[Mohammad Sameer Nasir](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mohammad-sameer-nasir)

December 2, 2020

**The rise of soft power**

China has long been using soft power for persuasion and influence on other nations. A prime example of Chinese soft power could be its infrastructural investments and trade with various African countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative is central to Chinese interest in such politically weak but mineral-rich countries. China has seen great potential in Africa and believes that it is an emerging and growing market despite the high-risk environment. The less secure economic environment additionally provides China an advantage as it allows for negotiate deals on favorable terms: outside the ambit of international economic institutions.

An important component of the Chinese business philosophy is the notion of creating relationships through mutual favors and nurturing personal connections. Africa can also provide geostrategic benefits to China by helping advance its agenda on the international stage. It is an open secret that it is home to the largest single bloc in the United Nations. China has also funded $200 million for the African Union headquarters to reinforce its interest in the region as well as to strengthen diplomatic ties. China is continuing its non-interference policies in the domestic matters of African nations.

The Chinese relationship with Africa is not new. The Tazara line railroad was a Chinese project during the 1970s in the midst of the social upheaval of the cold war. Around then it served as a signal of China’s long-term ambitions to the US as well as to Russia. The Tazara, however, turned out to be another victim to the mismanagement in the African mainland. China has renewed its endeavors and sees opportunities to reap good returns as well as geo-strategic advantages.

These infrastructure related ventures encompass various industries; however, development of the railroad is at the heart of it. China has also capitalized on the incredibly lucrative and unexplored oil markets of Algeria, Nigeria and Angola.

The Chinese model is in stark contrast to the Western model. While the Western world prefers highly subsidized loans and foreign aid, the Chinese have made economically justified investments and provision of resources to execute those projects. It is worthwhile to note that railroads like the Tazara line were considered unfeasible during the 1960s by the World Bank and the UN.

The renewed Chinese focus on the continent is in one way a continuation of the old vision also. Around ten thousand Chinese companies now operate in the continent predominantly in Zambia and Nigeria. The contribution of these investments to Nigeria’s GDP has been around nine percent. The amount of Chinese investments totals more than a colossal $299 billion. This has rendered China Africa’s largest trade partner by far, posing another mighty challenge to the Western world. The Chinese premier has pledged a further $60 billion worth of investments in the region.

China also expects political advantages from these mega investments. One glaring manifestation was the joint communique of 25 African nations, endorsing the stance of China on the political unrest in Hong Kong. The Chinese are slowly enhancing their political influence on the back of these economic partnerships. The socio-political strategies that China has been attempting to enforce in Xinjiang, South China Sea, Hong Kong and Tibet are profoundly controversial. The Western democracies exert political and economic pressures to dissuade China from these undertakings and such attempts meet with skepticism and contempt from Chinese authorities. They believe that in the long run enhancing China’s area of political influence is the best safeguard for China.

China has been utilizing ‘soft’ power so as not to reinforce coercion through military or economic threats. The whole concept of the BRI draws inspiration from the once legendary ‘Silk Route’, an ancient synonym for trade, wealth, and connectivity. China is going to be an economic savior for cash starved countries around the world, and provide necessary funding and technical assistance for development of much-needed infrastructure to unleash desperately needed economic progress.

China’s investments in the African continent is one such example. China is not employing any military or economic tactics which can be deemed coercive in any manner. One primary aim is to create goodwill among people through economic largesse and make these partnerships a win-win game by fueling trade and investment in the region. Africa embodies an environment struggling with weak economies, governments, and disenfranchised citizens.

China sees an excellent opportunity to usher in a new era of economic progress, lifting millions out of poverty and subsequently reaping apparent economic benefits as well as hidden long-term political benefits. This is the epitome of Soft Power. The long-term geo-strategic benefits which can accrue to China rattle the West. They understand that economic integration will create more economic interdependence for countries in the BRI initiative. Western influence will not vanish overnight but with time it can fade. The emergence of the soft power of China will play out in the years to come. The benefits will be easier to calculate. That cannot be said about the costs.

The writer is an advocate of environment and food insecurity and an active member of the strategic planning task force at the Lahore American School.