

## **The Challenges of Africa's Coronavirus Pandemic and China's Soft Power Dynamics: An Overview**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines Chinese soft power dynamics in Africa with respect to how the continent approached the challenges posed by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It should be stressed that China's soft power politics stems from its ability to champion globalization and economic integration from Asia to the rest of the world. China has used its soft power elements such as culture, ideology, legitimacy and ability to attract others to project its power on the African continent and this came to play during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for this research work were obtained through critical case sampling and the content analysis style was used for the interpretation of data in the study. Certain factors such as diplomacy, aid, medical assistance, international relations and status were selected for the study. This study adopts Todd Hall's theory of institutional power, reputation power and presentational power to underscore the relevance of China's soft power intervention in Africa. Hall ascertains that certain States use their power to influence and advance state interests while pushing for public diplomacy and information control. Therefore, this work argues that China's intervention in Africa's COVID-19 pandemic effort was a way to enhance Sino Africa relationship while exhibiting and improving its international image and status. It concludes on the note that China's positive attraction and agenda for Africa has a lot of benefits and consequences which will affect Africa's foreign policy and approach in the nearest future.*

**Keywords:** *soft power, diplomacy, aid, pandemic, China, Africa*

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## Introduction

Sino-African relations have been a contentious issue since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Osiki, 2017). It is an effervescent, two-way vigorous engagement in which both sides modify their policy initiatives due to popular perceptions emanating from each other and the international community. China is both a long-established diplomatic partner and investor in Africa. Chinese trade has been a major source of economic rejuvenation for most economies in Africa (Banwo, 2021). Sino-African relationship has a historical trend and over the years, we have witnessed the exchange of ideologies, philosophies, expertise, skills, education and cultural support from these diplomatic ties (Banwo, 2022). China is a major aid donor, but the scope, scale, and mode of Chinese aid practices are poorly understood and often misquoted in the press. Most analyses of Chinese engagement with African nations focus on what China gets out of these partnerships which is primarily natural resources and export markets. On the other hand, some studies have described the impact, positive and negative, that China's aid and investment policies have had on African countries. However, sinologists have approached Sino-African relation from a pulsating approach in which both players act in a dynamic manner in adjusting to perceptions that emanate from the public and initiatives that are ignited through its national policies. Similarly, many scholarly works have failed to understand that both China and Africa have a lot to gain from their engagements and interactions (Rotberg, 2009).

It should be stressed that Chinese aid and investment in Africa are not new, but scholars of international relations have questioned the rationale behind China's investment in Africa. Why are the Chinese in Africa? And most especially why do the Chinese provide conditional and unconditional aid and assistance to African countries? Undeniably, China has four overarching strategic interests in Africa. Firstly, it wants access to natural resources, particularly oil and gas (Osiki, 2020). It is estimated that, by 2040, China will import more oil worldwide than the United States (Osiki, 2020). To guarantee future supply, China is heavily investing in the oil sectors in countries such as Sudan, Angola, and Nigeria. Secondly,

investments in Africa are a huge market for Chinese exported goods and it might facilitate China's efforts to restructure its own economy away from labor-intensive industries, especially as labor costs in China increase. Thirdly and most importantly, China wants political legitimacy in Africa and in the international arena. The Chinese government believes that strengthening Sino-African relations helps raise China's own international influence. Most African governments express support for Beijing's "One China" policy, a prerequisite for attracting Chinese aid and investment. Finally, China has sought a more constructive role as a contributor to stability in the region, partly to mitigate security related threats to China's economic interests (Brautigam, 2011).

With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping around the globe, Africa became a victim to this pneumonia disease and as such it recorded its first case in Egypt. Most African countries have a crippled health care system with inadequate medical resources and incapacitated health workers who lack thorough training. Thus, Africa was in a precarious state and China who seeks political legitimacy and international recognition was able to respond to the teething challenges of most African States. Likewise, the Chinese sees themselves as a superior race and unique race who intends to influence other races positively (Banwo, 2019).

While this might be one reason for China's rapid response to the chronic healthcare problems of Africa, scholars have posited that China's economy is knitted together and closely intertwined and as such trade or finance shocks from Africa can have rippling effects on China and the rest of the world (Osiki, 2013). China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been dubbed "mask diplomacy and COVID-19 diplomacy" across the globe. Despite these assertions, one can say that China has contributed humanitarian aid to many African countries to support their ailing healthcare institutions. This study therefore attempts to fill the gap in knowledge by showing that soft power has both negative and positive implications on state actors. Hence, it finds a meeting point between the notion of soft power and bilateral relationship. The aim of this study is to identify Chinese soft power approach and strategies during the COVID-19

pandemic in Africa and discuss the implications for these states. This study examines the notion of soft power, bilateral relations between China and Africa and Chinese mode of engagements with Africa.

### Literature Review

This research work is located within the precinct of soft power diplomacy. Soft power itself was derived from the works of great scholars such as Joseph Nye Jr., Hans Morgenthau, Klaus Knorr and Ray Cline in the nineteenth century. Nye formulated and coined it in his book: *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990). He developed the concept further in: *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye (2009: 160) was one of the scholars who engaged critics who tried to undermine US power during the Cold War era. He was of the opinion that they were unable to deal with the changes of US power through the new international system. In his view, they focused solely on what he defined as “hard power,” (e.g. economic and military capabilities) and thus not recognizing the second characteristics of US power (e.g. its soft power). He contended that whereas power resources can be effective in the military and economic sphere, only soft power can work at the transnational level. He then argued that soft power is based on three resources:

1. Culture in places where it is attractive to others
2. Political values, where it lives up to them at home and abroad, and
3. The legitimacy and moral authorities disseminated through foreign policies.

He measures their capability to the extent as they are able to attract or repel other actors to “want what you want.” Thus, he defined soft power as the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing

agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes.

The concept of soft power as a co-optive means to obtain preferred outcomes comes from the notion of power itself. Power, according to Hans Morgenthau (1966: 61) who was one of the major representatives of the realist school, was seen as when a person has control over other people's ideas and actions. The liberalists see power as the ability of an actor to get things the other cannot do under normal circumstances or to have control over the results (Keohane and Nye, 1989). In this regard, power has the same effect either in the west or the east; nevertheless, some scholars viewed the notion of soft power as a Western coined phrase. Maria Wey-shen Siow (2010: 1) defines soft power as a Western concept that has only found acceptance within Chinese policy making circles and Chinese analysts agree with Nye's definition of soft power. However, Chinese scholars modified Nye's conceptualization of soft power; they opined that the Chinese soft power definition should add economic development, diplomatic cooperation and investment agreements that were formerly excluded from Nye's definition (Heng, 2010). It is based on this conviction that Stephan Chan (2013: 154) describes soft power in form of a soft appeal as seen in the case of China. It aims to strengthen and reinforce a moral argument and the right moral standing in the relationship between states. Youling Liu (2011: 22) identifies soft power as a significant and effective factor that drives a country towards achieving its national goals. He identifies culture, ideology and diplomacy as common examples of soft power while he categorizes specific goals that could be historical, economic, political and social. Likewise, Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin (2008: 28) both defined soft power as an international appeal and its external and internal mobilization capabilities. They identified cultural allure, as well as the ability to establish international rules, mobilize domestic elite, and mobilize the domestic grassroots, as the most important quantifiable indicators for measuring soft power. Lastly, Youling (2011: 22) depicts education, the psychological and physical conditions of the people, technological advancement, superiority of national culture, human

resources and strategy, social cohesion and unity, and the sustainability of socio-economic development as the basic features of soft power.

One inherent fact from the above literature is that both Western and Eastern scholars have agreed that the concept of soft power is the ability to affect and influence others through different institutions of the state to achieve the desired outcome of the actor. It is a way to mobilize state resources to impact other nations in the international arena.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work adopts the theories of Todd Hall (2010: 149) in conceptualizing the notion of soft power as propagated by Nye Jr (2009: 160) and some other scholars. Hall was of the opinion that it is difficult to associate just the idea of attraction as the primary mechanism behind the effects to soft power. To him, Nye Jr notion of soft power as seen in the culture, political ideas and policies with necessity can produce an attraction that will help a country in the pursuit of its foreign policy. Hall asserts that the implications of culture is vague and whether political ideas are bound to be attractive to those they are supposed to influence is an amorphous term in culture. Hall then proposed theories that discuss soft power outside these contexts. To him, they should be seen in institutional power, reputational power and representational power. Hall sees institutional power as the options available to state actors according to their membership and relative position within specific international organizations which enable those states to exercise influence within them. Barnett and Duvall (2005: 39) also contributed to the literature on institutional power; they see it as per-constituted actors exercising control over others indirectly through institutions.

Likewise, Hall sees reputational power as portraying an economically successful action. For instance, it might give a State more of a say in the creation of development models. Being known as a neutral broker could qualify a State to intercede as arbitrator in a conflict. A reputation for

giving aid might dispel suspicions that a State has exploitative intentions. He added that reputations develop in complex ways and may not be simply a reflection of past behavior of international actors. Nevertheless, the images others have of a State, influence the importance they attach to its statements, the manner in which they interpret its actions and the predictions they make about future behavior. Reputational power, therefore highlights the manner in which particular reputations provide States with issue-specific forms of influence. Furthermore, he sees representational power as the abilities of States to frame issues in a more limited and concrete fashion or advance their own interpretations, and consciously seek to shape the beliefs of others. Propaganda, public diplomacy and the control of information remains some of the tools and sources of representational power (Hall, 2010). Janice Bially Mattern (2005: 602) posits that representational force is aimed at the victims' subjectivity rather than physicality and is communicated not in reference to material capabilities but through the way the author structures her narrative.

These theories are applicable to understanding Chinese soft power approach in Africa because it will enlighten us of how China is indirectly using institutions and power to assert its authority in Africa. Halls reputation and representative power is applicable to this research. It shows that China is using its aid in Africa to build its reputation power as an economically successful nation to the global community. Likewise, its constant propaganda of aiding and assisting Africa fortifies its representational power. Lastly, China's engagement during the pandemic period in Africa sets African regimes within a framework of subjectivity. During trades agreements and conflicts, they might have to surrender their rights and powers to China.

## **Methodology**

In this study, the data were collected from three major sources, Western, Asian and African databases. The data are mostly secondary sources from relevant books and journal articles. Soft power and Chinese engagements in African COVID-19 pandemic as depicted in primary and secondary



materials were downloaded from Western, Asian and African databases through the internet. Relevant information related to the subject matter was selected through critical case sampling method and the content analysis style was used in the study. Soft power, COVID-19, diplomacy, aid, medical assistance, international relations and status resource materials were downloaded from the internet specifically on how they influence and facilitate bilateral relationship between China and Africa. Hence, the data for this work were considered representative of how Chinese soft power approach engaged African countries in their COVID-19 pandemic. The data used for this work were analyzed to understand the influence of Chinese soft power on eradication, treatment and the health measures used by African countries to combat COVID-19.

### **The Spread of COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa**

On December 31st 2019, Chinese authorities in Wuhan announced a cluster of pneumonia cases of etiology, most of which included patients who reported exposure to Wuhan's Hunan Seafood wholesale market. Consequently, on February 10, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) named the disease, caused by the new virus, COVID-19. Accordingly, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic because of the manner in which verified cases of it was evolving and spreading rapidly (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 disease was reported to have symptoms similar to influenza. Others included mild diseases, severe lung injuries and multi-organ failure which eventually resulted in death especially in older patients (Guan et al., 2020). One inherent setback at tackling COVID-19 is that there was no vaccine discovered for the prevention of it. The best prevention was to avoid being exposed to the virus. Airborne precautions and other protective measures were adopted in mainland China. It included the use of face masks, covering coughs and sneezes with tissues that are then safely disposed, use of a flexed elbow to cover the cough or sneeze, regular hand washing with soap or disinfection with hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol, avoidance of contact with infected people and maintaining



an appropriate distance as much as possible and refraining from touching the eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands (WHO, 2020).

Africa over the years has been faced with its own fair share of epidemics and pandemics and they are still a natural phenomenon in most countries. Many contagious diseases such as HIV, Tuberculosis, Ebola and Lassa fever already threaten the lives of people in Africa. COVID-19 brought greater doom for most African states. It was first reported in Africa on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, barely two months after it broke out in China. It spread to over 30 countries in Africa in less than a month and over 47 other countries on the continent (Musiitwa and Li, 2020).

COVID-19 found its way to Africa through several channels. Firstly, most African governments did not have adequate information about COVID-19 and in certain instances where the information was available; the leaders had a lackadaisical attitude to it. Secondly, there were conflicting news and speculations that COVID-19 could not survive in hot regions and as such all guards were let down in Africa. Also, there was news circulating from many scientists such as those from Beihang and Tsinghua universities which had researched the spread of the COVID-19 in 100 cities. They concluded that high temperature and high relative humidity significantly reduced the transmission of COVID-19 (Cookson, 2020). This false information led to a wild spread of COVID-19 in most African countries despite their high temperature and humidity. Thirdly, Africa lacked the testing technology to detect COVID-19 at its borders and as such foreigners came in undetectably with the virus and invariably contaminated the people. Fourthly, health institutions in charge of pandemics in many African countries lacked the resources to handle such outbreak. Fifthly, sensitization and enlightenment on how to prevent COVID-19 in most African countries came late or perhaps in most cases were not available. The resultant effect was that people's lives were exposed to imminent danger. Sixthly, health institutions and quarantine centers in most African countries were undermined by the lack of facilities such as ventilators, sanitizers and testing kits (van Staden, 2022).

Therefore, the spread of COVID-19 was already premeditated

unintentionally by the authorities and governments of several African states. Seventhly, most African countries are poverty stricken and densely populated with high rate of illiteracy. Therefore, maintaining the right hygiene or accessing the desired information to combat or prevent the spread of COVID-19 was a major challenge and hurdle for them to achieve (Itugbu, 2021). These were some of the reasons why COVID-19 found access to many African countries that lacked the capacity to deal with it. Nevertheless, as the world struggled from the claws of the COVID-19 pandemic, certain institutions or nations came to the aid and assistance of African countries.

## **Discussion**

China is a major donor of aid to Africa, but the scale and mode of Chinese aid practices appear poorly misunderstood and often misrepresented. China is a long-established diplomatic partner and not a new investor in Africa. Its interests on the continent encompass not only natural resources but also issues of trade, security, diplomacy and soft power. China portrays the principle of non-interference and friendly relations as the new positive model for engagements with Africa. It promotes its presence in Africa based on equality, mutual respect and mutual benefits. It sees the fundamental needs of food, security and economic development as forms of human rights that it helps to promote through robust economic development and trade with Africa (Taylor, 2009). Chinese support for Africa in its fight for the COVID-19 aligns with its diplomacy of soft power.

Nye Jr asserts that soft power is the ability to affect others through a co-optive means of an agenda and eliciting positive attraction to obtain preferred outcomes. A school of thought argues that China's engagement in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that it aims to affect and influence Africans for its own agenda which at the moment is unknown. Another school of thought propounds the idea that China is helping Africa on humanitarian grounds and nothing more. Despite these two schools of thoughts, certain things are obvious from Chinese aid to Africa and it would be discussed below. China is assisting Africa as a central part of

its impressive strategy and tactful policy in Africa; it aims to exert its soft power across the globe. This is obvious because first it aligns its actions with the postulation of Todd Halls who stated that countries can use their soft power in the form of institutional power to indirectly control others. The bulk of the aid that came to Africa came from the Chinese State sponsored companies, embassies and Chinese State sponsored charitable organizations.

Jack Ma through his Alibaba Foundation donated 500 ventilators, 260,000 protective suits with masks, 2,100,000 test kits, and 6,000,000 face masks to 54 African countries. Huawei, a telecommunication giant from China donated R1 million to South Africa and the Huajian Group (the Chinese shoemaker) donated over face masks and other anti-epidemic supplies to eight African countries. Chinese embassies in Kenya and Uganda also donated 250,000 masks, medical goggles and thermometers to these African nations. Local Chinese within their communities were also centrally mobilized to aid African communities in which they lived and operated their businesses respectively (Engelberth and Sági, 2021). Chinese medical doctors were dispatched to African countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burkina Faso to fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Africa.

Secondly, China is adopting the reputational power model as seen in its soft power approach by giving aid to African countries. China intends to create a new image for itself. When the virus broke out in Wuhan, China, the country was blamed for the pandemic outbreak across the globe. It was called 'Chinese virus' and as such scholars have called Beijing's COVID-19 diplomacy and humanitarian effort as a part of its broader strategy to deflate some of its blame and divert attention from it. China is therefore creating an image for itself as being able to control the virus within its own country and then going out to regions like Africa to assist in the pandemic effort. Likewise, this model also sees China as building its reputation at home to stir up national pride as the country would be seen as a high-profile provider of humanitarian aid and assistance in Africa and other parts of the world. Chinese reputation has soared high since it started

offering aid to Africa. This is evident through some scholarly comments such as Eric Olander that asserts there is a desperate need for the medical protective equipment and gear to support public health workers in Africa and China's donation fills a part of that need at a time when not many other people have been stepping up to help (Asiedu, 2020).

Thirdly, China is invoking its representational power and shaping its beliefs for others about its intervention in the pandemic plight of African countries. China is creating a narrative of being the number one humanitarian partner that is replacing the Americans in times of need. Chinese officials have stated that when lives are at stake, nothing matters more than saving lives. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Zhao Lijian remarked during the period that it was useless to argue over the merits of different social systems. He also said that the whole world should jointly come together and safeguard the health and safety of mankind (Crawford and Martin, 2020). Likewise, China's representative power became obvious when America suspended its funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) because President Trump accused the health institution for being too cozy with China. The Beijing led government immediately pledged millions of dollars in additional support to the organization. This gave China even more influence in the global health agency and allowing the country to portray itself as the new champion of multilateralism (Ward, 2020). It is also pushing for the narratives that China and Africa are closely tied together in several situations and it is obligatory for it to respond to the needs of most African countries. These notions are obvious that China has adopted its soft power in form of institutional, reputational and representational in its aid relief efforts in Africa.

Despite Chinese aid to Africa, scholars have perceived Chinese engagement with Africa in different notions. Phillippe Rogers (2007: 22) asserts that it comes with a mix of approval, apathy and contempt. For instance, Chinese doctors were sent to Nigeria to assist in COVID-19 pandemic fight and it was met with great uproar as reported in the news and the social media. The Medical Doctors 'Association in Nigeria immediately threatened to review their activities and participation in the

pandemic fight if government decision to invite the Chinese medical team was not rescinded. The invitation was perceived as a national disgrace and demeaning image for the millions of Nigerian doctors who had engaged themselves in the fight [see Adewole, (2020); Adejuwon, (2021)].

Another school of thought claims that Chinese aid to Africa is economically driven. This is because the pandemic has calamitous effects on world global economies. China is Africa's largest trading partner and exports from Africa slowed by 17.5% since the COVID-19 hit the two regions. With Africa under lockdown due to the pandemic, there would be a downward trend in the trade volumes between China and Africa. African countries, like Angola and South Sudan, exported 95% of their resources to China and there was a slow-down in demand from Africa thus heavily affecting prices and invariably the economies (Asiedu, 2020). Similarly, another school of thought argues that Chinese aid in Africa is based on its strengthening its bilateral ties with the continent and nothing more. Stephen Chen of the London School of Oriental and African studies posit that China supplies masks, ventilators and testing equipment which most African countries lacked. The aid from China can be seen as a sign of goodwill and a way to strengthen China Africa relations (Schwikowski, 2020). Kurlantzick et. al. (2006:1) asserts that China assists Africa because it claims it knows Africa's development challenges and comprehends the plights of developing nations. Its overarching goal is seen as win-win diplomacy through reinforcing its bilateral ties through aids and loans in the continent.

Protagonists of Chinese aid in Africa have asserted that the Chinese response to the pandemic in the continent came in a timely manner and fashion. Africa lacked all the necessary equipment and China came to the rescue of most African nations. Most African nations could protect the lives of its citizenry with Chinese aid.

Furthermore, scholars have argued that China's aid efforts in Africa leaves the continent on another dependent model in which it has to always rely on China for assistance in times of crisis. Africa should be able to combat the pandemic crisis by itself. They argued that China worked and

fought the virus by itself. Why should Africa not be left alone to combat the pandemic by itself? These scholars have argued that Africa has always been on the receiving end and as such it cannot attain the international reputation it needs despite all the resources it has. It cannot handle its own affairs but has to rely on China for aid and assistance. In conclusion, therefore, China's aid in Africa comes with mixed feelings, reactions and statements.

### **Conclusion**

China's investment in Africa has increased up to billions of dollars through its diplomatic and economic engagements in recent years. Its central thrust of engagement has been China's commitment to support most of the developing countries of Africa without enforcing the stringent measures and requirements by the West and most especially the United States of America. Hua Chunying, Director of China's Foreign Ministry Information Department, has argued that "China-Africa traditional friendship will not be disturbed by instigation of some forces," (Crawford and Martin, 2020). China was not the only country that assisted Africa in its pandemic fight, Africa received a lot of COVID-19 commitments from bilateral partners such as the United States (\$274m), multilateral institutions such as the World Bank (\$14bn program to sustain economies), African Development Bank (\$10bn COVID-19 response plan) (Bone & Cinotto, 2020). However, these aids and funding were not condemned like Chinese aid because scholars have posited that China has an agenda in Africa, its method of operation is not transparent and that China's action does not conform to the standards of international institutions.

Despite all these rhetoric, Chinese diplomatic effort in fighting COVID-19 in Africa was remarkable despite all the schools of thought postulated by scholars. The fact remains that Africa was incapacitated by poor health infrastructure to fight the pandemic; however, having China come to their rescue seems laudable. Nevertheless, some have seen Chinese soft power in the form of China hiding behind or instigating non-profit organizations and its embassies around the globe to support the

fight in their respective African regions with aid in form of materials and relief efforts. Secondly, scholars have also seen China as trying to create a new reputation for itself, one different from the Western perspective. The West believes China should be held responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak around the globe due to certain issues that arose at the initial outbreak of the virus in China. They opined that Chinese censored and withdrew certain information from the public and the WHO, as such it lacked the moral right to act. China was therefore trying to remove such perception from the international scene by acting as the noble and modest country, who after conquering the virus in its own country was going around the globe helping those in need.

Thirdly, China pushed itself to be the world global leader by trying to oust the Americans that presumably have held the position since the new world order was established. It has pumped its finances into international institutions like the WHO and rallied round the globe supporting the pandemic relief efforts. Fourthly, one of China's foreign policies is the notion of win-win strategy. China needs a ground to exert its power as an international and global leader, and it has found Africa as the terrain to act. China's true intention for investing so much around Africa has been very contentious and scholars have posited that most African countries will be compelled to bow to Chinese economic demands and overtures in the future. Scholars have argued that most African countries will lack the bargaining power and right to favorably discuss trade issues with the Asian giant.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of havoc on the African continent and globally. Many lives were lost, economies crippled and it affected and reshaped human lives greatly. A global response and approach were put in place by nations that felt morally obligated to act and to ensure the sustenance and protection of humanity.



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