

## Rethinking Nigeria's soft power capability as a regional leader in Africa

### *Memikirkan kembali kemampuan soft power Nigeria sebagai pemimpin regional di Afrika*

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#### Abstract

Nigeria has always been seen as a significant regional player in Africa, and the country has not hidden its aspiration to be its leader. However, recent events, particularly in the fourth republic between 1999 and to date, have seen this ambition decline significantly. The study interrogates Nigeria's soft power leadership capability as contemporary power diffusion theory and its ambition to be a regional leader in Africa. It examines various ways Nigeria can rethink its soft power strategies to achieve its age-long regional aspiration. The qualitative research method was adopted for the study, while primary and secondary sources were used in collecting data for the research. Findings reveal that Nigeria's neglect and underutilisation of its strategic soft power tools in gaining regional influence continue to inhibit its African leadership ambitions. The study recommends a dynamic policy of developing and deploying significant soft power resources to boost Nigeria's leadership in Africa.

**Keywords:** Africa; power diffusion theory; regional leadership; soft power capability

#### Abstrak

Nigeria selalu dilihat sebagai pemain regional yang signifikan di Afrika, dan negara itu tidak menyembunyikan aspirasinya untuk menjadi pemimpinnya. Namun, peristiwa baru-baru ini, khususnya di republik keempat antara tahun 1999 dan hingga saat ini, telah melihat penurunan ambisi ini secara signifikan. Studi ini menginterogasi kemampuan kepemimpinan soft power Nigeria sebagai teori difusi kekuatan kontemporer dan ambisinya untuk menjadi pemimpin regional di Afrika. Studi ini juga mengkaji berbagai cara Nigeria untuk dapat memikirkan kembali strategi kekuatannya untuk mencapai aspirasi regionalnya yang sudah berlangsung lama. Metode penelitian kualitatif digunakan untuk penelitian ini, sedangkan sumber primer dan sekunder digunakan dalam pengumpulan data untuk penelitian ini. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa pengabaian Nigeria dan kurang dimanfaatkannya perangkat lunak strategisnya dalam mendapatkan pengaruh regional terus menghambat ambisi kepemimpinan Afrikanya. Studi ini merekomendasikan kebijakan dinamis untuk mengembangkan dan menyebarkan sumber daya soft power yang signifikan untuk meningkatkan kepemimpinan Nigeria di Afrika.

**Kata kunci:** Afrika; teori difusi daya; kepemimpinan daerah; kemampuan daya lunak

## Introduction

Nigeria's leadership potential in Africa is well-documented when considering its enormous material and human resources. Nigeria is considered a strategic regional power in Africa by major and minor powers because of its preponderance of power and capability. Nigeria's leadership role in Africa in decolonisation, conflict resolution and peacekeeping, financial and technical aid, and establishing multilateral organisations and global partnerships in solving political, economic and environmental issues in Africa and beyond are among its leadership potentials scholars have identified. 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).

The concept of power is very significant to politics in a domestic and international sense. Although power cannot be defined in a single way, the concept appears ambiguous because of the several ways it is used. However, many scholars agree on the indispensability of power theory in all strata of politics. The power concept in international relations comes with the realist-idealist debate and is very relevant in a state's exercise of power (Crabb 1968, Johari 2014).

In trying to situate this study of rethinking Nigeria's soft power capacity as a potential regional leader, the theory of power becomes a natural framework for analysing 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, emphasising 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' behaviour through the co-optive 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).

Nye further describes soft power as a nation's history, geography, cultural diversity, economic strength and social pattern. He highlighted democratic development, civil society organisation prevalence and impact, science and technology infrastructure and values like arts and sports that social life produces as constituting soft power. As elucidated by Nye, soft power has been seen as an alternate way of projecting state power. This study will rely on this theory to redefine Nigeria's regional leadership capacity (Nye 2004).

This position has resulted in two major research questions aimed at explaining the rationale for Nigeria's suitability for a significant leadership role in Africa. First, what relationship exists between good leadership domestically and assuming a major leadership responsibility in the region? Second, how can soft power capabilities propel Nigeria to a significant leadership role in Africa?

The research will be anchored on the above questions and how it applies to the power theory as a framework for analysing the research problem. Hans Morgenthau, the foremost power theorist, succinctly emphasised the significance of power in achieving a state's national interest in the international system. In fact, he emphatically explained the nature and manifestation of power and outlined critical elements of national power comprising both tangible and intangible elements that measure and determines a nation's status in the international system (Morgenthau 1948, Johari 2014).

Soft power, therefore, represents the intangible element of a state's national power manifestation and readily justifies its application and a framework for interrogating Nigeria's regional leadership ambitions in Africa from the perspective of its soft power capability. This paper will critically examine these issues affecting Nigeria's leadership aspiration in Africa and seek to proffer solutions. The theory of soft power will be applied to re-invent Nigeria's regional leadership plan because of its power of attraction and influence on potential recipients as opposed to leadership by coercion which induces suspicion. The inability to use military and economic threats to resolve conflicts or forge cooperation in the contemporary era has elevated the concept of soft power built on superior ideas and values that engender other's attraction and change of preference is the reason for its choice in this research (Nye 2004, Ogunnubi & Isike 2017, Tella 2018).

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. As this paper examines Nigeria's place in this new trend, it 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.

Nigeria, therefore, must rethink its soft power strategy to align with the contemporary matrix and indices of measuring soft power. Consequently, the study will explore Nigeria's soft power sources, tools, instruments, and resources used interchangeably by many works of literature. These resources have been expanded beyond the traditional soft power tools and continued to be built upon Nye's initial postulation of culture, political values and foreign policy constituting the foundation of soft power assets (Nye 2004, Tella 2018).

According to additional elaboration by Patalakh on Nye's original theory, three distinctive features generate a country's attraction to other states. These are culture - where it is attractive to others; political values - living up to it at home and abroad; Foreign policies - when others view them as legitimate and having moral authority. Patalakh further agrees with Nye that, for soft power to be effective, there must be organised channels and mechanisms of transmitting soft power by states to potential recipients (Nye 2004, Patalakh 2016).

Patalakh, for instance, agrees with Mukherjee (2014) on India, which has a litany of soft power tools, and yet a moderate international image hampered by the insufficient promotion of these soft power resources. This line of thinking proves how a nation like Nigeria with an ambition to lead Africa must go to promote its regional image through soft power. Therefore, Nigeria needs to recalibrate and reinforce its regional soft power capabilities. It must also take a cue from other successful states that regularly rank as top soft power enablers taking cognisance of the fame and influence they wield to achieve its regional interest (Nye 2004, Patalakh 2016).

### **Contemporary measuring indicators for soft power capability**

There are various measurement schemes of the soft power thesis, and its significance in contemporary international relations can never be overemphasised. These indicators that rank and classify a country's performance, utilisation and deployment of the soft power construct in the overall power ratings of influential states globally will be examined.

There are globally recognised soft power measuring and ranking organisations and their indicators and this study will deploy them to help measure and reinforce Nigeria's soft power capability. Some of these are the Soft power 30 - a global ranking of Soft power by Jonathan McClory of Portland communications; Institute for Government - AFG-Monocle Soft power index; Rapid-Growth Markets Soft Power Index - Ernst & Young (2012) and Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index (2020).

Some writers in the field have highlighted a couple of measuring indices as major criteria and factors in determining soft power usage. These measuring indicators of soft power by some compilers are (McClory 2015): Digital; Culture; Enterprise; Engagement; Education; Government (Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index 2020) Business and Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture and Heritage, Media and Communication, Education and Science, People and Values (Gopalan & Park 2019), Attraction and Influence, Image and Branding, Integrity and Value System, Diplomacy and Outreach (Ernst & Young 2012) CO2emissions, Freedom Index, Most Admired Companies, Olympics, TIME's 100 Most Influential People, University Rank, Tourism Arrivals, Language Enrolments, Voter Turnout, Media Exports, English Fluency, Rule of Law, and Immigration. Although different templates exist for each compiler, the above indicators capture all the features or resources that are embedded in soft power theory. It is essential to note that they all have closely related features (McClory 2015, Yavuzashan & Cetin 2016, Gopalan & Park 2019, Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index 2020).

A more extensive indicator and ranking every aspiring soft power state like Nigeria needs to take note of is the one provided by McClory (2015) and a couple of others subsumed under these five broad headings of Diplomacy, Government, Culture, Business and Innovation Sub-Index and Education Sub-Index. The significance of a soft power capability to a country's image regionally and globally cannot be understated. Given that the transition from the tangible way of wielding power to the soft method is mainly attributed to its non-viability in the age of global terrorism menace and general denunciation of war and economic strangulations by some major powers, a softer way of international engagement became the new norm. The study will consider different mechanisms the Nigerian state can harness to reset its soft power capability from Nye's three major dimensions of culture, political values and foreign policy, and other contemporary measurement indicators (McClory 2010, 2011, 2015, Ernst & Young 2012, Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index 2020).

## Research Method

The qualitative research method was used in the conduct of the research. In obtaining primary data, the purposive sampling technique, a selection of a few people representing a larger population of professionals familiar with the field, was employed to provide their opinion on the research questions through an interview session. Interviews were conducted with 20 informants drawn from the academic, media, diplomatic circles, and graduate students of Politics and International Relations because of the technicality of the research problem to provide further empirical evidence on how Nigeria can rethink its regional leadership ambition from the soft power perspective. In addition, secondary data like journals, books, media reports, government reports, and the internet were obtained using documentary and historical approaches. Finally, their responses and other findings were analysed qualitatively.

The data collection strategy for the study included online Zoom interviews and open-ended/unstructured questionnaires. The former was four and the latter 16, which made it cost-effective for the researcher. Part of the interview questions were two critical research questions that hinge on the research problem. Their responses were unequivocal on the significance of robust domestic leadership and soft power capabilities in projecting Nigeria's regional leadership potential. This conclusion was reached through a content analysis strategy, a major feature of a qualitative research method. The researcher repeatedly listened to the recorded interview and read through the questionnaire responses and other notes that were taken. The content analysis technique enabled the researcher to analyse the primary data by summarising the raw data, identifying major themes, categorise and reviewing them to arrive at the findings.

## Result and Discussion

The interview with 20 informants showed that the significant decline in Nigeria's leadership position in Africa capable of attracting and influencing other African states in terms of political values, cultural influence, diplomatic engagement and strategic development aid was due to poor leadership performance. Furthermore, the findings revealed that all the informants represented the total population of the sample taken from specific professions with the knowledge of the research questions agreed with the assertion that there was a relationship between competent domestic leadership and Nigeria's capacity to undertake the role of a regional leader. This position has also been corroborated by other documentary evidence cited in the study.

All informants agree that Nigeria can re-invent its declining leadership position in Africa by harnessing its enormous soft power capabilities. They believed Nigeria was blessed with numerous soft power tools, and a contemporary leadership strategy could raise the country's leadership influence in Africa and beyond if properly employed. The informants also contended that developing critical soft power policies like other major and regional powers can earn the country regional leadership, loyalty and influence.

All informants agreed that having robust soft power tools was a major determinant of regional leadership potential in the 21st century, which Nigeria can exploit to re-assert its influence in the region. Among the listed soft power tools the informants recommended for an improved regional rating for the country were

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efficient leadership, enhanced democratic values, pragmatic foreign policy, innovations, cutting-edge arts and cultural products. This position by the informants further strengthens documentary evidence that the soft power mechanism enhances a country’s regional leadership potential.

These findings are supported by Joseph Nye’s definition of soft power and its role in a nation’s leadership influence, which he explains as encapsulating a nation’s history, geography, cultural diversity, economic strength and social pattern. He also included democratic development, civil society organisation prevalence and impact, science and technology infrastructure and values like arts and sports that social life produces as constituting soft power (Nye 2004).

### **Rethinking Nigeria’s soft power capability**

In rethinking Nigeria’s soft power capability, there are some challenges to the country’s rise and influence in Africa and beyond. Among some of these limitations that Nigeria must overcome are poor leadership, systemic corruption, misgovernance, poor foreign policy, uninspiring values, economic stagnation, etc (Ogunnubi & Uzodike 2016, Ogunnubi & Isike 2017, Tella 2018).

There are several sources of soft power, just like hard power, which explain how it works. This paper has also underscored the significance of measuring a country’s soft power potentials based on specific indices. In addition to Nye’s traditional three, others are non-military capabilities, like economic strength, science and technological tools, which showcase some form of overlaps between hard and soft power resources. A couple of these soft power instruments that can enhance Nigeria’s position as a first-grade nation in Africa will be discussed under the cultural, political, foreign policy, education sub-index and business/innovation sub-index dimensions below (Nye 2004).

### **Cultural dimension**

Peter Fisk (2020) observed a shift of power economically and culturally, underscoring a further transformation in the 2020s decade. Foreseeing these changes, he harps on shifting the hard and hierarchical power structure to a new soft and social power. Fisk refers to this as “meta power” because it goes beyond the traditional power sources and boundaries of control, nations and previous power nodes and codes.

This study has revealed a couple of Nigeria’s soft power resources from the cultural perspective, highlighting film or movie production (Nollywood) and music with iconic superstars as an area of comparative advantage over other 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).

Therefore, the way forward is to recalibrate Nigeria’s soft power resources and approach for a more significant impact. There must be a national roadmap on soft power development and a specialised agency or department, if not a full-fledged ministry, to develop, coordinate, and harness all Nigeria’s soft power resources. Soft power should be prioritised as part of Nigeria’s national interest, capable of earning additional revenue for the government, enhancing its global and regional image, and fast-tracking its development. A breakdown of these cultural dimensions of soft power is analysed below.

*Entertainment industry:* Nigeria’s unprecedented dominance in the entertainment industry in the region represented by the Nollywood (film) and music industry must be taken to another level to continually showcase its culture, re-writing old narratives while changing the general perception about the country in the region and beyond. The fame of Nollywood and the music industry stems from resilient Nigerians and non-governmental agencies projecting and raking up substantial non-oil revenues and massive employment for the country. Therefore, the Nigerian government must start investing significantly in the entertainment industry to further stretch its hold on the sector in the region in particular, as the industry has begun featuring prominently in the country’s GDP (Yavuzaslan & Cetin 2016, Ogunnubi & Isike 2017, Tella 2018).

*Language:* This has been identified as another critical way of displaying a nation's intangible power and connecting people worldwide. The English language is a typical example of connecting hundreds of millions of people globally from a few tens of millions of original speakers and their cultures. Nigeria can also leverage the language aspect of its soft power to project its image regionally and beyond. Hausa, Yoruba, Fulani and Pidgin English are widely spoken in Nigeria and across the region. The primary users of these four languages are predominantly Nigerians. Therefore, a look at these languages and their speakers becomes critical.

Many speakers use the Hausa language as a native language in Nigeria, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, Cameroon, Sudan, Chad and Ghana. However, some others in tens of thousands also use it as a migrant language, business and trade in the Central African Republic, Togo, Equatorial Guinea; Gambia, Congo, Eritrea and Algeria (Koslow 1995). The Yoruba language is principally spoken in the West African countries of Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire and the diaspora. The Yoruba people of Nigeria also live in Brazil, Cuba, and many Caribbean states, where the Yoruba language, culture, and traditional religion are also practised (Apter & Derby 2009, Akintoye 2010). The Fulani people of Nigeria speak either Fula, Fulbe or Fulfude language. Their kith and kin are significant speakers in 17 West, Central, East and North African countries, with most of them practising similar traditions, culture, religion and trade across their geographical spread in the continent (Ndukwe 1996).

Finally, the Nigerian Pidgin English - an English-based Creole language, is spoken as a lingua-franca across Nigeria and is similar to the one spoken across English-speaking West African countries and a couple of French West and Central African countries (Esizemtor & Egbokhare 2011).

The question of how Nigeria can leverage this vast connection of people of similar origin across the region through language and culture in achieving its goal as a regional leader becomes imperative. The country should take a cue from other global and regional powers with established institutions with the mandate of promoting their country's culture globally through language centres, literature and art exhibitions, etc.

Examples of these institutions that promote their country's soft power, particularly culture, are the British Council, Confucius Institute, Institut Francais, Goethe Institute, Indian Cultural Institute, Brazilian Cultural Centre and Korean Cultural Centre, etc. In addition to these vital institutions, the traditional media, mainly the TV, are indispensable in pushing these soft power resources out. Television stations such as BBC, CNN, and CCTV have their signals received globally through the satellite system 24 hours and in real-time. Therefore, depending on foreign platforms to transmit the country's soft power resources will be counterproductive; Nigeria must establish and project a TV brand to promote its soft power capability (MacDonald 2018).

To project its power, the Nigerian government must maximise its citizens' ethnic, cultural, and religious affiliations within the region. The government must use this power of attraction, as postulated by Nye, to exert some degree of influence in the region where they live by using this age-long relationship to transmit its soft power resources to the admiration and support of these people for the country's benefits.

*Sports:* The Nigerian government must make a conscious effort to revamp its sports sector. It must also consider the massive number of people employed by sport and the country's abundant talents. Sport is a vital soft power tool that brought Nigeria fame and global acclaim in the past. The Nigerian national football team, the Super Eagles, achieved the highest FIFA ranking of 5th for the best male football team globally after the USA 94 world cup and the highest for any African football team to date (FIFA 2020). Nigeria's performance in the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Olympics and world athletic championships, where Nigerian athletes flourished, winning gold medals and other accolades, significantly lifted its profile globally. 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).

*Literature:* Nigeria's literature is among the best in the region and beyond. However, the country can do more to make it even more valuable. The Nigerian Prize for Literature, established by the Nigerian

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Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), is the most significant literary award in Africa and one of the richest globally. It is a laudable step. However, more such prizes and academic chairs should be established at all levels of education by the government and the private entities to ensure another Nobel Prize for literature, among others, returns to Nigeria (The Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Limited 2020).

*The Nigerian fashion industry:* Nigeria’s fashion is already going global, but the country can further maximise the present gains and ramp up more revenue investments and recognition globally. Improvement of infrastructures, particularly the energy sector, technology application and robust investment by government and the private sector, is significant. This can further promote the Nigerian fashion brands, styles and fabrics like Adire, Aso-Oke, Ankara and Dashiki, among others, as the country’s imprints. These can continue to attract the global community while raising the nation’s profile (Morakinyo 2012, Akinsola 2020).

*Nigerian cuisines:* The checklist of popular Nigerian cuisines is going global, and the list is endless. As part of Nigerian culture, the country has a vibrant food culture due to the diverse population. Food and national cuisines are great avenues for showcasing a nation’s culture. As a country rich in varieties of food because of its tropical location, the Nigerian government can do more to support food cultivation and processing through massive investment in the entire agro value chain. This investment can open the country to an international audience, ready to explore its soft power resources (Anonymous 2019).

*Museums, monuments and arts galleries:* These are national treasures and heritage of a state that exposes its cultural power. There are 52 museums in Nigeria, 65 declared national monuments and 100 proposed national monuments. There are also three dozen national art galleries with private ones scattered across the country. The effectiveness of Nigeria’s national monuments can only be measured by the number of domestic and foreign tourists visiting these cultural heritages. Secondly, the government’s accrued revenue from these tours is very consequential in the measurement indicator of soft power nations and listing (National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria 2020, UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2020).

*Tourism:* A couple of factors determine a foreign tourist’s visit to a destination. Some of these factors include, among others: Physiographic-landscape and climate, culture, history, market ties, special events, and tourism. For the superstructure, accommodation, facilities, and food are vital. Other supporting factors like accessibility, communication and transportation infrastructure are crucial in attracting massive tourism traffic. Other scholars identify customer service level, law and order, and value for money conditioned on significant cultural heritage and landscape as pivotal. The Nigerian government has much to gain from soft power’s cultural context. Some benefits are improved regional and global image, a buoyant economy, and alternative revenue sources (Crouch & Rutchie 1999, Dinnie 2008).

### **Political values and governance dimension**

Several political values and governance perspectives are crucial to Nigeria’s rising regional profile. The human development index by the UN (UNHDI) is an essential measuring index that projects a country’s soft power position regionally and beyond. The major constituents of HDI, which can be low, medium or high, are based on a country’s economy, education and health. Nigeria’s HDI was placed at 0.534 in 2018, which was low compared to other regional rivals like South Africa and Egypt. Nigeria was ranked 158 out of 170 countries on the HDI table, suggesting poor development indicators for the country (UNDP 2019).

Nigeria can raise its soft power ranking regionally and globally by overhauling and revamping the basic development indices like its GDP and increasing citizens’ spending power - per capita income. In addition, the country’s current educational enrolment, literacy level, and health management system must improve radically and optimally. These indicators can significantly increase citizens’ life expectancy as a major HDI indicator (UNDP 2019).

Going by the World Bank Good Governance Index, the Nigerian government must use essential measuring indicators to recalibrate its governance system to enhance its soft power profile. Some of these are increasing government effectiveness through qualitative governance, political stability, accountability, regulatory quality, the rule of law, and curbing corruption. Similarly, the EU has highlighted good governance indicators as crucial as participatory democracy, quality public services, local financing, and cross-border cooperation. Therefore, Nigeria must imbibe these values to improve its political and good governance benchmarks (Kaufmann & Kraay 2002, Council of Europe 2020).

The Nigerian government must enhance and guarantee individual freedom, political freedom, and its citizens' fundamental human rights as promoted in the UN convention and African and Peoples Rights protocol. The recent attempt by the government to stifle opposing views, the #EndSars movement demanding government accountability and gagging of the press in a supposedly constitutional democracy could be a severe setback on Nigeria's soft power projection regionally (Ernst & Young 2012, McClory 2015, Onubogu 2020).

There are critical contemporary democratic practices expected of an ambitious regional leader like Nigeria. These vital issues are gender balance, income inequality level, trust in government, capital punishment, murder and homicide, crime rate, government responsibility, and think tanks' role. The government's political will in entrenching these democratic values is critical in reworking its vision of an influential regional leader.

The recent #EndSars protest that shook the country on police brutality, extortions, extra-judicial killings and social vices without appropriate response and accountability further dented the country's leadership ambition regionally. The government must take responsibility and build back citizens' confidence by setting in motion radical reforms to earn back the trust of citizens and non-citizens that has been eroded so much since the protest against the lack of accountability in governance. These reforms that enhance political freedoms can make the country more attractive to others, as elucidated by Nye's soft power attraction approach (Ajayi 2020, Onubogu 2020).

### Foreign policy dimension

The last soft power tool propounded by Nye to complete the third leg of soft power sources is foreign policy. Other scholars refer to it as diplomacy. The state's foreign policy disposition as a function of soft power diffusion is now being measured or ranked with specific indicators. Nigeria's foreign policy, which centres on Africa, is very laudable and one of the most pragmatic regionally. However, despite Nigeria's active and reputable foreign policy credentials in the region, this critical soft power tool needs to be strengthened further (Ogunnubi & Isike 2017, Tella 2018). Some vital diplomacy indicators Nigeria can improve upon are:

**Table 1.**  
Technical aid corps beneficiaries

Africa	Caribbean Region	Pacific Region
Angola, Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Comoros Island, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger Republic, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, The Gambia, Uganda, and Zambia	Belize, Commonwealth of Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, and the Bahamas	Fiji Island

Source: Tella (2018)

*Foreign and development aid:* This is another vital area in which Nigeria has some edge over its regional rivals. However, the country can achieve more in the region and beyond if the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) programme is expanded and better funded (see Table 1). The programme should also include the recipient countries' socio-political, cultural and economic development needs and not only human and technical resources. This will enable the agency to become a critical foreign aid platform of the Nigerian government providing development aid to its allies and partners in the region and beyond, like the UK-DFID, U.S Peace Corps and USAID, etc., in line with its foreign policy objective for the region (Aina 2020).



*Immigration:* Immigration, visa policy and the strength of a country’s passport explain the power of a country. As a critical soft power measuring indicator, immigration policy assesses a country’s regional and global influence. The Nigerian government has to work much harder in raising the country’s soft power capability through its immigration and visa policy which is highly determined by economic opportunities available in a nation, among other factors (KPMG Advisory Services 2017, Henley & Partners 2020). Despite the Nigerian government’s recent establishment of a visa-on-arrival protocol to encourage tourism and investment, policies encouraging culture, education, investment, immigration, and global interconnectivity are significant in raising Nigeria’s regional status (McClory 2015).

The country’s ability to offer asylum to refugees and migrants and the strength of its passport to access other countries in the region and beyond with ease are specific areas the government must reinforce. The strength of a country’s soft power is in the number and quality of foreign immigrants residing in that nation. In affirming this position, Henley and Partners Passport Index, in their analysis, opine that a passport was meant to be a portal to the world, while for others, it was a barrier to the travel freedom they seek (see Table 2). It, therefore, ended with the question of where each state lies on the spectrum of mobility. This question is undoubtedly challenging for the Nigerian state. The Nigerian passport was ranked 94th globally in 2020, with only 46 visa-free access destinations to mainly developing countries of Africa, Oceania, the Caribbean and Asia. It, therefore, needs a further upgrade as a country seeking regional leadership (Henley & Partners 2020).

**Table 2.**  
Global passport ranking 2020

S/N	Country	Rank	Countries Access
1	Japan	1	193
2	USA	7	187
3	South Africa	57	102
4	Nigeria	94	46
5	Somalia	111	34
6	Afghanistan	116	26

Source: The firm of global citizens (Henley & Partners 2020)

Other significant soft power indicators Nigeria has to reinforce from a diplomacy perspective are the number of cultural missions, diplomatic presence/footprints abroad and global network/membership of international organisations. A paradigm shift in Nigeria’s foreign policy and diplomatic engagement in these strategic soft power tools is indicative. Although Nigeria’s diplomatic presence globally is about 110, comprising permanent missions, consular, delegations and representatives to multilateral organisations, the absence of cultural institutions such as the British Council, Goethe Institute and Confucius Institute, among others, is denting Nigeria’s leadership ambitions, hence the need for a step up in that direction.

In the age of climate change and other environmental challenges, international conventions like the Kyoto and Paris Protocols are very germane among other environmental sustainability treaties. Nigeria must respect these laws while exploiting natural resources for economical use as a signatory to these protocols. Nigeria has to reduce environmental pollution in its oil and mining industry as a nation seeking regional and global recognition through power diffusion. The rate of pollution in one of Nigeria’s projected world heritage sites - the Niger-Delta Mangroves (a storehouse of biodiversity, food, energy and mineral resources) violates these international protocols. Consistent regulation of the nation’s environment and adherence to these conventions is decisive in determining Nigeria’s influence, and these are significant soft power ratings today (Lawrence & Sika 2016, Odoh et al. 2017).

### Education sub-index

This study has emphasised the monumental place of education as an aspect of Nigeria's human capital development that needs strategic action. Beyond its importance, Nigeria must improve the quality of its education at all levels. A situation where millions of school-age children are out of school is appalling and diminishes Nigeria's leadership ambitions in the region. The quality of tertiary education in the country must be top-notch. Nigerian universities have to be in the top rank to portray their regional leadership expectation, but this is not the case. The highest-ranking Nigerian university falls between 400-500 spots in the Times University 2021 world ranking (see Table 3), which is low for a potential regional leader.

**Table 3.**  
Times world university rankings 2021

S/N	University	Ranking	Country
1	University of Oxford	1	United Kingdom
2	Stanford	2	USA
3	University of Cape Town	155	South Africa
4	University of Ibadan	401-500	Nigeria

Source: Times Higher Education (2021)

Besides the ranking, the number of international students studying in Nigeria and the number of academic publications in top indexed journals across five major subjects by leading scholars in Nigeria are further education sub-index barometers determining a country's soft power ranking. Adequate funding for higher education in general and STEM, in particular, will engender landmark research and development in Nigeria. It can also solve everyday problems in the country, which is crucial to its image and profile regionally and beyond (McClory 2015, Abdulrazak 2020, Times Higher Education 2021).

### Business/innovation sub-index

This is another category outside the traditional trio by Nye that further measures a country's soft power ranking. Nigeria's business competitiveness has to be upgraded by the government through its regulatory strategy. Support to the private sector and funding of the SMSE industry is pivotal to increasing growth and development. In addition, the ease of doing business and the government support for Nigerian brands outside the country, such as Dangote Group, Globacom, Fintechs, indigenous banks, financial institutions and start-ups, can positively project the country (McClory 2015, Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index 2020).

This position is in line with the World Economic Forum (WEF) description of competitiveness, which highlights sets of institutions, policies and factors that determine a country's productivity level. Nigeria's placement in the 116th position out of 141 countries ranked on the WEF competitiveness index as a regional leader in Africa diminishes its soft power credentials (see Table 4). The corruption perception of Nigeria is not a positive one. Rethinking Nigeria's soft power from the business and innovation perspective means a radical shift in its governance system and a giant leap beyond its unimpressive ranking on the Transparency International Corruption Perception scale. An analysis of a 23 years ranking of Nigeria on the corruption index shows an inconsistent and low rating not befitting a nation aspiring for regional leadership (Schwab 2019, Trading Economics 2020).

**Table 4.**  
Global competitiveness report 2019

Rank	Country	Score
1	Singapore	84.8
2	USA	83.7
60	South Africa	62.4
116	Nigeria	48.3
141	Chad	35.1

Source: Schwab (2019)

Innovation in the contemporary era increases a nation’s profile. Nigeria must key into the new world order, innovate and develop new ideas for tackling everyday problems. This must begin from the health sector to the financial, business, entrepreneurship, startups, etc. The government has to invest in human capacity and funding innovation hubs across the country (Dutta et al. 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic bedevilling the world has exposed Nigerians’ hidden potential to innovate and improvise various forms of technology and medical supplies during the 2020 global lockdown to combat the pandemic. Therefore, the government has to harness these human resources available in the country capable of bringing about substantial improvements and contributions to economic growth, healthcare, and agriculture, among others (Ekun 2020).

International patent right as a GDP contribution to a state’s image is an area the Nigerian state must be reinforced by investing more in research, development and innovations. In addition, a country like Nigeria with regional ambitions has to improve its patent filing, indicating a nation’s level of scholarship, inventions, research and development achievements, and a significant soft power attribute (WIPO 2019). Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is another crucial indicator by promoters of the business/innovation sub-index soft power tool. The Nigerian government has to redouble its current effort to attract FDI to the country (see Table 5). FDI to the country in recent times has shrunk dramatically compared to countries like South Africa and Egypt. The significance of FDI in these countries with high-level investment inflows is always obvious (Rufai 2018).

**Table 5.**  
Africa’s FDI flows, top 5 host economies, 2020

S/N	Countries	Ranking	VALUE (\$)	Ratio TO GDP
1	Egypt	1	5.9 billion	-35.1%
2	Congo (DR)	2	4.0 billion	+19.3%
3	South Africa	3	3.1 billion	-39.4%
4	Nigeria	4	2.4 billion	+3.5%
5	Ethiopia	5	2.4 billion	-6.0%

Source: UNCTAD Report (2020)

Similarly, the level of internet connectivity that enhances digital solutions, among other advantages, is another indispensable way of reinforcing Nigeria’s soft power profile in the region and beyond. Therefore, the Nigerian government must increase its investment in infrastructure and create an enabling regulatory environment for the digital economy to thrive (McClory 2015, Brand Finance-Global Soft Power Index 2020).

## Conclusion

Data from the primary and secondary sources backing the study have been critically depicted, and the analysis aimed at rethinking Nigeria’s soft power capability as a potential regional leader was also situated appropriately. A couple of strategic steps at reinforcing the country’s soft power tools for more significant influence regionally and beyond have also been provided. Given this, the study aligns further with some scholars’ and experts’ views on the significance of applying the above measuring indices in accelerating a country’s soft power capacity.

The paper reiterated the significance of soft power tools, particularly in the area of culture – sports and entertainment, humanitarian and environmental programmes, among others, as having superior influence over tangible power tools of coercion wielded by political and military leaders. It recommended a robust investment in soft power capabilities for countries pursuing regional and global influence.

The paper calls for collaborative 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. Responding to these emerging global issues increases a country’s influence. Therefore, Nigeria can gain prominence when deploying its soft power tools to resolve these issues. The place of STEM education is an essential soft power tool Nigeria needs to develop and deploy to project its regional power in Africa and beyond.

Nigeria's influence in the region can be reinforced by prioritising and investing more in its soft power tools directed towards the region in line with its Afro-centric foreign policy. Developing an extended vision and strategy with critical institutions that disseminate and promote Nigeria's soft power tools is significant. This medium should be in the grade of the British Council and Confucius Institute with a robust platform like the BBC brand with extensive coverage that can be decisive for Nigeria's regional influence.

Nigeria has to develop its higher education and research capacity to attract scholars across Africa with some incentives to promote its influence regionally and beyond. Educational endowments that allow Africans to study in Nigeria should be instituted. The Erasmus Mundus Mobility and Exchange Programme in the EU is an excellent example that can be used to project Nigeria's culture and values across the region and beyond.

Above all, the Nigerian government has to upgrade infrastructure and human resources capability; diversify the economy from oil, develop more soft power resources and get everyone fully engaged in vocation and skills and export them to drastically reduce criminality, since both soft and hard power overlap in some cases, to address the perennial insecurity challenges and create an enabling regulatory environment for the digital economy to thrive. Furthermore, radical reforms that engender improved skills and a more competitive digital job market must be pursued. Finally, the government should support public-private partnerships to stimulate and sustain the digital platform's demand to increase investment opportunities. In sum, the issues discussed above can go a long way in helping Nigeria rethink its soft power capability and raise its prestige regionally and beyond.

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