossessed, paralyzed and traumatized continent and people that was forcibly incorporated into the international capitalist economy from the 1850 on the basis of extreme inequality. Therefore, all forms of racial abuses, stigmatization and attacks against the African people weather those in Diaspora, temporary

resident or migrants across the world are consequence of their historical antecedences which view Africans as inferior when compared to their European or Asian counterparts.

Recent research has shown how people comments with characteristics of right-wing populism and supremacism of ethnically when engaging persons of different colour and race. Han Chinese, xenophobia and racism have increased in Chinese cyberspace in the past decade, with little public criticism. After reports in early April that a Nigerian corona virus patient had attacked and bitten the face of a Chinese nurse in a bid to escape quarantine, Chinese social media platform Weibo erupted with xenophobic and racist sentiment. Many Chinese believe that foreigners have been given extra benefits, leading to concerns about unfairness and inequality. In late February, when the government published draft regulations to ease conditions for foreigners to get permanent residency in China, it was met with strong opposition online amid rising nationalist sentiment. Africans in Guangzhou were frequently mentioned by Chinese internet users as an example of why foreigners should not be welcomed in the country (*The Conversation, 2020*).

### **Analysis of Sino-Africa Relation**

Sino-Africa relation covers the holistic developmental and trade cooperation between China and Africa. The establishment of FOCAC in 2000 has improved the role of China in development discourse across Africa and Nigeria in particular. According to Alli (2010), Sino-Africa relations are not a particularly new development because after the victory of the communist revolution of 1949, the Chinese begin an intensive cultivation and engagement with the African continent. The move further deepened the intensification of the national liberation struggle on the African continent. This support for the various struggles in Africa coincided with the anti-imperialist ideologies of the PRC and its desire to promote its own brand of socialist/communist and Maoist agenda as opposed to the soviet Marxist/Leninist brand.

Sino-Africa or China-Africa relation is the relationship that exists between the African Continent and the Peoples Republic of China. It is the agreement and cooperation that is meant to foster a comprehensive developmental agreement between the continent through the instrumentality of the African Union and China. It contains the agenda that enables Africa pursue multilateral engagement with China. China-Africa relations got off to a slow start after the first Asia-Africa Conference, the Bandung Conference, in 1955, as Beijing attempted to assert its leadership over the Third World and the nonaligned movement (Alden, Large and Soares, 2008).

Specifically, China is the number two oil consumer from African countries after the United States of America and accounts for above 40% of the growth of world energy demand for oil in the last years. China obtain about 25% of their domestic energy needs from Africa, mostly from Sudan, Chad, Angola, Libya, Gabon, Algeria and Nigeria. This need is already on the rise by above 9% in the past years and will be on the increase astronomically as the Chinese economy continues to grow. The expansion of its economy necessitated the search for new market for the product of the very productive Chinese manufacturing sector. And also important there was need for

increased access to needed raw materials from minerals to oil and gas and even timber and agricultural products from Africa which has greatly impact the earning and financial exchange between China and African states (Alli, 2010).

Over the past two decades, China and Africa have become inextricably entwined. China has built roads and railways across Africa and is the biggest trading partner for the entire continent. Eighty percent of Nigeria's bilateral debt is owed to China. About 60 percent of foreign direct investments to Ethiopia came from China in 2019. China has repeatedly stressed the importance of China-Africa alliances based on "mutual prosperity." Yet these partnerships face irrevocable disruption if the Chinese government continues to downplay deeply rooted racial prejudices and dismisses the international outrage concerning the treatment of African migrant workers and students in China, 2020).

Before, the 2006 Beijing summit, China was becoming the continent of Africa's largest investment partner, overtaking the continents traditional investment partners of Britain and USA. Almost 900 Chinese companies were present in the continent and also increasing with interest in construction, factories and agriculture, retail shops and drilling of oil. The head of China's Export import Bank (Exaimbank), Li Ruogu had speculated that six months after the summit, the bank would commit about \$20 billion over in the coming years to finance Chinese export and business in Africa (Agwu, 2013).

According to Large (2007), over the decades, Chinese engagement with Africa has gone through distinct phases, starting from the phase and periods of intense activities to periods of relative neglect. After the inauguration of PRC in October, 1949, the communist regime moved to restore China's historical international position through an increasing involvement with African countries which have effect on China's own internal political and economic posture. Chinese engagement with Africa was developed under the "three worlds' policy, ostensibly acting as the non-aligned 'champion' of the developing world". This was the first instance of China using Africa as a terrain for ideological competition.

However, the realities of the moment negate the above position where events that encroach on the fundamental rights of Africans, through racist and xenophobic attacks on the people which have become a recurring event that violates international accepted codes and conventions ratified by nations in the international system and specifically the UNHDR of 1947. These actions of Chinese nationals against Africans are a deviation from its stated friendliness with the continent as a whole and respective African country.

In the discourse of the place of fact and fiction in growing Sino-Africa relations, Agwu (2013, p.435-6) notes that "in-between the mix of fact and fiction, what is often ignored is the objective fact that whereas the Chinese intention in Africa are not completely altruistic, they are also, on the other hand, not completely exploitative. In order words China and Africa have equal responsibilities in the pains and gains of their relations. Africa has offered a welcoming hand that

has secured China the raw materials essential for its industrial development, but China on the other hand, has brought investments to African countries, most of which are even resources rich especially countries such as Zambia and Mauritius (Agwu, 2013).

The issues in Sino-Africa relations was documented in Zambia's relation with Chinese workers in the country, where the Chinese complain about the government's rigid control over expatriate staff, high transportation cost and poor infrastructure, discrimination, complication in labour relations process, incessant strike by the work force and poor local industries, that were not helpful to investors, workers and the political class accuse the Chinese of safety standard, poor remuneration and the fact that aid and investment from China are Trojan horses, such that, the Chinese employed doctors from their home country and end establish restaurants in town and flooding the country with human beings as against expected investment (Agwu, 2013).

According to Mukanga (2012), China's growing ties with corrupt government inevitably undermine ordinary Africans striving to build a proud African continent. For Zambia, it's first hand experience with Chinese human right abuses and flouting of labour laws by their companies which were documented by Human Right Watch. When employees at Collum Coal Mine were shot by their supervisors, the government, the country's President Rupiah Banda quickly step in to ensure that they should not be prosecuted. Such crimes against the state and the people had become a private deal amongst rich and interested individuals.

The growing presence of Chinese nationals in Nigeria also has its antecedent consequences such that Nigerians are often used by Chinese nationals as cheap labour on construction sites with poor wages when compared to their Chinese counterparts which are saddled with the same task. These Chinese nationals' records show that, they are prisoners who are products of prison emptying when filled to capacity and sent to Africa where they are pressed into service on infrastructure projects undertaken by state-run companies, (Agwu, 2013).

### **Abuse of Africans in China: Impediment to Sino-Africa Relation**

In recent times Africans in China and those working with Chinese companies have become subject of human right, racism and Xenophobic attacks. Africans residing and working with Chinese national have been subjected to treatments that contradicts established bases of friendship, cooperation and bilateral and multilateral agreements for development as available first in international conventions and more importantly in the growing fortunes of Sino-Africa relations which has been described as major deviation of what is contained in Washington Consensus to a more development centred South-South Cooperation.

Importantly, the outbreak of Corona virus (Covid-19) in Wuhan city of China has negatively affected the international political and economic structure. Nations of the world have greatly questioned Chinese handling of the disease and this situation has raised fundamental questions on Chinese diplomacy and world power equation. Within this situation, the negative

treatment against African across the country specifically, from Nigeria, Mali, Kenya and Ghana has come to reinforce human right abuses which negate international rules of peaceful co-existence. Recently, videos were released of racist abuse and xenophobic attack against Africans in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province in southern China, closely linked to Hong Kong and Macau, and has the largest African community in Asia.

The discriminatory act started within the fear of the outbreak of the second wave of Covid-19 and thought of the fear of importation of corona virus cases and a second wave of the pandemic in China, the local government implemented surveillance and mandatory testing and an additional 14-day quarantine for all African nationals in the city, regardless of whether they tested positive for COVID-19. These measures paid no regard to whether people had recently travelled out of China, or how they would be mistreated by landlords, hotel managers and shopkeepers (*The Conversation, 2020*).

According to Shaban (2020), the 38-second video has since gone viral on the social media platform. It shows Chinese officials masked and with temperature guns blocking a black woman from entering a mall. The video originally posted on TikTok by a user @claudi405 had a series of caption amongst which were “This is the treatment black people get in China now, they were not allowed to get inside of the shopping mall.” the video feeds into the recent outrage in southern China’s Guangzhou where Africans were reportedly forcibly evicted and in some cases quarantined and tested for COVID-19.

As the blacks are stopped from entering a white shopper walks past the security, another white shopper tries to intervene but fails. “Chinese government says black people are not welcome, because they the cause of the corona virus,” another caption read. This discriminatory attitude from a country that pride itself as the second highest investor in the continent of Africa portend great danger first for Sino-Africa relations and the perception of the public of Chinese government in dealing with the continent and its people.

The implication of these abuses against Nigerians in China has brought to question the cordial relation in areas of interest between China and Africa under FOCAC. Given China’s ambitious involvement and cooperation with African countries, the recurring incidence of xenophobic attacks and racist abuse negates the essence of the Forum.

### **Capacity for Corresponding Diplomatic Response**

The fact that the continent of Africa is desirous of development and the satisfaction of its citizens is not in doubt. Given the various efforts of the leaders of the continent in establishing various developmental agreements with nations of the world that have the capacity to drive the continent’s development need has been rightly documented in existing literatures. However, these drives for attracting development and investment partners have not come without a cost to the existence and capacity of the continent to confront the overt and covert intentions of these development partners.

From the first contact via trade to the eventual partition of the continent amongst Europe big powers and interested parties at the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, the recent neo-colonial and imperialist tendencies pursued under the instrumentality of multilateral agencies sponsored by European capitalist system, the new scramble for Africa and its natural resources which was aptly document by Osita and Anigbo (2010) given the new actions and efforts of China and other countries of the Asian extraction, and most recently the human right abuses, racist and xenophobic attacks against Africans by their supposed developmental partners has left much to be desired of the continent.

The basic question that resonates across literature and in the minds of concerned observe and fundamentally, this study is what is the capacity of the continent to collectively withstand the growing onslaught against its citizens in Diaspora and what is the capacity of the individual state at addressing this challenges and still strategically drive its established multilateral and bilateral engagement and within this framework attract the development benefits that these countries especially China present given its vast and growing presence in the continent and between respective states.

According to Nick Bindell in Agwu (2013), many African states are too weak to stand up for, or even define their national interest and consequently lack the capacity to confront the challenges posed by the actions and inactions its partners especially the Chinese government given the vast array of investment and presence of the country in the continents developments process and most importantly when situated in the supposed construction of the African Union secretariat by the Chinese government to the continent free-of-charge.

It is important to note that the cities, and the government in Beijing, are now facing a full-blown diplomatic crisis and Public Relations disaster amid accusations of racism especially against African Nationals. In responding to the increasing attacks and abuse of Africans, a group of African ambassadors in Beijing wrote a letter of complaint to the Chinese government about the “stigmatisation and discrimination” being faced by Africans. Other African diplomats, facing domestic pressure, have held discussions with representatives from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Many African countries will be particularly disappointed given how much their diplomats have spoken up for China on the international stage. African governments have supported China on issues including its membership of the UN in the 1970s, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang.

One major response to this attack came from Kenya where the government has taken a decisive action against Chinese representative in the country. In Kenya, the hashtag #DeportRacistChinese was trending on Twitter in mid April after Kenyan internet users saw reports of Kenyans and other Africans being treated unfairly. Moses Kuria, an MP from Kenya’s ruling party, even advocated Chinese people in Kenya should go back to China with immediate effect.

The action also drew global condemnation; when Japan historically a target of Chinese nationalism and racist attacks announced a \$2.2 billion fund to help companies and business operating in China relocate production to Japan. In response, Larry Kudlow, a top economic adviser to President Donald Trump, suggested that the United States follow suit and “pay the moving costs of American companies from China back to the U.S.” (Wang & Qin, 2020).

Sino-African engagement keeps developing; racial relations have emerged to concern people on both sides. The recent Chinese cyber discussions on Africans have shown a blatant racialism against Africans. Given this, Africa Union through its leaders have unanimously questioned Beijing and its citizens plan in Africa. Opposition voices in the southern Africa region and across the continent have written to South African president Cyril Ramaphosa who doubles as Chairperson of the AU to call for an investigation into mistreatment of Africans in China. “As Africans we are appalled by the reports of poor treatment of African nationals who are residing in China. We call for all Africans to be treated with dignity and as equal to all other residents of China,” the statement signed by five regional opposition leaders stated (Shaban, 2020).

Separately, an unusually open critique of Beijing, the speaker of Nigeria’s House of Representatives tweeted a video of himself pressing the Chinese ambassador on the issue. “It’s almost undiplomatic the way I’m talking, but it’s because I’m upset about what’s going on,” Femi Gbajabiamila says. “We take it very seriously,” Ambassador Zhou Pingjian replies. Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama said he summoned the ambassador to express “extreme concern” and call for an immediate government response. The scoldings continued Saturday as African nations that have openly praised China’s development model or assertive investment in the continent in recent years made it clear that racist treatment of their citizens wouldn’t be tolerated.

Ghana summoned the Chinese ambassador as Foreign Minister Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey condemned the “inhumane” treatment, a statement said. The chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, said he summoned the Chinese ambassador to the AU, Liu Yuxi, to express “our extreme concern.” Kenya also has spoken out. A foreign ministry statement noted “unfair responses against foreigners, particularly of African origin,” from some locals in Guangzhou, especially landlords. The statement said the Chinese embassy in Nairobi has told Kenya’s foreign ministry that authorities in Guangzhou “have been tasked to take immediate action to safeguard the legitimate rights of the Africans concerned.”

In specific terms, the Nigeria government which has numerous areas of cooperation with the Chinese government through the Ministry of foreign affairs denounced Chinese xenophobia attacks against Africans and particularly Nigeria. In the same vein, the Nigerian business community in China warned of the impending implications of these inhuman treatments against Nigerians in China. The implication is that, trade and investment relations would be affected when human rights are subject of abuse.

Nigeria's capacity to respond to all forms of attack against its citizens in Diaspora is fundamentally questioned because of the limited economic capability of the country in terms of its ability to deploy the rich human and mineral resources deposited in the country. Its dependence on development patterns and Western donors has exposed the country and its citizens to attacks without adequate capacity for reciprocity.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The study focused on issues involving Sino-Africa relations and the current wave of racist and xenophobic attacks against Africans resident in China amidst the ravaging Covid-19 pandemic and the danger this action portends for the gains recorded thus far in the many areas of cooperation and engagement between China and Africa across respective states. It is clearly stated within existing body of literature and in this paper that the African people and the black race particularly are victims of human right abuse which negates existing international protocols on dignity and right of persons across the world irrespective of colour and gender.

Consequently, the study proffers the following recommendations on the lingering issues of racist and xenophobic attacks on Africans in China and the improvement of Sino-Africa relations:

- African leaders should collectively explore the framework of AU, respective sub-regional framework and in individual national capacity through purposeful collaboration drive an all-inclusive development that will enhance economic growth and by implication satisfy their citizens which will discourage the mass exodus of Africans to other countries where they become victims of racist and xenophobic attacks.
- The availability of abundant natural and human resources in the continent should be tapped in order to actualize the much desired development of the continent. Nation's areas of strength and advantage should be explored and by implication place the continent in good position in the event of negotiating multilateral and individual bilateral agreements with nations of the world.
- The global capitalist economy has placed Africa and its states at a disadvantage position, therefore, to overcome the challenges caused by this situation, the continent should maximize its potential as investment destination of all countries of the world to develop a framework that is peculiar to its internal dynamics and by this, intending investors will respects its citizens wherever they are found.
- Finally, conditions that will favour citizens right and dignity of human person should inform the basis of negotiating any agreement with any investment partner especially China and countries known for recurring abuse of Africans and the black race in general and this should also involve stringent conditions especially given the fact that Africa is the bride of every investment conscious nation across the world.

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