

# CHINA'S SOFT POWER AND STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY IN NIGERIA: A NEO-IMPERIAL PERSPECTIVE.

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## Abstract

China's expanding engagement in Nigeria represents a critical dimension of its broader global strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Beijing presents its relationship with Abuja as a mutually beneficial "win-win" partnership, growing evidence suggests that Chinese soft power and strategic diplomacy are producing asymmetric outcomes. This study interrogates China's deployment of soft power instruments, such as Confucius Institutes, media collaborations, educational scholarships, and infrastructure diplomacy, and examines how these tools reinforce China's geopolitical and economic interests in Nigeria. Anchored in the neo-imperial theoretical framework, the paper analyses how economic statecraft, cultural diplomacy, and elite-driven bilateral agreements collectively generate new forms of dependency reminiscent of historical imperial patterns. Using qualitative, document-based methods and secondary data from scholarly works, official reports, and media analyses, the study reveals that while China's presence contributes to infrastructural and cultural development, it also undermines Nigeria's policy autonomy and fosters structural dependency. The paper concludes that Nigeria's engagement with China, if not guided by transparency, diversification, and reciprocity, risks entrenching a modern form of neo-imperial subordination under the guise of South-South cooperation.

**Keywords:** China, Nigeria, Soft Power, Strategic Diplomacy, Neo-Imperialism

## Introduction

China's growing involvement in Africa has significantly reshaped global economic and diplomatic relations in the twenty-first century. Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy and most populous country, occupies a central position in this engagement. Over the past two decades, China has expanded its presence in Nigeria beyond traditional trade relations to include large-scale infrastructure financing, concessional loans, cultural exchange programmes, educational cooperation, and media partnerships. These initiatives are often framed within the broader context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and are presented by Beijing as a model of South-South cooperation built on mutual benefit and non-interference. However, beneath this narrative lies a complex mix of strategic and economic interests that suggest deeper forms of influence and dependence (Alden, 2017).

Despite this official framing, emerging scholarly debates raise important concerns about the underlying dynamics of China-Nigeria relations. While some scholars argue that China's engagement provides critical development opportunities and viable alternatives to Western conditional aid, others contend that it reproduces asymmetric relationships characterized by dependency, limited local capacity development, and growing external influence. Existing studies have extensively examined China's economic role in Nigeria, particularly in infrastructure development and trade expansion, such as the financing of major railway projects and energy infrastructure supported by Chinese institutions

(Ovigwe, 2021). Similarly, research on China's cultural and educational engagement highlights the role of Confucius Institutes, scholarship programmes, and media collaborations in projecting a favourable image of China and strengthening bilateral ties (Zhao, 2018).

However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the integrated analysis of China's soft power and strategic diplomacy as interconnected instruments of influence, and how these collectively shape Nigeria's policy autonomy and development trajectory. Most existing studies treat economic diplomacy and cultural engagement as separate domains, thereby overlooking the broader strategic coherence of China's approach. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of whether China's engagement represents a mutually beneficial partnership or a more complex structure of influence consistent with emerging forms of neo-imperialism.

It is against this backdrop that this study interrogates the nature and implications of China's soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria from a neo-imperial perspective. The central problem addressed in this paper is whether China's expanding engagement in Nigeria represents a genuinely reciprocal partnership or a subtle form of neo-imperial influence that reinforces structural dependency through economic, cultural, and political mechanisms. While China's activities have contributed to visible developmental gains, including improvements in infrastructure and human capacity, the extent to which these engagements may constrain Nigeria's long-term autonomy and policy independence remains insufficiently examined (Onuoha, 2021).

The aim of this study is to critically examine China's use of soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria and to assess whether these instruments reflect emerging neo-imperial tendencies. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

- i. To analyze the key components of China's soft power in Nigeria, including cultural, educational, and media initiatives.
- ii. To examine the role of strategic diplomacy in shaping China–Nigeria economic and political relations, particularly through infrastructure financing and bilateral agreements.
- iii. To evaluate the extent to which these engagements produce asymmetrical outcomes and structural dependency.
- iv. To situate China's activities within the broader framework of neo-imperialism and contemporary global power relations.

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- i. How does China deploy soft power instruments to influence Nigeria's socio-political and economic environment?
- ii. In what ways does China's strategic diplomacy shape bilateral relations and development outcomes in Nigeria?

- iii. To what extent do these engagements reflect neo-imperial patterns of dependency and influence as conceptualized within neo-imperial theory?
- iv. What are the implications of China's involvement for Nigeria's policy autonomy and long-term development?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to multiple areas of scholarship. Within the field of International Relations, the study advances understanding of how emerging powers such as China utilize non-coercive instruments of influence, building on the foundational insights of Joseph Nye while extending the concept to the Global South context. In African Studies, the research provides a nuanced analysis of China–Africa relations by focusing on Nigeria as a critical case, thereby enriching debates on external partnerships, development strategies, and post-colonial state autonomy. Furthermore, in the broader development discourse, the study interrogates the implications of foreign-funded infrastructure, educational exchange, and cultural diplomacy for sustainable development and institutional capacity-building in developing economies.

Importantly, this study also contributes to ongoing debates between scholars who view China's role in Africa as a form of mutually beneficial cooperation and those who interpret it as a reconfiguration of imperial relations. For instance, scholars such as Deborah Brautigam (2009) emphasize the developmental benefits and agency of African states, while critics like Ian Taylor (2016) highlight the risks of dependency and unequal power relations. By integrating soft power, strategic diplomacy, and neo-imperial theory into a unified analytical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping China–Nigeria relations.

Owing to the above, this study provides a critical and holistic examination of China's engagement in Nigeria, moving beyond conventional economic analyses to explore the deeper political, cultural, and strategic dimensions of influence in contemporary international relations.

### Conceptual Clarifications

A clear understanding of the major concepts in this study, China's Soft Power, Strategic Diplomacy, and Neo-Imperialism, is essential for situating the analysis within its proper theoretical and empirical framework.

### China's Soft Power

The term *soft power* was originally developed by Joseph Nye to describe the ability of a country to shape the preferences and behaviour of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). It rests on culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative. In the Chinese context, soft power refers to the deliberate efforts by Beijing to project a favourable image and build influence through non-coercive means such as cultural diplomacy, education, media, and development assistance (Zhao, 2018). China's soft power strategy in Nigeria is visible through the establishment of Confucius Institutes, exchange programmes, scholarships, and positive media narratives that promote Chinese culture and developmental experience.

These initiatives are designed to enhance China's attractiveness, create goodwill, and cultivate a perception of partnership and mutual progress.

### **Strategic Diplomacy**

*Strategic diplomacy* refers to the coordinated and purposeful use of diplomatic, economic, and cultural tools by a state to advance its long-term national interests. It combines traditional diplomacy with pragmatic statecraft, aligning aid, investment, and foreign policy objectives in ways that reinforce a country's global position (Alden, 2017). For China, strategic diplomacy in Nigeria operates through bilateral agreements, concessional loans, infrastructure development, and high-level political visits. It integrates economic cooperation with political influence, creating a form of diplomacy that prioritizes state interests under the guise of development assistance. This approach allows China to secure access to Nigeria's market and natural resources while deepening its geopolitical reach in West Africa.

### **Neo-Imperialism**

*Neo-imperialism* is a modern form of dominance in which powerful states or global actors maintain control over weaker nations through indirect economic, political, and cultural mechanisms rather than direct colonial rule (Harvey, 2003). It is sustained by unequal trade relations, debt dependency, and the global spread of dominant ideologies that serve the interests of major powers. In the context of China–Nigeria relations, neo-imperialism captures the subtle dynamics of control achieved through debt, tied aid, and the export of Chinese institutions and norms. Although China officially rejects comparisons to Western colonialism, its economic and cultural penetration in Africa often mirrors classical imperial patterns; where influence is exerted without formal conquest (Onuoha, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the Neo-Imperialism Theory to explain China's growing influence in Nigeria through soft power and strategic diplomacy. At its core, the theory suggests that modern forms of imperialism no longer depend on direct political control or colonization. Instead, influence is exercised more subtly through economic relationships, political engagement, and cultural interactions. Powerful countries are able to shape the policies and development paths of weaker states through tools such as loans, trade agreements, development assistance, and cultural exchange (Harvey, 2003; Alden, 2017).

### **Understanding Neo-Imperialism**

The idea of neo-imperialism is closely linked to the works of early post-colonial thinkers, especially Kwame Nkrumah, who argued that political independence in Africa did not necessarily mean true economic or political freedom. According to him, many newly independent states remained tied to external powers in ways that limited their autonomy (Nkrumah, 1965). In a similar vein, Walter Rodney explained that Africa's continued underdevelopment is rooted in long-standing global inequalities, where developing countries depend heavily on external actors for capital, technology, and markets (Rodney, 1972).

Building on these earlier insights, David Harvey views neo-imperialism as part of the broader workings of global capitalism. He argues that powerful states extend their influence through financial systems, trade networks, and institutional arrangements rather than through direct control (Harvey, 2003; Taylor, 2016). What emerges from these perspectives is a common understanding: influence in today's world is often indirect, but no less powerful.

In simple terms, neo-imperialism rests on a few key ideas. First, developing countries often depend on stronger economies for investment and technology. Second, global economic relationships tend to favor already powerful states. Third, control is usually indirect, exercised through policies, agreements, and institutions. Finally, culture and ideas also play a role, as dominant countries shape how others think about development, governance, and progress (Alden, 2017; Zhao, 2018).

### **Applying the Theory to China–Nigeria Relations**

When this framework is applied to China–Nigeria relations, it becomes clearer how China's presence is experienced across Nigeria's economy, politics, and society in interconnected ways that combine development benefits with subtle forms of influence.

China's involvement in Nigeria's infrastructure, including railways, power projects, and ports, has contributed significantly to visible improvements in development. These projects have helped address long-standing infrastructural gaps and improve economic activity. However, many of them are financed through loans tied to Chinese companies and technical expertise. As a result, while Nigeria benefits from improved infrastructure, it also becomes dependent on China for financing, execution, and maintenance (Onuoha, 2021; Ovigwe, 2021). This reflects a key neo-imperial dynamic in which development assistance can simultaneously generate long-term structural dependence (Harvey, 2003; Alden, 2017).

In addition, trade relations between both countries remain uneven. Nigeria mainly exports raw materials while importing finished goods from China. This pattern limits industrial development and reinforces a cycle of dependency that has long been highlighted in neo-imperial and dependency scholarship (Rodney, 1972; Taylor, 2016).

China's diplomatic engagement also plays an important role in strengthening bilateral relations. Through high-level visits, bilateral agreements, and policy cooperation frameworks, both countries have deepened their political ties. Although these engagements are mutually beneficial on the surface, they also give China subtle influence over Nigeria's policy environment and external orientation. This influence is not direct or coercive, but it is reflected in how cooperation frameworks shape decision-making and alignments in international relations (Onuoha, 2021; Alden, 2017).

Similarly, China's cultural and educational outreach further extends its influence. Through Confucius Institutes, scholarships, exchange programmes, and media partnerships, China promotes its language, culture, and development model within Nigeria. These initiatives help strengthen goodwill and foster closer people-to-people relations. At the same time, they shape how Nigerian students, professionals, and

policymakers perceive China's governance and development approach. Over time, this exposure can influence attitudes and policy preferences in ways that align with China's broader strategic interests (Zhao, 2018; Li, 2019).

### **Neo-Imperialism or Genuine Partnership?**

While the neo-imperialism framework offers useful insights, it is important not to view China–Nigeria relations from a purely one-sided perspective. Some scholars argue that China's engagement represents a different model of international cooperation.

For instance, Deborah Brautigam maintains that China's role in Africa should not be seen as imperialistic, but rather as a form of South–South cooperation. According to this view, China provides funding and support without imposing strict political conditions, allowing countries like Nigeria more flexibility in pursuing their development goals (Brautigam, 2020).

On the other hand, critics such as Ian Taylor argue that despite this positive narrative, the structure of these relationships often mirrors older patterns of dependency. Issues such as rising debt, trade imbalance, and limited local industrial growth suggest that the relationship may not be as equal as it appears (Taylor, 2016; Onuoha, 2021).

This study takes a balanced but critical stance. It recognizes that China's engagement has brought real benefits to Nigeria, especially in infrastructure and capacity-building. However, it also argues that the relationship is not entirely symmetrical. The patterns of dependence, influence, and imbalance observed across different sectors point to elements of neo-imperialism, even if they are not overt.

### **Relevance of the Framework to the Study**

Using neo-imperialism as a framework allows this study to go beyond surface-level descriptions of cooperation and examine the deeper power dynamics at play. It helps to explain how soft power and strategic diplomacy can function not just as tools of partnership, but also as instruments of influence that shape a country's development path and policy choices (Alden, 2017; Onuoha, 2021).

In this sense, China's engagement in Nigeria can best be understood as a hybrid relationship; one that combines elements of cooperation and dependency. It offers opportunities for development, but also raises important questions about long-term autonomy and sustainability. Neo-imperialism, therefore, provides a useful lens for capturing these complexities while still allowing room for alternative interpretations (Taylor, 2016; Brautigam, 2020).

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, supported by descriptive and analytical approaches, to examine China's soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria from a neo-imperial perspective. The choice of a qualitative method is deliberate, as the study

focuses on understanding how influence, power, and diplomacy are experienced, interpreted, and expressed, rather than measuring them in numerical terms. Concepts such as soft power and strategic diplomacy are embedded in narratives, perceptions, and policy behaviours, which are best captured through qualitative inquiry.

A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for studying international relations because it allows for a deeper exploration of complex political and economic relationships. In the context of China–Nigeria relations, the focus is not only on agreements and investments, but also on how these engagements are perceived, framed, and interpreted by different actors. This makes qualitative methods appropriate for capturing the subtle and indirect ways in which influence operates in global politics.

The study is based entirely on secondary data drawn from a wide range of credible and relevant sources. These include academic journal articles, books, government policy documents, bilateral agreements, official statements from Nigerian and Chinese institutions, reports from international organizations such as the African Union and the World Bank, as well as reputable media and policy analyses. The selection of these materials was guided by relevance, credibility, and currency, ensuring that only sources directly related to China’s economic, political, and cultural engagement in Nigeria were included. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic works and official institutional publications to enhance reliability, while recent studies were emphasized to reflect current developments in China–Nigeria relations.

The data were analyzed using content analysis and elements of discourse analysis. Content analysis involved a systematic reading of the materials to identify recurring themes and patterns, such as economic dependence, cultural influence, infrastructure diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and asymmetrical relations. Discourse analysis was used to examine the language and narratives embedded in official documents, policy statements, and media reports, particularly how China’s role is framed through concepts such as “win–win cooperation” and “mutual development.” This dual approach allows the study to capture both the practical dimensions of China’s engagement and the ideological narratives that surround it.

To ensure credibility, the study employed triangulation by comparing information across academic literature, official documents, and media sources. This helped to reduce bias and strengthen the reliability of the findings. However, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data alone, as it does not include primary data such as interviews or field observations that could provide direct insights from stakeholders. Despite this limitation, the diversity and depth of the sources used provide a strong basis for meaningful analysis.

Finally, the methodology offers a clear and systematic qualitative framework for examining China’s soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria. By combining carefully selected secondary sources with structured analytical techniques, the study is able to move beyond surface-level descriptions and engage more deeply with the meanings, narratives, and power relations that define China–Nigeria relations in the contemporary global political economy.

## **Research Findings**

The study reveals that China’s soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria operate across multiple dimensions, economic, cultural, educational, media, and humanitarian, creating both opportunities and subtle dependencies. The findings highlight the ways in which China’s interventions have transformed Nigeria’s development landscape, while also pointing to structural asymmetries that align with neo-imperial dynamics.

**Economic Influence and Infrastructure Diplomacy**

China’s economic engagement in Nigeria is primarily through infrastructure investments, which include major railways, roads, ports, and energy projects. The Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan railways, financed by Chinese loans and constructed by Chinese firms, are often cited as landmark projects that have improved connectivity, trade, and regional integration. These projects have contributed to Nigeria’s economic growth, creating jobs, facilitating commerce, and providing essential transport infrastructure that was previously lacking.

While these projects are beneficial, the study finds that financial dependence on China is a growing concern. Most infrastructure projects are tied to loans with repayment terms that favor China, and local involvement is limited in many cases. Technology transfer and skills development are not always prioritized, meaning that Nigeria remains reliant on Chinese technical expertise for the operation and maintenance of these projects. This dependency gives China indirect leverage over Nigeria’s development priorities and policy decisions (Onuoha, 2021).

Furthermore, China’s economic diplomacy extends beyond infrastructure into trade and investment. Bilateral trade between China and Nigeria has grown substantially, with China emerging as Nigeria’s largest trading partner. While this trade fosters economic opportunities, it is often imbalanced, with Nigeria primarily exporting raw materials and importing manufactured goods from China. This pattern reinforces the structural dependency that neo-imperialism theory describes, where the weaker partner remains reliant on the stronger partner for value-added goods and technical support.

The findings can be summarized in Table 1, which highlights major Chinese-financed projects in Nigeria, their value, and key observations on dependency and local engagement:

Project Name	Sector	Investment Value (USD)	Local Participation	Observations on Dependence
Abuja–Kaduna Railway	Transport	1.5 billion	Limited	High dependency on Chinese contractors
Lagos–Ibadan Railway	Transport	1.8 billion	Limited	Technology transfer minimal
Lekki Deep Sea Port	Maritime	1.2 billion	Moderate	Financial leverage favors China

Project Name	Sector	Investment Value (USD)	Local Participation	Observations on Dependence
Hydropower Plant (Zungeru)	Energy	1.0 billion	Limited	Operational reliance on Chinese expertise

*Source: Onuoha, F. C. (2021). Sino–Nigerian relations and the debt diplomacy debate. African Journal of International Affairs, 26(1), 67–85.*

### Cultural Diplomacy and Ideational Influence

China's cultural diplomacy in Nigeria focuses on building long-term relationships and positive perceptions through the promotion of Chinese language, arts, and values. Confucius Institutes at the University of Lagos, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and other institutions serve as platforms for cultural exchange, offering courses in Mandarin, Chinese calligraphy, history, and arts. These initiatives introduce students, faculty, and the broader society to Chinese culture, fostering familiarity and goodwill.

The research finds that cultural diplomacy has subtle ideological effects. Nigerian students, academics, and policymakers who engage with Chinese culture often develop positive attitudes toward China's governance and development approach. Over time, this can shape elite perceptions of economic management, planning, and state-led development, which may influence policy orientation in Nigeria. The study notes that cultural diplomacy complements economic and educational initiatives, reinforcing China's soft power through a combination of attraction and persuasion (Zhao, 2018).

Cultural initiatives are often accompanied by high-profile cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions sponsored by Chinese embassies or corporations. These events create visibility and reinforce the perception of China as a friendly, reliable, and capable partner. The public exposure also strengthens people-to-people relations, which is an essential aspect of long-term influence, as it fosters trust and reduces skepticism about Chinese involvement in Nigeria.

Moreover, the integration of culture with other instruments, such as education and media, creates reinforced channels of influence. Cultural diplomacy does not operate in isolation; rather, it interacts with scholarship programs, professional training, and media narratives to build a multi-layered image of China as a partner committed to Nigeria's growth. This integrated approach demonstrates strategic planning, highlighting China's ability to combine attraction with long-term influence.

### Educational Exchanges and Capacity-Building

Educational diplomacy is another key avenue of China's influence, primarily through scholarships, research collaborations, and technical training. Nigerian students and professionals are offered opportunities to study in China in areas such as governance, engineering, technology, and management. These programs provide valuable skills and

exposure to Chinese developmental experience, enabling participants to bring back knowledge applicable to Nigeria's economic and institutional challenges.

The study finds that these educational initiatives also create networks of influence. Graduates who return to Nigeria often maintain connections with Chinese institutions, which shapes professional perspectives and decision-making processes in ways favorable to China. This soft power instrument works quietly but effectively, creating long-term influence within key sectors of Nigeria's economy and governance structures (Zhao, 2018).

Scholarship programs are often complemented by training workshops, internships, and exchange visits, allowing participants to experience Chinese culture, language, and governance methods firsthand. These immersive experiences strengthen personal and professional ties, ensuring that China's influence extends beyond immediate educational benefits to long-term ideological and professional alignment.

Additionally, the research highlights a gender and regional dimension in educational programs. Scholarship recipients often come from diverse regions and backgrounds, ensuring broad exposure to Chinese norms and values. This inclusivity enhances China's image as an accessible and supportive partner, which contributes to the diffusion of soft power across multiple strata of Nigerian society.

*Table 2: Summary of Chinese Educational Programmes in Nigeria*

Program Type	Number of Participants	Duration	Sector Focus	Observed Impact
Full Scholarships	500+	1–4 years	Governance, Tech	Skills transfer and professional networks
Short-term Training	200+	3–12 months	Management, Policy	Exposure to Chinese development models
Research Collaboration	50+	6–12 months	STEM & Social Sci	Joint research outputs and knowledge sharing

*Source: Zhao, S. (2018). A neo-imperialist power? China's soft power in Africa. Journal of Contemporary China, 27(111), 675–688.*

### Media and Communication Strategy

China's media engagement in Nigeria is a deliberate tool of perception management and influence. Media outlets like CGTN Africa, Xinhua, and other Chinese-sponsored platforms collaborate with Nigerian news agencies to highlight positive aspects of Chinese investment, diplomatic visits, and cooperation initiatives. This coverage emphasizes China's role as a reliable development partner while downplaying criticisms of debt, labor practices, or environmental impacts.

The findings show that Chinese media initiatives are strategically targeted. They often focus on infrastructure success stories, trade achievements, and humanitarian contributions, providing content that resonates with both policymakers and the general public. This approach enhances China's credibility and creates a narrative of partnership, portraying China as a benevolent actor rather than a self-interested external power (Li, 2019).

Media engagement also reinforces other soft power tools. For instance, coverage of Confucius Institutes, scholarship programs, or health initiatives amplifies their visibility and impact. By integrating media into broader soft power strategies, China strengthens its presence in Nigeria not only economically and culturally but also ideologically.

Finally, the research highlights that media influence extends beyond information dissemination. By shaping public discourse and framing China as a partner in development, media engagement creates favorable conditions for policy alignment, subtly influencing Nigeria's domestic and foreign policy decisions in ways that advance Chinese interests without direct coercion.

### **Health and Humanitarian Diplomacy**

China has increasingly used humanitarian assistance and health diplomacy as a strategic tool to build goodwill and strengthen influence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China supplied Nigeria with vaccines, personal protective equipment, and technical support for health management.

These initiatives enhanced China's reputation as a reliable and caring partner, creating a sense of solidarity that extends beyond economic and cultural ties. Such interventions are visible and immediate, generating positive public perception and trust in China's presence in Nigeria (Olayinka, 2021).

Health diplomacy also intersects with other strategic tools. By highlighting cooperation in times of crisis, China positions itself as a comprehensive partner capable of supporting Nigeria's development across multiple sectors. This reinforces the perception of China as a credible actor and complements investments in infrastructure, education, and culture.

Finally, humanitarian efforts serve a long-term strategic purpose. Beyond immediate assistance, they establish channels for influence in health policy, governance, and international collaboration, further embedding China's presence in Nigeria's institutional framework and consolidating asymmetrical relations.

### **Emergence of Lopsided Dependence**

A consistent pattern across all dimensions is the creation of asymmetrical dependence. While Nigeria benefits from infrastructure, education, cultural exposure, and humanitarian support, the terms of engagement often favor China. Loans are tied to Chinese contractors, educational programs align with Chinese governance approaches, and media narratives reinforce positive perceptions of Beijing.

This asymmetry reflects neo-imperial characteristics, where influence is achieved not through coercion or colonization but through economic leverage, cultural affinity, and ideological persuasion. Nigeria gains material and institutional benefits, but its long-term policy autonomy and development priorities are subtly influenced by China's presence.

The study demonstrates that China's influence is multidimensional, combining soft power and strategic diplomacy into a cohesive approach. The interplay of infrastructure, culture, education, media, and health initiatives ensures that China maintains both visibility and leverage in Nigeria, shaping development outcomes while safeguarding its long-term strategic interests.

*Suggested Table 3: Summary of China's Influence and Dependency in Nigeria*

Dimension	Key Instruments	Benefits to Nigeria	Observed Dependence / Leverage
Economic	Infrastructure, loans, trade	Improved infrastructure, trade	Debt dependence, reliance on Chinese contractors
Cultural	Confucius Institutes, festivals	Cultural exchange, goodwill	Ideological alignment, influence on elites
Educational	Scholarships, training programs	Skills development, networks	Alignment with Chinese development models
Media	CGTN Africa, Xinhua coverage	Positive narratives, public awareness	Policy framing, perception management
Health Humanitarian	/ Vaccines, medical aid	Public health support, trust	Moral influence, strategic leverage

*Sources: Onuoha, 2021; Zhao, 2018; Li, 2019; Olayinka, 2021.*

## Discussion of Findings

The study shows that China's presence in Nigeria goes beyond traditional diplomacy. It operates across multiple areas, economics, culture, education, media, and health, creating opportunities for Nigeria's growth while also introducing subtle forms of dependence. China's involvement has visibly shaped the country's development landscape, but it has also highlighted a certain imbalance in the relationship, suggesting elements of neo-imperial influence.

Economically, China has invested heavily in infrastructure, building key projects like the Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan railways, the Lekki Deep Sea Port, and the Zungeru Hydropower Plant. These initiatives have improved connectivity, boosted trade, and created jobs, all of which are positive for Nigeria. However, the study finds that most of these projects rely heavily on Chinese loans and expertise, with limited participation from local contractors. Technology transfer and skills development are often minimal, leaving

Nigeria dependent on Chinese knowledge and technical support. Trade patterns also reflect this imbalance, with Nigeria exporting mostly raw materials while importing manufactured goods from China. In essence, while Nigeria gains, it does so under terms that favor China, subtly shaping its development choices.

China's cultural and educational initiatives add another layer to its influence. Confucius Institutes, cultural events, and scholarships introduce Nigerians to Chinese language, arts, and governance values. Many students and professionals who engage with these programs return home with new skills, networks, and perspectives that often align with Chinese models of development. Over time, this creates a generation of Nigerians who are more familiar with, and sometimes sympathetic to, China's approach to governance and economic management. It is a quiet form of influence that works through attraction and relationships rather than coercion.

Media and humanitarian efforts further reinforce China's presence. Platforms like CGTN Africa and Xinhua highlight positive stories about China's investments, partnerships, and aid, shaping public perception in a favorable light. Humanitarian initiatives, such as vaccine donations during the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthen trust and goodwill, showing China as a caring and reliable partner. Together, these efforts ensure that China is not only seen as a source of funding or expertise but as a supportive partner in Nigeria's development journey.

Across all these areas, a clear pattern emerges: Nigeria benefits from Chinese engagement, yet the relationship is asymmetrical. Loans, technical control, and ideological influence all tilt the balance toward China. While Nigeria gains infrastructure, skills, and international connections, its long-term policy autonomy and development priorities are subtly influenced. This interplay of benefits and dependence captures the essence of contemporary soft power, showing how influence can be exerted through cooperation and attraction rather than overt dominance. In sum, China's approach combines generosity with strategy, shaping Nigeria's development path while safeguarding its own long-term interests

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

This study examined China's soft power and strategic diplomacy in Nigeria through a neo-imperial lens, focusing on how economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, media narratives, and humanitarian assistance interact to shape bilateral relations. The findings show that China's presence in Nigeria has generated tangible developmental gains, particularly in infrastructure development such as railways, ports, and energy projects, as well as in education, skills acquisition, cultural exchange, and public health support. These contributions have helped address critical development gaps in Nigeria and strengthened bilateral cooperation.

However, the study also reveals that these benefits are accompanied by a persistent structural imbalance in the relationship. China's engagement is characterized by significant financial leverage, control over technical expertise, and strong influence over how development narratives are framed and communicated. This asymmetry manifests in Nigeria's growing dependence on Chinese loans, contractors, and technology, as well as

in the diffusion of cultural and ideological influence through education and media platforms. In this sense, China–Nigeria relations reflect key features of neo-imperial dynamics, where influence is exercised not through direct coercion but through attraction, partnership, and structural dependence embedded within cooperation frameworks.

Despite these imbalances, China’s engagement has undeniably shaped Nigeria’s development trajectory and expanded its access to infrastructure financing and global partnerships. The relationship therefore presents a dual reality: it is both developmental and strategically asymmetrical. This underscores the need for Nigeria to engage more deliberately and strategically in order to maximize benefits while minimizing long-term vulnerabilities. Within the broader global political economy, this case reflects the evolving nature of international power relations, where emerging powers like China increasingly shape development outcomes in the Global South through economic statecraft and soft power rather than traditional colonial mechanisms.

In light of these findings, several policy directions are recommended. First, Nigeria should strengthen local participation in all China-funded infrastructure and development projects. Increasing the involvement of Nigerian engineers, contractors, and technical experts, alongside structured technology transfer agreements, will reduce overdependence on foreign expertise and promote sustainable domestic capacity-building. This will ensure that infrastructure development also contributes to long-term industrial and technological advancement within the country.

Second, Nigeria should pursue a more diversified foreign partnership strategy. While engagement with China remains important, overreliance on a single partner increases vulnerability. Expanding economic, technological, and educational cooperation with multiple global actors will enhance Nigeria’s bargaining power, reduce dependency risks, and create a more balanced external relations framework.

Third, institutional strengthening is essential. Nigeria needs clearer and more transparent frameworks for evaluating foreign loans, monitoring project implementation, and ensuring accountability in bilateral agreements. Stronger regulatory oversight will help ensure that external partnerships align with national development priorities and long-term economic sustainability.

Fourth, educational and cultural exchanges should be strategically harnessed for national development. While collaboration with China in education and training is beneficial, Nigeria should ensure that returning scholars and trainees are effectively integrated into local systems where their skills can contribute to innovation, governance reform, and industrial growth. At the same time, Nigeria should actively promote its own cultural identity and intellectual contributions in international spaces to balance external cultural influence and strengthen its global presence.

Finally, there is a need for continuous monitoring and public engagement in Nigeria’s foreign partnerships. Government institutions, civil society, and the media should play active roles in assessing the developmental impact of Chinese-funded projects, loans, and programs. Greater transparency and public awareness will enhance accountability and ensure that foreign engagements remain aligned with the country’s national interest.

In conclusion, while China's soft power and strategic diplomacy have contributed significantly to Nigeria's development, the relationship must be carefully managed to avoid long-term dependency. A more balanced, transparent, and strategically diversified engagement framework will enable Nigeria to benefit from global partnerships while safeguarding its sovereignty, strengthening its development capacity, and improving its position within the global political economy.

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