

Docking Diplomacy: China’S Soft Power And The Geopolitics Of The Lekki Deep Seaport

by

Oluwaseun Igbagboyemi Soile

Department of History & Diplomatic Studies,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria.

oluwaseun.soile@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

Tel. No: 234-8024135913, 08079715536

ORCID: 0000-0002-0047-1684

Abstract

The paper investigates the strategic role of China’s investment in Nigeria's Lekki Deep Seaport as a tool for soft power and geopolitical influence in West Africa. Framing the port within the general Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Africa's infrastructural map, the study propounds that the Lekki Deep Seaport acts not only as an essential economic asset but also as a symbol of shifting world power relations. The paper uses an economic-benefit approach coupled with regional competition in maritime, debt, and state capacity perspectives to foreground the complex interactions between development opportunities and attendant sovereignty issues. It argues that, while the port presents a window for Nigeria's national economic diversification pathway and a test-bed for regional leadership, it also exposes the country to dangers related to debt-dependent governance and strategic manipulation by foreign agents. The study closes by recommending policies geared toward institution-building in Nigeria, transparent debt management, and regional consensus-building. In unpacking the multidimensional ramifications of docking diplomacy, this study offers one avenue toward a more nuanced understanding of China-Africa relations and the geopolitics of maritime infrastructure in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: China-African Relations, Economic Diplomacy, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Lagos, Lekki Deep Seaport

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of China becoming a formidable actor in the international arena, not only through economic build-up but also through strategically deploying its influence around the globe, including Africa. Infrastructure investment stands at the heart of China’s foreign-policy construct and global-image building, being used as one tool of soft power—what scholars have called "infrastructure diplomacy" (Bräutigam, 2009; Nye, 2004). Whereas soft power once may have been linked to the allure of culture or ideology, infrastructure now stands as a manifestation of China's soft power, denoting developmental partnership and mutual benefit. And nowhere is this more clear-cut than in Nigeria, where the development of the Lekki Deep Seaport by Chinese state-oriented

actors offers a probe into how geopolitical influence very practically gets 'docked' in African ports disguised as cooperative development.

In the last few decades, China's economic footprint in Africa has grown steadily larger, with Nigeria—being Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies—fronting as the main theater of Beijing's engagement on the continent. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has poured billions into Nigeria's road, rail, energy, and port infrastructure; thereby cementing its place as a key development partner (Sun, 2014; Alden & Alves, 2017). Yet such investments are more than just about development—they are deeply political and strategic. The Lekki Deep Seaport project is the first deep seaport in Nigeria and one of the largest infrastructural projects of West Africa. The port project is partially financed and constructed by China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), evidencing state-backed economic diplomacy (China-Africa Research Initiative [CARI], 2023).

This paper situates the Lekki Deep Seaport within the greater discourse of China's soft power agenda in Africa by interrogating the use of strategic infrastructure investments for long-lasting political goodwill, economic dependence, and diplomatic leverage. Soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye (2004) as the capacity of states to influence the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments. While Nye contained culture, values, and policies as key mediums of soft power, the approach adopted by China massively expands this definition. In the view of Beijing, large-scale development projects—in particular in the South—are important tools for polishing China's international image and spreading the narrative of South-South solidarity (Callahan, 2016; Kurlantzick, 2007).

Notwithstanding, the expanding Chinese infrastructural footprint in Nigeria has not gone without a few controversies. Discussions pertaining to "debt-trap diplomacy" have questioned those investments as being valid for national sovereignty and as asymmetrical economic relations of power (Bräutigam, 2020). Critics point out that such ventures, though ostensibly developmental, could increase Nigeria's economic dependence on China, weaken its internal institutions, and leave at least some limits on the country's own foreign policy choices. Supporters counter that these investments are needed urgently for major infrastructure, which Western traditional partners have so far failed to deliver without severe conditionalities (Onuoha, 2018; Eguegu, 2022).

This paper, therefore, asks two pertinent questions: To what extent does the Lekki Deep Seaport constitute a channel of China's soft power in Nigeria? And what may be some of the geopolitical implications of such a partnership for Nigerian sovereignty and standing in West

Africa? To address these questions, this study undertakes a qualitative approach, drawing evidence from policy documents, media analyses, related literature, and expert reports and assess the soft power dimensions and geopolitical dynamics of the Lekki port project. It also engages the bigger debates concerning infrastructure-led diplomacy, development finance, and reconfiguration of global powers.

The structure of this paper follows: Section One introduces the subject of the study by providing some background. Section Two outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework, focusing on soft power, infrastructure diplomacy, and China-Africa relations. Section Three details the evolution of China-Nigeria relations, with a focus on economic cooperation and political alignment. Section Four looks at the Lekki Deep Seaport project in detail—its origins, players, and strategic importance. Section Five examines China's use of the port as an instrument of soft power, improving its image and influence in Nigeria. Section Six presents the criticisms and controversies surrounding the port, including debt concerns and geopolitical consequences. Section Seven establishes contextual comparison with other African port investments, while Section Eight concludes with reflections on the wider effect of "docking diplomacy" on Africa-China relations and Nigeria's place within the shifting global order.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section seeks to place strategic considerations within the framework of China's involvement in the Lekki Deep Seaport by exploring the three conceptual pillars which are related to each other: soft power, infrastructure diplomacy, and geopolitical influence. Taken together, these frameworks provide critical thinking around the China-Nigeria engagement, especially through high-profile infrastructure projects. The projects become the lenses through which the bilateral interaction can be analysed not simply as development aid, but as avenues for global influence and diplomatic capital.

Soft Power: Definitions and Chinese Interpretations

Joseph Nye's (2004) influential articulation of soft power remains a pivotal point for discussion into global influence, defining soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment." In Nye's view, soft power has three main sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative (Nye, 2004). While the essence of hard power is military and economic coercion—the essence of soft power lies in the perception and appeal of a state's identity and behaviour.

The Chinese have thus embraced the notion of soft power, but with significant modifications based on their own political philosophy and foreign policy considerations. The Chinese interpretations of soft power go beyond culture and values to include material development and technological advancement, along with cooperation for mutual benefit from an economic standpoint (Wang, 2008). This is in perfect harmony with Beijing's emphasis on mutual respect, non-interference, and win-win cooperation in foreign relations—a point that resonates with many postcolonial countries in Africa and elsewhere (Zhang, 2010).

Modern infrastructure and financial attraction describe China's soft power transformation in the Global South. Rather than focusing on Confucius Institutes, media exports, or elite cultural exchanges, Beijing has constructed an alternative narrative where huge, visible infrastructure projects are meant to stand as symbols of partnership and benevolence (Callahan, 2016; d'Aspremont & Tan, 2020). In this context, soft power is not just conversational—it is built into roads, ports, railways, and industrial zones.

Infrastructure Diplomacy and the Political Economy of Development

Infrastructure diplomacy is the utilisation of infrastructure investment as a foreign policy tool to exert influence and diplomatic leverage. It involves state-sponsored or state-directed investments which serve for the purpose of development but also pursue long-term geopolitical interests (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). This has been very much the case with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which came into being in 2013 to connect China to global markets through vast networks of roads, ports, railways, and energy corridors. Consequently, African states, under the BRI umbrella, have become critical intersections in China's grand plan for international connectivity. Infrastructure diplomacy—of varying degrees and complexity—fosters good relations with African elites, enables resource extraction and access to markets, and creates credibility for China as a global leader that steps in to deliver development when the West has withdrawn (Bräutigam, 2009; Mawdsley, 2018). These investments combine fewer political strings attached than Western aid, are executed in great speed and scale.

It is in Nigeria that this mode of diplomacy can be seen in the form of megaprojects concerning the Abuja-Kaduna railway, the Zungeru hydroelectric plant, and especially the Lekki Deep Seaport. The seeming economic projects serve the wider political purposes of China by creating strategic dependencies, legitimising the Chinese model of development, and promoting Chinese influence within Nigeria's polity (Eguegu, 2022).

Geopolitics, Sovereignty and the Strategic Value of Ports

Ports are not merely economic assets; they are also geopolitical platforms. If a state controls or accesses key maritime infrastructure, it may project power, defend trade routes, and influence regional politics (Kaplan, 2010). China's involvement in the development of African ports, including the Lekki Deep Seaport, must therefore be considered within a broader geopolitical logic. The Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea have become increasingly important theatres for China's global maritime strategy. These ports, including Djibouti (where China has a military base), Mombasa, Bagamoyo, and Lekki, act as strategic logistic points, thereby facilitating China's commercial and perhaps strategic aspirations. Beijing remains adamant that Chinese overseas port investments are purely commercial endeavours, but the dual-use nature of such infrastructure has made many Western policymakers and African civil society actors uneasy (Ferchen *et al.*, 2018).

In Nigeria, from a maritime vantage point, the Lekki Deep Seaport strengthens China's maritime presence along the West African coast and deepens Nigeria's integration into China-centric trade networks. This naturally evokes heavyweight questions on economic sovereignty, dependency, and the guaranteed long-term stewardship of important national assets. Although the port is formally established as a public-private partnership, the largest equity owner—China Harbour Engineering Company—indicates the deep entrenchment of Chinese state interests in Nigeria's infrastructural future (CARI, 2023). Adding further geopolitical context is Nigeria's clout as a regional hegemon in West Africa. With increasing Chinese capital underpinning its critical infrastructure, Nigeria's capacity to independently determine regional political outcomes will be degraded over time, and hence through newfound Chinese-built infrastructure in strategic coastal zones finds a fresh means of influence which will in turn affect Nigeria's alignment in the broader global power race.

China–Nigeria Relations in the Twenty-First Century

An environmentally dynamic strategic bilateral relationship between the two has developed in the last twenty years. The strategic and economic interests have amicably converged in the evolving bilateral relationship between China and Nigeria, so that the growth rate going forward looks indefinite, while political pragmatism and diplomatic non-alignment have served as catalysts for the shifting relationship (Taylor, 2006; Alden & Alves, 2017). While Nigeria is trying to address the infrastructure deficit to spur industrial growth, China presents itself as a development partner ready and willing to provide capital, technical expertise, and diplomatic engagement without the conditionalities almost always attached by Western institutions (Taylor, 2006; Alden & Alves, 2017). With this in mind, this section will outline

the evolution of relations between China and Nigeria in the twenty-first century with a keen eye on economic, political, and strategic dimensions of the partnership as well as their implications for national development and global geopolitics.

Diplomatic Foundations and Strategic Partnership

While formal diplomatic relations between China and Nigeria began in 1971, it was only around the turn of the millennium that more vigorous attraction was generated on both sides (Obiorah, 2007). In 2005, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement that extended bilateral cooperation to trade, energy, infrastructure, agriculture, and culture—the turning-point in the relationship. Nigeria, often described as ‘the giant of Africa’ because of its demographic and economic statistics, occupies a strategic position in China’s Africa policy. Not only is it Africa’s largest economy; it is also a critical gateway into the West African sub-region and the broader Gulf of Guinea maritime zone.

Referring to Nigeria as a strategic partner by China indicates that they recognise the value of each other. For China, Nigeria is a large consumer market, offers access to energy resources that can influence decision-making of countries in the region, and is a strong symbol of African cooperation with Beijing’s model of development. On the Nigerian side, China offers an alternative development partner outside the orbit of Western dominance in international financial institutions and development discourse—one that emphasises non-interference and respect for state sovereignty (Sun, 2014; Eguegu, 2022).

This diplomatic rapprochement has been institutionalised formally through various high-level visits and agreements. Both countries have frequently sent presidential and prime ministerial delegations to one another, and Nigeria is one of the founding members of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which has been the main platform where announcements of Chinese commitments to African development have been made. These meetings have led to some concrete economic outcomes, bulk of which is infrastructural.

Economic Cooperation: Trade, Investment, and Infrastructure

China has become Nigeria's number-one trading partner and one of its major sources of foreign direct investment (FDI). Between 2000 and 2020, bilateral trade grew from below \$2 billion to above \$15 billion, with China exporting manufactured goods and importing crude oil and raw materials (UNCTAD, 2021). However, the trade imbalance continues to be heavily tilted towards the Chinese side, a source of concern to Nigerian policymakers and local industrialists.

More significantly, Chinese presence in Nigeria infrastructure sector has been utterly transformative. Chinese companies are very centrally involved, especially state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating major infrastructure projects in the railway sector, e.g., Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan railways, the Zungeru hydroelectric dam, airport terminals, and now the Lekki Deep Seaport. Many of these projects are financed by way of concessional loans extended by the Chinese policy banks for development, that is, the Export-Import Bank of China, or by way of public-private partnerships (PPPs), guaranteeing China a long-term stake in the operation and management of that infrastructure (Bräutigam, 2009; CARI, 2023).

The Nigerian officials consider these projects as key inputs into the economic transformation of Nigeria. However, the projects do pose questions: given complaints about the loan repayment timelines, low levels of integration of local content, and Chinese dominance in labour, criticism of these projects has started to emanate from within. In addition, the investments tend to be highly centralised and opaque; thus, foregrounding issues relating to governance and accountability for how these deals are struck and carried out (Obiorah *et al.*, 2008; Eze, 2021).

Security and Political Dimensions

Despite its mainly economic underpinnings, China's engagement of Nigeria is not removed from political and security undercurrents. China seems increasingly concerned about the internal stability of Nigeria and its regional security leadership, especially so in the maritime security context in the Gulf of Guinea—a corridor of utmost significance for global energy supply chains and one that directly impacts the operational security of China's seaborne trade.

China has contributed to peacekeeping in Africa and collaboratively works with Nigeria on counterterrorism, cyber governance, and intelligence-sharing issues. More subtly, the Beijing principle of non-interference fits perfectly well into the Nigerian state's sensitivity about sovereignty and international criticism relating to domestic questions such as corruption, electoral violence, or human rights abuses. This complementary outlook in turn strengthens mutual diplomatic support in international fora, including the United Nations (Alden & Large, 2019).

In symbolic terms, Nigeria has often been used by Chinese diplomats and media to demonstrate Sino-African solidarity. Official discourse is usually framed as China as the other developing country supporting the aspirations of an emerging African power, in contrast to the Western patron-client paradigms (Zhang, 2010). The Lekki Deep Seaport, in this narrative, illustrates African development via non-Western cooperation.

The Lekki Deep Seaport – Infrastructure and Strategy

The Lekki Deep Seaport is one of West Africa's largest maritime infrastructure projects and the linchpin of Nigeria's economic transformation and regional leadership aspirations. Situated within the Lekki Free Trade Zone (LFTZ) in Lagos State, the port displays the marriage between infrastructure development and geopolitics. With great financial and technical backing from China, the port projects the deepening influence of China in Nigeria, not just as a development partner but also as a geopolitical actor shaping the country's economic future. This section explores the port's technicalities, strategic rationale, and involvement of the Chinese actors.

Project Overview: Technical and Financial Specifications

The Lekki Deep Seaport is Nigeria's first-ever deep seaport and, upon full completion, should become the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. The port, located about sixty-five (65) kilometres east of the city of Lagos, covers an area of more than ninety (90) hectares and is designed to handle 2.7 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) annually in its first phase while allowing for expansion to 6 million TEUs (Lekki Port LFTZ Enterprise, 2023). Being deep draft, with a depth of about 16.5 meters, the port will be able to accommodate Post-Panamax and Super Post-Panamax vessels, which cannot berth in Apapa and Tin Can Island with their shallow drafts.

Figure 1: Construction nearing completion at the Lekki Deep Seaport, Lagos



Source: The Guardian Nigeria (2022)

The project follows a public-private partnership (PPP) arrangement through the three main bodies: Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), Lagos State Government, and China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). CHEC owns 52.5% of the equity in the project, making it the largest shareholder; the NPA owns 5%, and the remainder is held by the Lagos State Government and other Nigerian entities (CARI, 2023). The value of constructing the port is estimated at more than \$1.5 billion, with most of this above financing coming from the China Development Bank (CDB) as long-term concessional loans.

The port becomes well-linked into the larger Lekki Free Trade Zone, a special economic zone that aims to spearhead export-led industrialisation. This linkage is also strategic, being connected to other mega-projects such as the Dangote Refinery and Petrochemical Complex, Lekki-Epe Expressway, and proposed railway lines, forming an industrial corridor that will transform the Nigerian economy in terms of job creation, trade facilitation, and manufacturing (Eze, 2021).

Strategic Logic: From Infrastructure to Influence

The Lekki Deep Seaport fell out of the cases of hard infrastructure but has overt shades of a deeper and broader strategic logic: infrastructure as a conduit for influence. From a Nigerian perspective, the port addresses long-standing inefficiencies in maritime logistics: the chronic congestion suffered at Lagos ports; the insufficient handling capacity of Nigerian ports; and the high level of loss of revenue due to illegal transshipment and delayed landings (Olukoju, 2020). In that sense, the project is fully aligned with Nigeria's bigger national development priorities as articulated under the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) and the National Development Plan 2021-2025.

China, on its own part, sees bigger strategic outcomes from the port. Firstly, it establishes a maritime base in West Africa, thus linking Nigeria into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in spite of Nigeria having never been made a party to it. Secondly, the port ought to intensify China's logistics footprint within the Gulf of Guinea, which is fast becoming a geographical jewel because of its energy reserves, shipping lanes, and vicinity to regional markets (Ferchen *et al.*, 2018).

More importantly, the 45-year-long-term concession of CHEC ensures China's commercial presence and leverage in Nigerian maritime affairs for the foreseeable future. Although not a military base, this port lays down another "strategic strongpoint" globally for China, which means it is a civilian facility that might be used to underpin diplomatic or

security goals in the future (Cheney, 2022). The dual-use nature of such facilities, like those seen in ports such as Gwadar (Pakistan) and Djibouti, heightens their applicability for longer-term geopolitical strategies.

Sovereignty, Dependency and Soft Power Politics

There are issues of sovereignty, debt dependency, and soft power that the Lekki Deep Seaport project raises. Though officially labelled a PPP, the preponderance of CHEC and CDB in financing and construction design renders a clear asymmetry in decision-making capacity. As a matter of fact, some Nigerian analysts have argued that the port may serve as a form of "strategic encumbrance" that ties Nigeria to Chinese economic interests and constrains the scope for autonomous policy manoeuvres in the maritime sphere (Eguegu, 2022).

Even though the loans from CDB are granted on concessionary terms, their actual conditions have been kept under wraps through confidentiality agreements, which continue to stir much public speculation on debt sustainability and asset seizure. Even so, while evidence are not at hand showing China intends to use these ports as leverage as critics of "debt-trap diplomacy" allege, the very perception of control has affected public opinion, as well as discourse among the elites in Nigeria (Bräutigam, 2020).

However, the port does constitute soft power currency for China. Its promise, visibility, and association with progress significantly contribute to the narrative of China as Africa's indispensable development partner. The local media have often portrayed the port as concrete evidence of China's commitment to Africa's rise in sharp contrast to the perceived indifference or extractivism of Western actors (Zhang, 2010). Therefore, this port bolsters China's soft power, not just through ideology or culture, but through concrete projects that make a tangible difference in the lives of ordinary Africans and consequently feed into the prestige of these affected states.

Soft Power in Practice: Image, Influence and Diplomacy

Deeply important in terms of soft power investments is China's strategic involvement in the construction of the Lekki Deep Seaport. This is a representation of its general approach to soft power through infrastructure, culture, and diplomatic engagements that are employed in the art of fostering cooperation without the need for overt threat. Soft power, unlike traditional hard power, is not about bullying nations into agreement through means of force or sanction but is concerned with overt acts of attraction, an attempt to build legitimacy, and to shape preferences through narratives and a web of relationships (Nye, 2004). Therefore,

the Lekki Deep Seaport can be perceived both physically and ideologically as a platform that sustains China's image as a partner, moderniser, and proponent of common development.

Infrastructure as a Vehicle of Soft Power

Infrastructure investment has come to constitute a fundamental aspect of China's soft power approach in Africa. Through vast projects such as the Lekki Deep Seaport, China presents itself as an alternative development partner providing concrete payouts in areas where Western assistance is often criticised for excessive bureaucracy and conditionality (Bräutigam 2019). The port project, mainly financed through loans from China and executed by Chinese contractors, is the living embodiment of China's promise of infrastructural transformation.

Intentional narrative building around the port stresses idea of mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty. Chinese officials frequently describe the Lekki Deep Seaport as a "win-win" project under the BRI, with particular emphasis placed on how it enhances Nigeria's economic fortunes and regional integration (China Daily 2023). Such statements strike a chord with Nigerian elites and policymakers keen to diversify the economy and improve the competitiveness of trade.

By investing in big, visible projects, China is even better placed to influence elites and the wider population's perception. The visibility of Chinese workers, equipment, and branding at Lekki continually reinforces the idea of China being part of Nigeria's development story; this existence of discrete presence goes a long way in building a positive image of China as a trustworthy partner, which extends to diplomatic goodwill and political capital.

Figure 2: An Inside View of the Completed Lekki Deep Seaport



Source: Business Day (15 July 2025)

Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Exchange

As a complement to infrastructural soft power, China conducts wide-ranging cultural diplomacy aimed at cementing social and political ties with Nigeria. Confucius Institutes set up by China in Nigerian universities blend Chinese language teaching with cultural events and academic exchanges to cultivate understanding of Chinese culture and values (Kurlantzick, 2007). Through China-funded scholarships, Nigerian students are sent to study in China, creating a group of alumni who are personally and professionally connected to Beijing (Zhao, 2020), while the students on their return home become part of informal diplomacy channel through promoting China's positive image and development model.

Both state media from China and Nigerian news agencies frequently showcase the Lekki Deep Seaport project as a symbol for a new era of Sino-Nigerian relations. The Chinese companies executing the port construction also take on community projects, such as the construction of schools, clinics, and training centres near the project sites (Eguegu, 2022). These efforts help to create goodwill among the local people and counteract suggestions of exploitation by foreign firms.

Messaging and Strategic Communication

China's diplomatic messaging around the Lekki Deep Seaport carefully highlights themes relevant to Nigeria's national development discourse — sovereignty, shared prosperity, and

South-South cooperation (Alden & Large, 2011). The attempt to deem the project "African-led" and "African-owned" is one that addresses concerns related to neo-colonialism and China-mindedness, technically levelled at loss of autonomy. Albeit depending on China for operational control (Kalu, 2020). The official Chinese rhetoric goes on about the respect it gives to Nigeria's development priorities, stressing point blank that China would not intervene in its internal affairs, thus providing a Lexus and an olive branch to decision makers in Nigeria who cherish sovereign decision making and view almost a moral obligation on Western aid and loans to work with external conditionalities attached thereto. Moreover, China uses the port to promote its broader BRI framework—the promise of infrastructure connectivity and economic integration in different continents—while presenting the Lekki Deep Seaport as its flagship BRI project in West Africa outsourcing a message to other African countries that tangible outcomes will arise through collaboration with China.

Building Influence through Economic Interdependence

The soft-power infrastructure investment, such as Lekki, is further enhanced by the economic interdependence. As Nigeria becomes more connected to China via trade, finance, and technology transfer, a mutual interest develops in maintaining stable relations (Mohan & Lampert 2013). Chinese companies involved in running the port also facilitate cargo movements and provide complementary economic activities such as logistics, warehousing, and industrial processing zones near the port. These activities create jobs, build skills, and diversify the economy in Lagos State and beyond. The economic livelihood that comes will be a kind of soft power in creating constituencies at home who would want to see good relations maintained between themselves and China. China, in their strategic interest, gains access to Nigerian markets and trade routes through West Africa, consolidating their influence in the region. Diplo-economic relations build incentives for Nigeria to keep China in their perspectives in diplomatic forums, trade negotiations, and multilateral engagements.

Challenges and Limits of China's Soft Power at Lekki

Despite these successes, China's soft power projection through the Lekki Deep Seaport faces many challenges. The limited transparency of loan agreements and the relatively small Nigerian equity stake have fuelled criticism domestically, raising questions about the depth of Nigeria's ownership and control (Bräutigam, 2020). Social and environmental concerns

related to the port's construction have also sparked protests and local opposition, complicating the narrative of mutual benefit (UNEP, 2021). In addition, China's image is sometimes tarnished by perceived labour practices and the baseline of technology transfer, which do not reflect the ideal of an equitable partnership. Worse from a soft-power perspective, geopolitical competition, especially from Western powers fearful of China's rising influence in the world, means that the soft-power gains from Lekki need to be constantly reinforced through active diplomatic engagement at the grassroots level.

Contestations, Controversies and Geopolitical Implications

While Lekki Deep Seaport is a monumental infrastructure representing Nigeria's aspirations of economic modernisation and regional prominence, it is concurrently a hotbed of contestations and controversies. These contestations highlight broader tensions with respect to sovereignty, environmental sustainability, debt dependence, and shifting geopolitical alignments. This section critically examines the problems surrounding the port and situates the Lekki Deep Seaport in the complicated regional and global political economy.

Sovereignty Concerns and National Interest

At the core of many criticisms lies sovereignty and control over strategic national infrastructure. The Lekki Deep Seaport is being operated under a concession agreement said to last for forty (40) years, with the main operator being the China Harbour Engineering Company (Olukoju, 2020). For many Nigerians, the concern here remains the eventual consequences of ceding long-term control to a foreign entity over a critical gateway into its maritime trade. Such arrangements raise the spectre of neo-colonial dependence, where economic sovereignty is compromised by the terms of foreign investment (Aning & Pokoo, 2021). There are allegations that Nigeria's equity stake is quite meagre, said to be about twenty percent (20%), with the contractual terms shrouded in secrecy, thereby, undermining ownership and placing Nigeria at the mercy of external pressures.

Furthermore, given that complete transparency of the loan agreements and repayment terms is lacking, this has aggravated the concerns of governance and accountability. In this regard, civil society organisations, opposition politicians, as well as some media outlets, have demanded that there be full disclosure purportedly to ensure that the project truly advances Nigeria's broader economic interests and that Nigeria is not saddled with an inherently unsustainable obligation (Bräutigam, 2020).

Debt Sustainability and Economic Risks

In the above-mentioned issues of sovereignty is the vexed question of debt sustainability. While the Lekki Deep Seaport is mainly financed through Chinese loans which, on one hand, assure quick infrastructural development, on the other hand, they bring with them financial obligations that may be straining Nigeria's fiscal capacity (Gallagher & Yuan, 2021). Proponents emphasise the port's upgrading and trade facilitation on the grounds that they will bring economic benefits in the long run, whereas sceptics speak of the possibilities of debt distress. The fear of "debt-trap diplomacy"—situated in the theory that China purposely ensnares countries in debts that are not sustainable so that it may extract strategic concessions—has gained currency, although remains the subject of much debate amongst scholars (Bräutigam, 2020; Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018). Nigeria's experience with increasing external debt underscores the importance of prudent debt management. Critically, in the absence of stern oversight and transparent renegotiations, the Lekki project may, in the opinion of the critics, further aggravate Nigeria's debt burden, thereby reducing her fiscal space for social and developmental expenditure and increasing vulnerability to external shocks.

Environmental and Social Controversies

Environmental sustainability emerges as a crucial issue of contestation relating to the Lekki Deep Seaport. The port is situated close to the Lekki Lagoon- a sensitive ecological zone rich in biodiversity (UNEP, 2021). There is anxiety about destruction of habitats, pollution with increased shipping activities, and potential long-term degradation of marine and coastal ecosystems. These environmental hazards are further compounded by Nigeria's previously existing difficulty with enforcing environmental legislation and regulations and ensuring that industrial adaptation conforms to these. On a social level, the project has been criticised for insufficient stakeholder consultations, particularly with the indigenous and local people affected by land acquisition and displacement. Opposition arises with complaints of insufficient compensation and loss of livelihoods. Although the Chinese enterprises have taken steps in community development by erecting schools and health facilities, these grievances persist (Eguegu, 2022). These social tensions are brought to the fore by protests and legal suits, underscoring the importance of undertaking Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) transparently and promoting community engagement processes that uphold human rights and respect for local autonomy.

Regional Competition and Diplomatic Tensions

With its strategic location in Lagos, which is the economic hub of West Africa, Lekki Deep Seaport is poised to alter the dynamics of maritime trade within the sub-region. However, this position of prominence gives rise to competitive forces pitting the ports of neighbouring countries, especially Ghana (Tema), Benin (Cotonou), and Togo (Lomé), against each other (UNCTAD, 2022). Regional actors view the new port with apprehension as it is likely to divert trade flows and investments, thereby shifting economic balances within the West African sub-region. This competition sometimes frays diplomatic relations, thus setting a hindrance to regional integration through organisations such as ECOWAS. Furthermore, the Chinese connection brings a geopolitical twist to regional infrastructure development. Other global powers, namely, the United States, the European Union, and some of the former colonial territories, are watching China building up its presence in West Africa with growing distrust as they foresee strategic implications in terms of influence over vital maritime chokepoints (Kalu, 2020).

Geopolitics of Maritime Infrastructure

Lekki Deep Seaport is strategically placed in the world theatre to function as a critical node for China's wider strategic aspirations brought under the Belt and Road Initiative and the so-called "String of Pearls" maritime strategy (Shichor, 2019). China, by building and taking control of ports across Africa and Asia, seeks to guarantee supply chains, safeguard energy routes, and project naval presence. Thus, the development of Lekki sends out a clear message about China's intent to pursue greater influence in the Atlantic maritime domain at the expense of traditional Western maritime dominance along shipping lanes. This said expansion has birthed a new geopolitical contest between China and established powers, Nigeria being a middle ground where this contestation unfolds. For Nigeria, this geopolitical setup is one rife with both opportunities and threats. While getting economically closer to China will translate into immediate benefits like infrastructure modernisation and enhanced regional leadership for Nigeria, the country will henceforth have to carefully diplomatically balance to avoid alienating other international partners and engaging into a larger power rivalry.

Navigating Contestations: Policy Challenges and Opportunities

Subsequently, the Lekki Deep Seaport provides Nigeria with a vivid example of why foreign investment and infrastructure diplomacy call for superior governance mechanisms. Transparency is required from the inception of contract negotiations. This should be accompanied by inclusive stakeholder engagement and firm adherence to environmental and

social safeguards to relieve the associated risks. Apart from this, Nigeria should also expand its strategic partnerships to avoid becoming over-reliant on any one external actor. It is also of prime importance that regional cooperation mechanisms are strengthened to harmonise port development and encourage equitable trade development in order to lessen antagonistic competition. Eventually, how Nigeria wrangles with the contestations around the Lekki Deep Seaport will impact her sovereignty, economic trajectory, and regional standing as we take steps.

Comparative Reflections and Regional Trends

Lekki Deep Seaport is perhaps the most prized jewel of China's massive infrastructure diplomacy in Africa. However, it also is spiralling in dynamics, taking shape against a wider regional and continental backdrop wherein maritime infrastructure development is fast becoming one theatre of competition, cooperation and strategic manoeuvring. Thus, the paper seeks to situate the Lekki affair within comparative frameworks across West Africa and beyond, analyzing regional trends, lessons learnt, and the implications on the future trajectory of maritime infrastructure and geopolitics in Africa.

Comparative Overview of Major Port Projects in West Africa

Over the past two decades, the West African region has witnessed increased port infrastructure development occasioned by rising trade flows, urbanisation, and attempts to spur industrialisation. Key projects are the expansion of the Tema Port in Ghana, the Port of Cotonou in Benin, and the Lomé Port in Togo—all of which, like Lekki, have seen major Chinese investment and expertise under the BRI umbrella and other bilateral arrangements (UNCTAD, 2022). Each port projects specific national interests and geopolitics:

- **Tema Port, Ghana:** The expansion of Tema has been carried out on the basis of public-private partnerships with Chinese companies and has become Ghana's central logistics hub on which are dependent neighbour landlocked countries. The Government of Ghana seeks to ensure good governance and transparency and hence emphasises local content policy that would maximise benefits and reduce dependence (Amanor, 2021).
- **Port of Cotonou, Benin:** Cotonou, as the main trans-shipment hub in West Africa, has exploited its locational advantage to attract foreign investment, especially Chinese capital (Ayayi, 2020). However, Benin aims to balance these partnerships with those involving European and other African stakeholders in order to diversify influence.
- **Lomé Port, Togo:** The deep waters of the Lomé Port and its rapid growth have been extensively shaped by strategic reforms and investments, including Chinese help in

upgrading the container terminal. Togo, in its pursuit of regional integration under ECOWAS frameworks, attempts to position Lomé as a gateway to the hinterland (Djagba, 2022).

These ports are faced with similar challenges to Lekki, such as debt management, ensuring local benefits, and geopolitics, while they differ importantly in governance approach, partnerships, and community engagement strategies.

Regional Integration and Infrastructure Corridors

Within the marine sector in West Africa, regional integration constitutes a growing imperative (African Development Bank, 2019). Infrastructure corridors connecting a port with its inland transport network intend to facilitate trade flows, reduce costs, and spur industrialisation. Considering its location within the Lagos megacity, an economic hub; and its plans for industrial zones, the Lekki Deep Seaport is expected to be a major node for integration. Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aim towards the creation of a seamless regional market. Efficient port operations and connectivity are fundamental to the realisation of such lofty goals. The ability to handle large vessels and containers at Lekki sets Nigeria up to handle the increased volumes of regional cargo.

In spite of this, however, integration has been severely hampered by competing national interests, poor infrastructure linkages away from the port, and uneven policy implementation. Lessons from Tema and Lomé emphasise the need for regional planning and regulations to be coordinated, enabling maximum benefit to derive from port investments (UNCTAD, 2022).

China's Role in Regional Maritime Infrastructure Development

The Chinese presence in West African ports extends well beyond Lekki to a smattering of countries in what appears to be a shift in strategic approach to maritime connectivity under the BRI. Having stressed financing, construction, and operational management, China has quickened port modernisation but at the possible expense of questioning issues of sovereignty and dependency (Bräutigam, 2009). Whereas Western donors often tie conditionalities to governance reforms or environmental standards, Chinese investment chooses to stress respect for sovereignty along with rapid potentials of development. African governments have been attracted to the Chinese way of doing things, even though they would have to be cautious about ensuring sustainable outcomes. China has also stirred competition and collaboration among West African states on a regional level. A few governments see

Chinese partnerships as a possibility to improve infrastructure deficits, whereas others worry about being overshadowed by stronger neighbours or losing leverage to China.

Lessons from Other African Regions

Looking beyond West Africa, port development in East and Southern Africa provides instructive comparisons. The development of the Mombasa Port in Kenya and the Doraleh Container Terminal in Djibouti have involved significant Chinese participation and reveal parallel patterns of opportunity and contestation (Kragelund, 2017). For instance, Kenya's Mombasa port modernisation has boosted trade but also sparked debates about debt and local stakeholder engagement. Similarly, Djibouti's port expansion under Chinese leases has strategic military implications, raising regional security concerns (Shichor, 2019). These cases underscore the need for African states to strengthen institutional capacities to manage complex infrastructure projects, negotiate favourable terms, and balance multiple foreign partners' interests to safeguard national priorities.

Emerging Trends: Digitalisation, Sustainability and Multilateral Cooperation

Emerging regional trends in maritime infrastructure also include digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and multilateral collaboration. Digitisation of port operations—through technologies like blockchain, automation, and real-time tracking—is becoming critical to enhancing efficiency and transparency (UNCTAD, 2022). The Lekki Deep Seaport project has begun exploring such technologies, positioning itself as a modern hub capable of meeting global shipping standards. Embracing digitalisation fits neatly with Nigeria's broader "Digital Economy" agenda, fostering competitiveness and integration into global supply chains.

Sustainability concerns are prompting greater attention to environmental impact mitigation and resilience-building against climate change effects, especially for coastal infrastructure vulnerable to sea-level rise and extreme weather (UNEP, 2021). However, the lessons from other African ports stand as a stark reminder that sustainability being embedded into planning and operations has slowly become the non-negotiable in this regard. Additionally, the multilateral cooperation, including ECOWAS and the African Union, is steadily establishing itself as a coordinating mechanism for infrastructure development, harmonisation of policies, and mobilisation of funding from diversified sources. This, in theory, gives hope of reducing duplicated investments while wrestling external investors together with stronger bargaining power.

Implications for Nigeria and the Lekki Deep Seaport

For Nigeria, the regional and comparative insights urge the strategic, forward-looking positioning of Lekki Deep Seaport that would include:

- a) Strengthening institutional governance so as to ensure transparency and accountability in port operations and investment agreements.
- b) Strengthening regional coordination towards building trade complementarities rather than inter-port competition to the detriment of collective growth.
- c) Investing in infrastructure in the hinterland so that it becomes worthy of the full capacity of the port and ultimately offers integration into the broader economic development.
- d) Giving priority to the concepts of environment and social sustainability while considering the possible risks so that the gains could be optimised in the long term with social communities supporting it.
- e) Diversifying the international partnerships to circumvent the risk of being wholly dependent on a single external player, thus harnessing knowledge and finance from all possible avenues.

By situating Lekki in these regional trends and comparative experiences, Nigeria may better handle the opportunities and risks facing the maritime infrastructure development to become a source of national prosperity and regional integration in the multipolar world.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Lekki Deep Seaport is something of a meeting point for global capital, national aspirations, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Being an infrastructure of grand scale, it signals the aspirations of Nigeria of becoming the leading maritime and economic hub in West Africa. As an instrument of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it also exemplifies the broader global power rebalancing, especially the deepening strategic and economic entanglements between Africa and China.

This paper has argued that the port is not simply a logistical node but also an arena geopolitically. It embodies China's soft power strategies—with narratives of partnership, modernisation, and mutually beneficial cooperation—while also fulfilling interests of a material and strategic nature. For Nigeria, the port brings concrete benefits in trade competitiveness, industrial development, and regional influence. However, it also exposes vulnerability: asymmetric power relations, gaps in regulatory capacity, and erosion of policy sovereignty.

In a sense, these become dualities that have to be reflected upon to understand the notion of docking diplomacy; a term that is used here to describe how maritime infrastructure serves as both a literal and metaphorical gateway for foreign influence. China's docking of capital, technology, and ideology onto African ports reshapes landscapes in sovereignty, security, and development.

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Soft Power in Practice:** China has leveraged the Lekki Deep Seaport not only to meet Africa's infrastructure needs but to rebrand itself as a reliable development partner. The port functions as a tool of attraction and legitimacy, allowing Beijing to gain influence through deliverables rather than coercion or ideological exportation.
2. **Economic and Strategic Leverage:** The port enhances Nigeria's capacity for trade, but under terms that grant China long-term operational control. This raises questions about the balance between national benefit and foreign leverage, especially given the opacity of concession and financing arrangements.
3. **Regional Reordering:** By establishing a maritime stronghold in Nigeria, China contributes to the reordering of West Africa's port hierarchy and trade corridors. This may increase Nigeria's regional clout but could also engender tensions with neighbouring states and external actors wary of Chinese strategic depth.
4. **Sovereignty and Governance Gaps:** From the limited equity stake and regulatory presence of the Nigerian state at the port, broader governance issues are posed. Absent institutional checks and balances, Nigeria may find it difficult to ensure that the port's operations serve wider national development objectives.

Policy Recommendations

In the light of above findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. **Rebalancing Concession Agreements:** The Nigerian government should push for periodic review of concession terms, especially those relating to revenue-sharing, labour standards, and environmental compliance. Any re-negotiation must focus on equity stakes commensurate with the national importance of the port and must articulate in greater detail mechanisms for developing local content.
2. **Institutional Capacity Development:** To avoid regulatory capture, Nigeria must enhance institutional capacity at the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), Nigerian Shippers Council (NSC), and Customs Service. This includes digitising port processes, professional development, and cross-agency coordination. This regulatory environment

is needed to maintain competitive standing and guarantee that public interests are maintained.

3. **Transparency of Debt and Fiscal Prudence:** The Ministry of Finance and the National Assembly must be more transparent in their professing of Chinese loans and concession agreements. In publishing the full terms of the China Development Bank Loan, speculation would be tamed, public trust fostered, and Nigeria's debt governance regime enhanced. Debt sustainability assessments must, henceforth, become a precondition for any new infrastructure borrowing.
4. **Environmental and Social Safeguards:** Lekki Port and such large infrastructure projects must submit themselves to rigorous Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Social Impact Assessments (SIAs), with all findings fully publicised. Local communities negatively impacted by the expansions, land reclamation, and industrial pollution of the port should be brought into planning and compensation. Future expansions must be aligned with Nigeria's climate and sustainability goals.
5. **Regional Integration and Diplomacy:** To avoid a race to the bottom in regional port competition, ECOWAS and the AfCFTA Secretariat should coordinate port development strategies across West Africa. A regional maritime blueprint may help the distribution of traffic, harmonise tariffs, and promote collaboration rather than zero-sum rivalries.
6. **China Engagement Strategy:** Nigeria needs to articulate a China strategy moving beyond opportunistic borrowing toward more structured engagement, including developing internal expertise on Chinese foreign policy; the creation of inter-ministerial taskforces on China-Africa relations; capacity-building and enhancement of the role of the Office of the National Security Adviser in infrastructure diplomacy; and diversifying of Nigeria's partners in infrastructure to avoid over-dependence.

Final Remarks

Lekki Deep Seaport is more than a mere physical entry point; it is a strategic reflection of Nigeria's opportunities and challenges in an evolving world order. It confirms China's arrival as an infrastructure superpower, but it also tests the administrative resilience and foresight of Nigeria. For the country to fully maximise the styles of cooperation, it must move from a passive recipient of docking diplomacy to an active architect of its development destiny. Hence, on the geopolitical scene, ports stand in for the deeper questions of sovereignty, agency, and the future of African modernity. As Nigeria navigates a new connectivity and

interdependence era, it must anchor itself in transparency and accountability towards a shared strategic vision.

References

1. African Development Bank. (2019). *West Africa Regional Integration Strategy Paper*. Abidjan: African Development Bank.
2. Alden, C., & Alves, A. C. (2017). *China and Africa's Development: Partnership, Practice and Prospects*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Alden, C., & Large, D. (2011). China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20(68), 21–38.
4. Alden, C., & Large, D. (2019). *New Directions in Africa–China Studies*. London: Routledge.
5. Amanor, K. (2021). Governance and local content in Ghana's port sector development. *African Journal of Economic Policy*, 28(1), 37–54.
6. Aning, K., & Pokoo, J. (2021). Sovereignty and foreign investment in Africa: The Lekki deep seaport case. *African Journal of International Affairs*, 14(2), 101–117.
7. Ayayi, S. (2020). Port modernization and regional competition in Benin. *West African Maritime Review*, 12(2), 102–118.
8. Bräutigam, D. (2009). *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
9. Bräutigam, D. (2020). *A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy'*. *Area Development and Policy*, 5(1), 1–14.
10. Callahan, W. A. (2016). *China Dreams: China's New Leadership and Future Impacts*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
11. Cheney, S. (2022). Strategic Strongpoints: China's Port Infrastructure and Global Power Projection. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 5(2), 23–39.
12. China Daily. (2023). Nigeria's first deep seaport opens for operation. *China Daily Africa* 25th January 2023 Available online at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202301/25/WS63d01498a31057c47ebab2c8.html>
13. China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI). (2023). *Chinese Investment in Africa Database*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
14. d'Aspremont, J., & Tan, S. (2020). *The Political Economy of China's Belt and Road Initiative*. London, England: Routledge.

15. Djagba, D. (2022). Regional integration and port development in Togo. *Journal of African Infrastructure*, 5(3), 55–72.
16. Eze, C. (2021). *China in Nigeria: Risks and Realities of Infrastructure Finance*. Research Report. Centre for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch University.
17. Federal Government of Nigeria. (2021). *National Development Plan 2021–2025*.
18. Ferchen, M., Perera, A., & Zhou, Y. (2018). *Why Unsustainable Chinese Infrastructure Deals Are a Problem for Africa*. Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre.
19. Gallagher, K. P., & Yuan, F. (2021). China's Development Finance and the Debt Sustainability of African States. *Global Policy*, 12(3), 345–358.
20. Hurley, J., Morris, S., & Portelance, G. (2018). Examining the debt implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a policy perspective. *CGD Policy Paper*.
21. Jones, L., & Hameiri, S. (2020). *Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative*. London: Chatham House.
22. Kalu, K. (2020). Africa in the Crosshairs: US-China Competition and the Future of African Sovereignty. *International Affairs Forum*, 11(2), 45–53.
23. Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House.
24. Kragelund, P. (2017). East African port development and Chinese influence: The case of Mombasa. *Development Policy Review*, 35(2), 247–263.
25. Kurlantzick, J. (2007). *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
26. Lekki Port LFTZ Enterprise. (2023). *About Us*. <http://lekkiport/about-us/>
27. Mawdsley, E. (2018). *South–South Cooperation 3.0? Managing the Consequences of Success in the Decade Ahead*. *Oxford Development Studies*, 46(3), 259–274.
28. Mohan, G., & Lampert, B. (2013). Negotiating China: Reinserting African agency into China–Africa relations. *African Affairs*, 112(446), 92–110.
29. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.
30. Obiorah, N. (2007). *Rising China and Africa's Development: Oil and Beyond*. *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Occasional Papers*.
31. Obiorah, N., Naidu, S., & Mandelbaum, K. (2008). *China's Engagement of Africa: Preliminary Scoping of African Case Studies*. *SAIIA Report*.
32. Olukoju, A. (2020). Maritime Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Port Reform in Nigeria. *Journal of African Maritime Studies*, 3(1), 45–62.

33. Onuoha, G. (2018). China's Belt and Road Initiative and Nigeria's Developmental Aspirations. *African Studies Quarterly*, 18(3), 35–50.
34. Eguegu, O. (2022). China's infrastructure diplomacy in Africa: Balancing opportunity and risk. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/chinas-infrastructure-diplomacy-in-africa-balancing-opportunity-and-risk/>
35. Shichor, Y. (2019). China's 'String of Pearls' and China's strategy in the Indian Ocean. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 6(2), 139–157.
36. Sun, Y. (2014). *Africa in China's Foreign Policy*. Brookings Institution.
37. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2021). *Bilateral Trade Statistics*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNCTAD.
38. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2022). *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNCTAD.
39. United Nations Environment Programme. (2021). *Environmental impacts of port development in West Africa*. Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP.
40. Wang, H. (2008). China's New Foreign Policy: Soft Power Diplomacy and Its Limits. *East Asia*, 25(4), 349–368.
41. Zhang, X. (2010). China's Soft Power in Africa: Promoting Chinese Model or Developing Mutual Understanding? *China & World Economy*, 18(1), 1–19
42. Zhao, S. (2020). China's educational diplomacy and African students in China. *Journal of African Studies*, 9(3), 215–230.