

Factors Affecting Nigeria's Soft Power Capability as a Regional Leader in Africa

Ember Yange

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the obstacles Nigeria faces in leveraging its potential for soft power to achieve greater influence within its region. The specific objectives include: the factors affecting Nigeria's soft power capability, the defining qualities and characteristics of Nigeria's leadership role within the African continent, the benefits and significance of Nigeria's non-coercive influence and capabilities and the possible ways in which Nigeria's soft power capability can be strengthened in order to enhance its regional leadership in Africa. The study adopted power theory as the theoretical framework of analysis. Findings of the study revealed that, Nigeria has long held ambitions of leading Africa, maintaining a significant presence on the continental stage. However, its influence has waned in recent years, particularly since 1999. Despite demonstrated strengths in areas like arts and culture, sports, diplomacy, and aid, Nigeria's ability to translate these soft power assets into effective regional leadership is questionable. This study, employing a qualitative approach and drawing on existing research, argues for a renewed and strategic investment in resources that can help Nigeria increase its influence and leadership role in Africa through soft power.

Keywords: African Continent, Aspirations, Nigeria's leadership, Non-Coercive Influence

INTRODUCTION

The current global political landscape is characterized by ongoing competition among powerful nations. In a world lacking a central governing authority, the pursuit of power and influence among independent states is considered an inevitable historical force. Traditionally, international power has been measured in concrete terms, primarily focusing on military and economic strength. Hard power is the exercise of influence through coercion, relying on tactics like military intervention, coercive diplomacy, inducements of payment, and economic sanctions (McClory, 2018). Soft power is a way to influence others to achieve desired outcomes by setting the agenda, persuading, and building positive relationships. Instead of using traditional methods of reward and punishment, soft power relies on networking, crafting appealing narratives, establishing global norms, forming alliances, and leveraging resources that make a country attractive to others. In simple terms, 'hard power is push; soft power is pull' (Jonathan, 2018). One country's gain in soft power, generally speaking, will lead to the loss of influence from another country. It is undeniable that whilst America has seen a decline in its soft power (Nye, 2004), China's soft power is now on the rise, primarily in Southeast Asia, but also in Africa and Latin America (Kurlantzick, 2006; Business World, 2005). Conversely, African nations do not often come to mind as primary agent of soft power. Africa's marginalization in the global economy, its own internal conflicts, and the autocratic regimes that ruled many of its countries until the end of the cold war all limited the cultivation of soft power. Although, on the African continent there are a number of countries with the best claim to the exercise of soft power, as defined by Nye: through its culture, its political values and the legitimacy of its foreign policy

(Sidiropoulos, 2014). Nigeria is considered a strategic regional power in Africa by major and minor powers because of its preponderance of power and capability. Nigeria is labelled in some quarters as ‘the Giant of Africa. Nigeria’s leadership role in Africa in decolonization, conflict resolution and peace keeping, financial and technical aid, and establishing multilateral organizations and global partnerships in solving political, economic and environmental issues in Africa and beyond are among its leadership potentials scholars have identified. A number of scholars have drawn positive correlation between regional power status and soft power attributes (Sidiropoulos 2014; Ogunnubi 2014; Geldenhuys 2010; Flandes and Wojczewski 2010; Gill and Huang 2006). According to them, a major requirement for regional power status is the location, presence and deployment of soft power attributes which may range from culture, to political ideology, diplomacy, sporting achievements, foreign policy, tourism, media and language (Flandes and Wojczewski 2010). The Twenty-First Century has witnessed massive investment from countries even with authoritarian government systems towards improving their soft power potential. However, the capacity to transition from mere potential to a consistent and reliable regional leader at all times continues to pose a challenge due to internal contradictions and leadership failure (Ogunnubi & Uzodike 2016, Tella 2018, Dauda et al. 2019, Aina 2020). By wielding its soft power resources, Nigeria arguably with enormous soft power potential is able to gain legitimacy, acceptance and recognition as being a regional power among other possible contenders. While analysis and debate on Nigeria’s power capability have focused almost entirely on economic and military aspects, an objective account of the state’s power portfolio would be incomplete without an estimation of its soft power capabilities. An account of Nigeria’s soft power status is therefore imperative (Ogunnubi & Isike, 2017). The nature of this study makes it amenable to the use of secondary data, which includes journals, books, media reports, government reports, and the internet were obtained using documentary and historical approaches. The qualitative research method was used in the conduct of the research.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is no surprise that the contemporary shift in power diffusion strategy from the material aspect of power to the non-material approach is constantly being constructed. Nigeria’s place in this new trend is vital to assess its soft power assets, which are cultural tools, political values, foreign policy and innovations capable of projecting Nigeria’s influence, admiration and changing preferences of other states in Africa and beyond to Nigeria. To date, there has been barely any scholarly effort to articulate the potential and capacity of Nigeria’s soft power resources despite evidence of reputed unofficial and official mobilization by both state and non-state actors. In a period in which Nigeria is confronted with numerous internal contradictions that debilitate its leadership role in Africa, unpacking the role of soft power can perhaps offer an alternative platform to mitigate the cost of its foreign policy obligations in the continent (Mustapha 2008). The image of the ugly Nigerian has become a significant obstacle to good relations, not only with Nigeria’s neighbours, but also on the continent and further afield’ (Osuntokun 2008, p. 158). It is true therefore that Nigeria has not been able to exert its influence to the full measure that it’s hard and soft power potential requires, and this poses a dialectical dilemma. The fundamental question posed in this study therefore includes; what is affecting Nigeria’s Soft power capability? What is the value of Nigeria’s soft power capabilities? It is against this background that this research seeks to assess the factors affecting Nigeria’s soft power capability as a regional leader in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In trying to position the study of assessing Nigeria’s soft power capability as a potential regional leader, the theory of power becomes a natural framework for analyzing Nigeria’s leadership ambitions in Africa from the dimension of a soft power. Traditionally, power is seen from realism, underscoring coercive power and usually regarded as the hard power. Scholars like Thomas Hobbes, Niccolo Machiavelli, Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr are all associated with classical realism, emphasizing the hard power approach to state

relations. At the same time, Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer tend to shift slightly from the classical school. On the other hand, most scholars describe hard power as that which can only be felt, experienced and measured. It consists mainly of a state's military and economic might (Mearshiemer 2010, Pallaver 2011, Johari 2014, Raimzhanova 2015). The concept of soft power was conceived and made popular in the 1990s by Joseph Nye, even though similar ideas had existed earlier. However, Nye differentiated it from the traditional hard power concept. While the former is primarily deployed through a state's military and economic capabilities with coercive methods, the latter relies on persuasion and tools like culture, political values and foreign policy to attract other states. Nye portrayed soft power as the capacity to affect others' behavior through the cooperative means of framing an agenda, persuading and extracting positive attraction to secure preferred outcomes. He explains soft power to imply the attraction of other actors to another country's objectives, preferences, and values through persuasion and not threat, and as a critical way of solving contemporary global issues instead of the conventional hard power approach (Nye 2004, 2009, Tella 2018).

Conception of Soft Power

Soft power is a type of influence wielded by persuading others, particularly countries, to do what you want them to do through political, moral, or cultural attraction without having to coerce with threats or financial incentives. As propounded by Nye (2004), soft power "is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion (and) it arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies." Trunkos (2013 cited in Hadi, 2019) notes that soft power deals with a nation's national resources which is capable of using it to affect other nations so as to persuade and elicit positive outcomes. As a concept, soft power is not really new in international relations. While the coinage of the term can be rightly traced to Nye (1990), there are ample examples of its practices among states in their dealings with one another. The Marshal Plan that helped in the reconstruction of ravaged Europe following the end of the Second World War is a very good example of the use of soft power. However, there are certain obstacles that a country can face which can limit its soft power influence; and, this paper looks at some of the factors faced by Nigeria in attempting to utilize its soft power capabilities in the 21st century.

Nature And Character of Nigeria's Regional Leadership in Africa

Since independence, Nigeria has been playing a significant leadership role in West African Sub-region and indeed the African continent. Africa has remained the center piece of Nigeria's foreign policy. Nigerian government have consistently devoted its attention to the plight of Africa, which has made the fundamental ethics of Nigerian foreign policy "Afro-centric" and that of his brother's keeper; a principle rooted in culture (Akinterinwa, 1988). That is why in recognition of the struggle and contribution to the dismantling of apartheid, colonialism and racism, she was categorically a "Frontline State". (Gumbi, 2015).

Factors Affecting Nigeria's Soft Power Capabilities

Soft power can effectively and successfully be deployed in an environment that is attractive and conducive to international investors. The Nigeria ambiance is presently challenged by factors that hinder the deployment of its soft power potential (Braithmoh and Edo, 2020). These factors are as follows.

1. Corruption has been said to be the bane of Nigeria's progress and, today, it constitutes an obstacle to the realization of the country's soft power potential. To Campbell (2020), Nigeria ranks 146 out of 180 countries surveyed by Transparency International on corruption. The perception of Nigeria as a corrupt nation by the international community does not help its soft power drive.
2. Another factor militating against the development of Nigeria's soft power potential is the present widespread prevalence of insecurity occasioned by the activities of bandits, hoodlums, kidnappers, boko-

haram and the ISIS. Ajodo-Adegbenro & Okorie (2014) linken the prevalence of insecurity in Nigeria to corruption. According to them, corruption is at the root of widespread poverty and crimes, which by extension are the causes of insecurity. This observation is still germane.

3. Another pitfall stifling the development of Nigeria's soft power potential is in the unstable business environment of the country. Poor infrastructure, weak economic base driven by energy policy that delivers poor and unstable electricity, are factors that further stifle the actualization of Nigeria's soft power (Ovuakporie & Agbakwunu, 2016).

4. Another challenge to Nigeria's deployment of soft power is in the poor perception of its human rights records. Political values have been identified as drivers for enhancing the soft power potential of a nation; and, it is a known fact that the international community generally frowns at abuses of human rights and, in most cases, discourages business relations with countries that post poor human rights records (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The Nigerian police and its brutality have long been under surveillance by aggrieved Nigerians, #EndSars movement helped to advance the image of criminality in the Nigerian security forces. As Ayozie (2020) puts it, the #EndSars movement has dented the Nigeria's image".

5. While Nigeria has had over two decades of continuous democratic rule, its democratic institutions and practices are not yet as developed as those found in some established democratic nations (Brammah and Edo, 2020). Since 1999, Nigerian elections have been plagued by various forms of misconduct, including ballot box theft, election result manipulation, vote buying, and violence. In collaboration with the above view, the just concluded 2023 general election was a total sham, quite a number of manipulation, vote buying, intimidation of voters that took place majorly in Lagos which was characterized by ethnic rivalry, killings of the youths whose choice of candidate and will was subverted by selecting a President through fraudulent means (ICIR, 2023).

Assessing the Value of Nigeria's Soft Power Capabilities.

This research has identified several aspects of Nigerian culture that contribute to its soft power potential. Specifically, the study highlights the country's thriving film industry and its vibrant music scene, featuring globally recognized artists, as areas where Nigeria possesses a competitive edge over regional rivals. The country has also shown a high level of regional mettle in arts -literature, fashion and language, cuisines and sports (Ogunnubi & Uzodike 2016, Ogunnubi & Isike 2017, Tella 2018). Arguably, Nollywood is one of Nigeria's most phenomenal cultural export that has significant economic potential and soft power implications. The success of Nigeria's film (Nollywood) and music industries is due to the hard work of Nigerians and independent organizations. These industries bring in a lot of money from outside the oil sector and create many jobs (Eshiett & Dayioğlu, 2023).

The super Eagles of Nigeria is considered as one of the best teams in Africa. It is only proper that this sporting fame and influence be re-invented to project the nation (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2020). The diversity of Nigerian people creates a vibrant food scene, where each dish tells a story about the culture. A case in point, is the Recent Nigerian chef and restaurateur Hilda Bassey Effiong who just set a new world record for the longest cooking marathon, almost 100 pots of food during the event which crashed the Guinness World Record site due to the popularity it generated (Guinness World Record, 2023).

Higher education is another area of concern. Universities play a key role in building a strong human capital base, and Nigeria needs institutions that rank highly to reflect its leadership aspirations (Eshiett & Dayioğlu, 2023).

Table: 1. Latest University Rankings on the Global Stage 2024

| S/N | University | Ranking | Country |
|-----|-------------------------|----------|----------------|
| 1 | University of Oxford | 1 | United Kingdom |
| 2 | Stanford University | 2 | USA |
| 3 | University of Cape Town | 167 | South Africa |
| 4 | Covenant University | 801-1000 | Nigeria |

Obtained from: Times Higher Education (2024)

“Unfortunately, the highest-ranked Nigerian university falls within the 801-1000 range in the Times Higher Education 2024 World Ranking, far below what’s expected from a regional leader (Times Higher Education, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Nigeria’s potential as a regional leader in Africa is hampered by its underutilized soft power. This study argues that for Nigeria to reach its full potential, it must not only address the challenges to its soft power but also actively work on strengthening it. The study emphasizes the importance of using established metrics, like educational rankings and business competitiveness, to assess a country’s soft power. This allows Nigeria to identify areas for improvement and focus its efforts on overcoming these obstacles. This study highlights several factors hindering Nigeria’s ability to be a strong regional leader: human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, a stifled business environment, corruption, and a disregard for the rule of law. These issues severely damage Nigeria’s reputation and its capacity to influence other African nations (Baimah and Edo, 2020).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper calls for collective action by all stakeholders in Nigeria to help resolve these global crises as part of a state’s foreign policy role to impact the region. Therefore, Nigeria’s government should prioritize attracting foreign investors to collaborate with local businesses. This partnership is crucial to secure funding for developing Nigeria’s soft power potential. Nigeria’s National Assembly should enact laws that attract foreign investment in sectors that can enhance the country’s soft power. These sectors include sports (particularly football), tourism (by developing existing tourist sites), and cultural events (like the Benin Arts Festival, the Igwe Festival, and the Argungun Festival). Investing in these areas will help Nigeria leverage its cultural heritage and sporting prowess to strengthen its soft power on the international stage. Also, there is emphasis on the importance of developing Nigeria’s capabilities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This is another crucial tool for Nigeria to project its influence as a regional power in Africa and beyond (Brimah and Edo, 2020; Eshiett & Dayioğlu, 2023).

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