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United States Soft Power Strategies and Their Impact on Nigeria's Foreign Policy Alignment in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study critically examines United States soft power strategies and their influence on Nigeria's foreign policy alignment in the twenty-first century. It addresses the debate over whether non-coercive diplomatic instruments shape Nigeria's external policy choices or primarily strengthen bilateral relations without fundamentally altering the country's strategic autonomy. Adopting a qualitative documentary research design, the study draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents and official reports. Thematic content analysis is used to assess major instruments of U.S. soft power and their relationship to Nigeria's foreign policy behaviour. The analysis identifies educational exchange, public diplomacy, health cooperation, cultural engagement and governance assistance as important channels through which the United States cultivates goodwill, institutional relationships and opportunities for cooperation. However, the reviewed evidence does not demonstrate that these engagements have produced sustained or comprehensive alignment of Nigeria's foreign policy with that of the United States. Nigeria's external relations continue to reflect national interests, regional responsibilities and the pursuit of strategic flexibility amid growing international competition. The study therefore distinguishes diplomatic access and issue-specific cooperation from durable policy convergence. It concludes that U.S. soft power is more clearly associated with stronger bilateral engagement than with decisive changes in Nigeria's overall foreign policy orientation. Future cooperation is likely to be more productive when it reflects mutual benefits, credible partnerships and Nigeria's independently defined strategic priorities.

Keywords: *Soft power, United States, Nigeria, foreign policy alignment, public diplomacy, strategic autonomy.*

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1. Introduction

The growing complexity of today's international relations has changed the means by which states implement their foreign policy goals. Military force and economic pressure are still very much part of statecraft, but the power to shape the preferences and actions of others by attraction, persuasion and cooperation has proven to be of great importance as well. This method is often considered soft power and has been used more and more by governments to pursue their national interests through diplomacy, exchange and education, cultural diplomacy, development aid, public health, strategic communication, etc. (Çiçek, 2022; Saaida, 2023). The United States has consistently introduced these instruments into its foreign policy system at the global level, recognising that influence can often be exerted through trust building, shared values, institutional partnership and people-centred approaches, and not solely through coercion (Panfilov & Savchenko, 2021; Kia et al., 2025). Importantly, soft power should not be equated with every non-military instrument of foreign policy: its distinctive mechanism is attraction and perceived legitimacy, whereas financial inducements and conditional assistance may operate through bargaining. This distinction is essential when assessing the channels through which U.S. engagement might influence Nigerian decision-makers. Nigeria is an important partner in U.S. engagement with sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria has significant diplomatic influence in Africa as the continent's most populous country, one of its largest economies and a key player in the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union. As a result, successive administrations of the USA have increased their involvement in Nigeria through educational exchange programmes, public diplomacy, health programmes, security programmes, cultural diplomacy, entrepreneurship development

and democratic governance support programmes. These efforts aim to foster deeper ties between the two nations and promote cooperation and convergence in key areas such as regional security, democratic governance, economic cooperation, counterterrorism, and international diplomacy (Oghenerukevwe, 2024; Ogunseye, 2024). This is an example of soft power diplomacy, signaling an increasing need to use soft power as a tool for maintaining strategic alliances in an increasingly competitive international system. Although, the United States soft power is extensively deployed in Nigeria, there are divergent opinions on how much it has influenced Nigeria's foreign policy orientation. Some scholars believe that through sustained public diplomacy, cultural engagement and development assistance, the perceptions of others can be favourable which will lead to policy cooperation while others believe Nigeria continues to formulate its foreign policy based on principle of national interest, strategic autonomy, and non alignment which has been the case from the post-independence period (Goldsmith et al., 2020; Rhee et al., 2023; Abidoye, 2026). This debate has gained more importance in the twenty first century with the power struggle among different actors in the world, especially the involvement of other world powers such as China, Russia, Türkiye and other emerging powers in Africa. The emerging competitive diplomatic landscape offers Nigeria several strategic partnerships, which results in a lower risk that any one external actor will be able to influence the country's foreign policy decision-making (Bature, 2025; Heibach & Taş, 2023). The notions of soft power, public diplomacy and international influence have been the subject of much discussion in the existing literature. But, very few studies have been undertaken to critically evaluate if the use of these instruments has resulted in any tangible foreign policy realignment as it pertains to the Nigeria context in the United States Foreign policy. Many studies on soft power or generally on

United States Africa relations have failed to account for how these aspects might intersect with Nigeria's domestic policy, regional leadership, and foreign policy doctrine (Baruah, 2024; Zanella et al., 2024). Thus, there is still a gap in analysis regarding the ties between soft power diplomacy of the United States and foreign policy decision making in Nigeria. Against this background, this study pursues two objectives. The first objective is The central analytical question is therefore not whether the two countries cooperate, but whether identifiable Nigerian foreign policy decisions converge with U.S. preferences because of attraction generated by these engagements. Such an assessment must distinguish correlation, shared interests and demonstrable influence.

1. 1. To critically examine the soft power strategies employed by the United States in its engagement with Nigeria during the twenty first century. The second objective is
2. 2. To evaluate the extent to which these soft power strategies have influenced Nigeria's foreign policy alignment in the same period.

By critically examining these issues, the study contributes to contemporary debates on diplomacy, international influence, and strategic autonomy while providing a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics that shape relations between the United States and Nigeria in an increasingly multipolar international system.

2. Review of Literature

Conceptual Review

As more and more countries recognize the significance of soft power in shaping the future of diplomacy, the practice of diplomacy has undergone a change in emphasis from the use of coercive instruments to attraction, persuasion and long term

engagement. The concept of soft power has gone beyond theory and become a working instrument of diplomacy (Çiçek, 2022), and soft power in the form of culture, political values, institutions, development model, etc. has become an important source of influence for states in the post Cold War world (Saaida, 2023). However, the power of soft power is called into question. Baruah (2024) considered it an indispensable tool of the modern diplomacy as preferences of the recipient states were thus built over time through educational exchanges, development assistance, cultural diplomacy and humanitarian engagement. By contrast, critics argued that attraction did not necessarily result in tangible foreign policy convergence unless it was backed by economic, political, and security considerations. This clash indicated that the impact of soft power was not so much in how it was used but rather in the political and strategic environment in which it functioned.

One of the major means of states' soft power was public diplomacy. More and more, governments began to look directly at foreign societies, to communicate with them, to exchange experiences with them, to develop joint cultural events and to support them in various ways, rather than negotiating with them through the medium of interstate negotiation. Kia et al., (2025) posited that public diplomacy had become an indispensable part of the foreign policy of the modern world as it created bonds that would create goodwill in the long term. Goldsmith et al. (2020) also concluded that positive diplomacy efforts, such as educational visits and official visits, had an effect on foreign public opinion and a positive impact on bilateral relations. But Rhee et al. (2023) showed that the success of public diplomacy hinged mostly on the motives behind the diplomatic activity, as perceived by the public. Rights in recipient societies where such initiatives were seen as beneficial grew when trust and cooperation was built. Perceptions of geopolitical self interest, on the other hand, undermined their

effectiveness. This debate has been especially relevant to the United States' ties with Nigeria, which often involved its security, governance, and economic goals. One aspect of these debates that is closely related is foreign policy alignment, which is understood as the degree of similarity or convergence in a state's foreign policy action and preference with that of another state. Cooperation does not necessarily mean dependence or identical policy; cooperation can be both selective, and decision making independent. However, Abidoye (2026) stated that despite the growing rivalry of the global powers, Nigeria continued to pursue a policy of strategic autonomy and non alignment in its foreign policy. This interpretation questioned the notion that constant external involvement would necessarily lead to a convergence of Nigeria's foreign policy, pointing out that national interests, domestic political factors, and regional obligations continued to hold the main sway in Nigeria's foreign policy options. Soft power and foreign policy alignment were further complicated by the contemporary international environment. Bature (2025) noted that Africa had turned into a chessboard of the United States, China, Russia, Türkiye, the European Union, and other players jostling for influence by investing, engaging in diplomatic relations, and promoting development assistance. As a result, African governments began to spread their external relationships around instead of directing them towards one power. In this regard, Heibach and Taş (2023) argued that the traditional dichotomy between 'hard' and 'soft' power no longer did justice to the foreign policy results of states, given that they increasingly resorted to a mix of economic statecraft, partnerships, humanitarian aid and strategic influence. Their criticism was that soft power needs to be understood in a wider geopolitical context, and not as a standalone factor in foreign policy action. In this competitive landscape, the United States has increased its policies in the areas of educational exchanges, governance assistance,

health diplomacy, cultural activities, entrepreneurship and public diplomacy with Nigeria. According to Panfilov and Savchenko (2021), educational diplomacy was one of the most sustainable types of soft power due to the long-term nature of professional and political networks established. Similarly, Kickbusch and Liu (2022) showed that global health diplomacy was able to further humanitarian goals while also having a positive impact on diplomacy. While these efforts brought about greater cooperation between the two, there was some debate as to whether they actually changed Nigeria's foreign policy stance. According to Oghenerukevwe (2024), Nigeria and the United States have collaborated significantly in the areas of governance, security, and development, but they have also had some differences over strategic matters. Furthermore, Ogunseye (2024) contended that there was no consistent policy towards Sub Saharan Africa which reflects Nigeria's influence in the region. Overall these studies indicated that while soft power of the United States helped to improve bilateral relations, the ability to influence the foreign policy orientation of Nigeria was yet to be determined. This intractable controversy was the basis for the present study.

Theoretical Review

Joseph S. Nye Jr. developed the concept of soft power in the late twentieth century, particularly in his 1990 work, and elaborated it in subsequent scholarship. Soft Power Theory explains how an actor may obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Its principal sources include culture, political values and foreign policies perceived as legitimate. For this study, the theory directs attention to how U.S. educational, cultural, public diplomacy and health-related engagements may generate credibility, goodwill and relationships that facilitate cooperation. It does not, however, establish that favourable perceptions automatically translate into changes in

Nigerian foreign policy. Contemporary scholarship has examined educational diplomacy, public diplomacy and development cooperation as potential channels through which such attraction may be cultivated (Çiçek, 2022; Kia et al., 2025).

Although Soft Power Theory is relevant, it received a lot of criticism. Critics questioned the extent to which attraction can explain state behaviour and, consequently, the degree to which it is undervalued in comparison to the importance of domestic political interests, regional commitments, and geopolitical competition. Heibach and Taş (2023) posited that foreign policy outcomes were the result of multiple power dynamics and not attraction alone, whereas Bature (2025) showed that Africa's multipolar environment had enabled Africa states like Nigeria to have diverse strategic options. Therefore, this study used Soft Power Theory as the analytical approach, however, acknowledging that the theory has its limitations in explaining the "strategically autonomous" states. The theory is applied here through a distinction between instruments, intermediate effects and policy outcomes: exchanges and programmes constitute instruments; goodwill and institutional access are intermediate effects; and observable shifts in external policy positions would constitute stronger evidence of alignment. This sequence prevents the analysis from treating the existence of diplomatic programmes as proof of their effectiveness.

Empirical Review

The findings of empirical studies on soft power were inconclusive. Goldsmith et al. (2020) determined that continued diplomatic effort positively affected foreign public opinion and increased bilateral cooperation, and Rhee et al. (2023) concluded that the perceived sincerity of diplomatic effort greatly influenced the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts. In Africa, Tamunomiegbam et al. (2023) showed that cultural diplomacy helped to enhance economic and political interactions, while Wüst and

Nicolai (2022) highlighted the need for credible institutions and consistent policy implementation. Zanella et al. (2024) also noted that methodological constraints persist in the study of soft power to establish direct cause-and-effect links with foreign policy outcomes. As concerns Nigeria, Oghenerukevwe (2024) discovered that the two countries had increased cooperation, which included governance support, educational exchanges, security cooperation, and development assistance. But Abidoye (2026) pointed out that Nigeria had always adopted a pragmatic approach of strategic autonomy and non alignment despite the increased level of bilateral engagement. All this diversity of findings pointed to the fact that cooperation does not necessarily mean alignment in foreign policy.

Research Gap

While there have been studies on soft power, public diplomacy and United States engagement in Africa, there has been little effort to critically examine the impact of the United States soft power approach on changes in Nigeria's foreign policy stance. Most of the studies were either conceptually oriented or examined bilateral cooperation without taking into account the role of Nigeria's strategic autonomy in the process of mediation of external influence. This study tried to fill this gap by critically assessing the extent of the influence of soft power strategies of the United States on Nigeria's foreign policy alignment in the era of contemporary multipolar competition and Nigeria's constant desire to make foreign policy choices. More specifically, the unresolved issue is one of outcome measurement and attribution. Existing discussions often document programmes and improved relations without identifying policy decisions that changed, the timing of those changes, or plausible alternative explanations. The present analysis addresses this distinction by evaluating claims

about influence against evidence of continued Nigerian policy discretion and competing strategic considerations.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design to critically examine the relationship between U.S. soft power strategies and Nigeria's foreign policy alignment in the twenty-first century. This approach is appropriate because the research questions concern diplomatic mechanisms, interpretations and policy outcomes rather than the estimation of statistical effects. The documentary material considered includes peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, official government publications, policy reports and publications of international organisations. Sources were examined for their relevance to U.S.–Nigeria relations, soft power instruments, Nigerian foreign policy choices and the wider geopolitical context. Documentary analysis permits comparison of competing interpretations while recognising that an observed association between diplomatic engagement and policy cooperation is not, by itself, evidence of causation (Çiçek, 2022; Baruah, 2024; Kickbusch & Liu, 2022; Oghenerukevwe, 2024).

The study employs thematic content analysis organised around its two objectives. First, the discussion identifies the principal forms of U.S. soft power engagement, including education, public diplomacy, health, culture and governance support. Second, it evaluates whether the reported outcomes indicate goodwill, institutional cooperation, issue-specific convergence or a broader change in Nigeria's foreign policy orientation. Interpretations are compared across sources, with attention to disagreements, contextual conditions and alternative explanations such as national interest, security priorities, domestic politics and relationships with other external powers. The approach supports a critical qualitative synthesis rather than a causal

estimate or an exhaustive systematic review. Its conclusions are accordingly framed in terms of what the documentary evidence supports, not as proof that soft power either determines or never affects Nigerian foreign policy decisions.

4. Results and Discussion

United States Soft Power Strategies in Nigeria

The documentary evidence indicated that the United States employed several soft power instruments which emphasised long term relationship building in its engagement with Nigeria as opposed to direct political coercion. Its approach had not been purely diplomatic, but educational exchanges, public diplomacy, health, governance support, and culture, all served to create positive perceptions and foster greater bilateral cooperation. Panfilov and Savchenko (2021) contended that educational diplomacy had facilitated the formation of a long-standing relationship among political, academic and professional elites, which means that a state's influence reaches beyond its formal diplomacy. By virtue of their position they were able to convey the message that educational programmes were not simply academic endeavours but investments in future leadership. But Goldsmith et al. (2020) warned that whilst diplomatic activity had led to an increase in public opinion of a sponsoring state, positive opinion did not necessarily lead to political influence or policy convergence. The evidence further showed that health diplomacy was one of the most visible aspects of the United States soft power in Nigeria. Kickbusch and Liu (2022)

insisted that global health programs had simultaneously worked to improve humanitarian goals and improved diplomacy by showcasing international responsibility and credibility. However, they did not go as far as to prove that humanitarian involvement had impacted on foreign policy preferences of recipient states. This restriction further confirmed the conclusion that Rhee et al. (2023) have drawn from their study of the effectiveness of public diplomacy in the view of the recipient society, which is that the actions of a country or state in external affairs are interpreted based on their motives. Programmes had been seen as mutually beneficial, and had fostered trust, while they were seen as geopolitical instruments, and had lost value as diplomatic instruments. The combined results indicated that soft power strategies of the U.S. had led to increases in bilateral contacts and institutional cooperation with Nigeria. The evidence however, had not been conclusive, and showed that while attraction could be created through education, health or public diplomacy, it had been inadequate to create sustained political influence. Rather, the literature showed that the success of these strategies had hinged on Nigeria's own priorities, perceptions of mutual benefit, and overall geopolitical considerations. These instruments differ in their pathways of influence. Educational exchanges can sustain professional networks over time; health cooperation can enhance the perceived credibility of a partner; and cultural or public diplomacy can shape perceptions among wider audiences. Yet each pathway requires a further evidentiary step before a claim about foreign policy alignment can be made. A positive perception of the United States, for example, is analytically distinct from a Nigerian decision to support a particular U.S. diplomatic position.

Impact on Nigeria's Foreign Policy Alignment

The documentary evidence suggests that U.S. soft power has strengthened bilateral engagement, but does not establish a consistent or fundamental redirection of Nigeria's foreign policy choices. Abidoye (2026) emphasises the continuing importance of strategic autonomy and non-alignment in Nigeria's external relations. This position indicates that close diplomatic ties should not automatically be interpreted as comprehensive alignment. Successive Nigerian governments have sought room for manoeuvre within an international environment in which partnerships can be pursued selectively across different issues. Accordingly, the relevant test of influence is not the frequency of bilateral contact alone, but whether particular policy choices show sustained convergence that cannot be adequately explained by pre-existing shared interests.

To this end, Oghenerukevwe (2024) noted the extensive cooperation between Nigeria and the United States in the fields of democracy and good governance, counterterrorism, regional security, and development projects. But cooperation had often been accompanied by policy disagreement on wider international matters, and this implied that co-operation had not replaced Nigeria's autonomous foreign policy considerations. This was corroborated by Bature (2025), who argued that the emerging rivalry of the global powers in Africa has increased the strategic leverage of Nigeria, which could now play multiple roles with the United States, China, and other actors. This interpretation challenged certain assumptions of a lasting and inevitable foreign policy behavioural change of recipient states due to ongoing soft power contact. A more general criticism is that of Heibach and Taş (2023), who stated that a single factor of soft power was not sufficient to explain foreign policy results; foreign policy was determined by economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitics.

Their findings came up with a more convincing explanation for Nigeria's diplomatic behaviour than those who believed that diplomatic outcomes were mainly a result of attraction and persuasion. The evidence reviewed together revealed that United States soft power had increased the diplomatic goodwill, institutional cooperation, and people to people engagement. However, it had not achieved the goal of fundamentally changing Nigeria's foreign policy posture which had been largely determined by national interest, regional responsibility as well as strategic autonomy. A more defensible interpretation is therefore that the effects of U.S. soft power are conditional and issue-specific. Where Nigerian and U.S. priorities overlap, diplomatic programmes may reinforce cooperation; where interests diverge, attraction may be insufficient to overcome domestic or regional considerations. The evidence reviewed does not justify the stronger claim that increased engagement necessarily produces either greater alignment or greater divergence.

5. Conclusion

This study examined U.S. soft power strategies and their implications for Nigeria’s foreign policy alignment in the twenty-first century. The analysis identifies educational exchanges, public diplomacy, health cooperation, governance assistance and cultural engagement as important means of sustaining bilateral contact and institutional relationships. These activities can generate goodwill and create opportunities for cooperation, but the documentary evidence does not establish that they have fundamentally redirected Nigeria’s overall foreign policy orientation. Nigeria’s engagement with the United States continues to coexist with the pursuit of national interests, regional responsibilities and strategic flexibility in a competitive international environment. The central finding is therefore a distinction between diplomatic engagement and foreign policy alignment: greater contact may facilitate

cooperation without requiring a state to surrender independent judgement on wider international questions. This interpretation qualifies overly deterministic applications of Soft Power Theory, while remaining consistent with the possibility of influence on particular issues. For policy, the implication is that durable U.S.–Nigeria relations should be developed through credible, mutually beneficial partnerships and respect for Nigeria's strategic priorities rather than an expectation of automatic policy convergence. Future research could test this conclusion through detailed comparisons of specific Nigerian diplomatic decisions, public statements and voting behaviour over time, alongside evidence about the mechanisms linking U.S. engagement to those decisions.

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