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Cultural Diplomacy and the Reconfiguration of Global Geostrategic Narratives: African Positionality in a Multipolar Order

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Abstract: *As global power configurations shift toward an increasingly multipolar order, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a critical instrument in the reconfiguration of influence and partnership within the Global Majority. This paper examines how multipolarity is reshaping cultural hegemony, with a particular focus on Africa as a central arena of geopolitical, cultural, and epistemic contestation. Moving beyond materialist accounts of power, the study investigates how emerging and non-Western actors engage African states and societies through culturally resonant, affective, and identity-based forms of diplomacy that challenge long-standing Eurocentric dominance.Using a qualitative research design grounded in critical discourse analysis and policy review, the paper draws on interdisciplinary frameworks from postcolonial theory, decoloniality, international cultural relations, associationism, and soft power studies. Through comparative case studies of China-Africa, Qatar-Africa, Russia-Africa, and Turkey-Africa relations, the research illustrates how cultural diplomacy emphasising mutual respect, historical solidarity, sovereignty, and shared values is increasingly displacing Western models rooted in conditionality and normative hierarchy.The findings reveal that emerging powers are more effective in fostering durable partnerships when cultural diplomacy prioritises emotional intelligence, recognition, and narrative alignment rather than transactional service delivery or ideological persuasion. These dynamics signal a broader shift in cultural hegemony within a multipolar global system, in which Africa exercises greater agency in navigating competing influences. The paper contributes to debates on decolonisation and global governance by demonstrating that cultural diplomacy is central, rather than peripheral, to contemporary geopolitical transformations and calls for African-led cultural strategies that leverage multipolarity to advance sovereign, balanced, and culturally grounded international relations and partnerships.*

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, cultural hegemony, decoloniality, geostrategy, global majority, multipolarity

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound structural reconfiguration marked by the gradual erosion of Western unipolar dominance and the consolidation of a more diffuse, contested

multipolar order. Within International Relations (IR) scholarship, this transformation has generated engaging and sustained debates, largely framed through analyses of material redistribution among states, such as shifts in economic output, military capabilities, technological advancement, and institutional leverage (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry, 2011; Stuenkel, 2016). While such approaches have contributed significantly to the understanding of the changing architecture of global power, they nevertheless remain insufficient for explaining how power within the Global South is legitimised, resisted, and socially embedded. By privileging material capabilities over meaning-making and human interaction processes, much of the multipolarity literature risks underestimating the cultural, symbolic, and affective dimensions through which hegemony is constituted, transactioned, and contested.

This underpinning argument of this paper is that cultural diplomacy is a central mechanism through which multipolarity is reshaping cultural hegemony, especially within what is increasingly referred to as the Global Majority. In this study, the concept of Global Majority is not referred to simplistically as a demographic and geographic descriptor. It is rather used as an analytical perspective that foregrounds the political, cultural, epistemic, and moral agency of non-Western societies that are historically marginalised within Eurocentric global orders (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). In this context, Africa emerges as a critical site where the reconfiguration of global powers is not only negotiated through trade agreements, security partnerships, or infrastructure projects, but also and mainly through struggles over recognition, legitimacy, respect, historical narrative, and cultural authority.

Many scholars (Alden and Large, 2019; Taylor, 2026, 2014, 2016) argue that conventional global paradigms often frame Africa as a passive arena in a renewed "scramble," where external powers compete for resources, markets, and strategic positioning. Such framings, however, obscure the extent to which African states and societies actively navigate multipolarity through selective alignment, symbolic resonance, and affective diplomacy. They also overlook how emerging and resurgent powers, most notably China, Turkey, Qatar, and Russia, have increasingly positioned themselves as cultural interlocutors rather than solely as economic or security partners for African nations. These actors use and rely on narratives of shared historical marginalisation, anti-imperial solidarity, civilisational affinity, and respect for sovereignty to distinguish their engagement from that of traditional Western powers, whose relationships with Africa remain deeply entangled with colonial legacies, epistemic hierarchy, and partnerships that are subjected to conditionality.

At the heart of this paper is a reconceptualisation of cultural diplomacy. Rather than treating it as an auxiliary instrument of foreign policy, a form of national branding, or a soft extension of public diplomacy, the study conceptualises cultural diplomacy as a relational beyond symbolic practice through which global actors negotiate legitimacy, moral authority, and hegemonic consent. Drawing on Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony, power is understood in this study not simply as coercion or inducement, but as the capacity to shape common sense and common good, normalise particular worldviews, and secure consent through cultural and affective alignment (Gramsci, 1971). From this scope, cultural diplomacy becomes a key site where hegemonic orders are reproduced, tested, and contested. This analytical move is particularly important in postcolonial and decolonial contexts.

Africa's incorporation into the modern international system occurred through violent processes of colonial conquest, epistemic domination, and cultural subordination, producing enduring hierarchies of knowledge, identity, and legitimacy (Said, 1978; Quijano, 2000). Western diplomatic practices,

even in their contemporary liberal forms, often continue to reproduce these hierarchies through development discourse, governance conditionalities, and moralised narratives of "capacity building", "good governance promotion", and "democratic assistance" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Ziai, 2015). As a result, Western cultural diplomacy, which is frequently framed as universalist, progressive, and value-driven, can be experienced and perceived in Africa as paternalistic, disciplinary, or dismissive of local epistemologies and practices.

Against this backdrop, the rise of non-Western diplomatic actors introduces not only alternative material partnerships but also alternative cultural grammars of engagement. On one hand, while China emphasises its partnership strategies on non-interference and shared developmental trajectories, Turkey focusses on cultural affinity and mobilisation of humanitarian solidarity models. On the other hand, Qatar's interventions focus on a mediation-based diplomacy, media power, and common good, while Russia's invocation of Soviet-era anti-colonial culture resonates as transactional strategies that challenge Western claims to moral and normative superiority (Kamrava, 2015; Özkan, 2018; Stronski, 2019). These approaches do not necessarily dismantle power asymmetries, nor should they be romanticised as inherently emancipatory. In geostrategic shifts, they often succeed in generating **affective legitimacy** precisely because they engage African partners as historical subjects rather than objects of tutelage.

Emerging powers are increasingly effective in Africa not primarily because they offer superior material outcomes, but because they engage through affective forms of cultural diplomacy that resonate with postcolonial emotions, aspirations, shared values, and epistemic recognition**.** In privileging narratives of mutuality based on historical solidarity over overt ideological persuasion or conditional service delivery, these (re)emerging global actors destabilise long-standing Eurocentric cultural hierarchies and reconfigure the terms under which hegemonic consent is negotiated.

It is important to note that this argument does not suggest that material power has become irrelevant, nor that cultural diplomacy operates independently of strategic interests. Rather, it posits that in a multipolar world characterised by normative pluralism and declining Western authority, culture and affect increasingly mediate the effectiveness of material power. As Nye's (2004) concept of soft power suggests, attraction matters; yet this article extends that insight by situating attraction within decolonial struggles over recognition and dignity. What is at stake is not simply whether African audiences find certain cultures appealing, but whether diplomatic engagements acknowledge Africa as an equal epistemic and moral actor within global politics. By foregrounding cultural diplomacy, this study also intervenes in broader debates about multipolarity itself. Much of the existing literature treats multipolarity as a systemic condition defined by the number of powerful states (Waltz, 1979; Stuenkel, 2016). This paper instead approaches multipolarity as a relational and cultural process, in which multiple centres of meaning, value, and legitimacy coexist and compete. From this perspective, multipolarity is not only about who has power, it is about whose narratives count, whose histories are recognised, and whose futures are imagined as legitimate.

Africa's growing diplomatic diversification illustrates this point vividly. Engagements with China, Turkey, Qatar, and Russia do not simply replace Western partnerships; they expand Africa's repertoire of international relations, enabling states and societies to leverage competing cultural frameworks to assert agency and negotiate more favourable terms. In doing so, Africa contributes to the emergence of a more plural global order, even as it navigates new dependencies and risks.

This paper therefore examines how cultural diplomacy operates as a key vector in shifting cultural hegemony within a multipolar world, with Africa as its primary empirical focus. Through a critical analysis of cultural diplomatic practices and discourses, this study seeks to demonstrate that cultural diplomacy is not peripheral to geopolitics but constitutive of contemporary power struggles, particularly in an era marked by decolonial contestation, epistemic plurality, and the reassertion of the Global Majority. By centring Africa within this analysis, the article challenges dominant IR frameworks and contributes to a more culturally grounded understanding of global transformation.

Rationale and problem statement

Despite the growing body of scholarship on multipolarity and global power transitions, significant analytical gaps remain in how these transformations are conceptualised and studied. Much of the existing literature continues to privilege material, structural, and institutional dimensions of power, such as economic growth, military capabilities, and voting power in international organisations, while relegating culture, emotion, and symbolic practices to a secondary or instrumental status (Acharya, 2018; Stuenkel, 2016).

A related limitation concerns how Africa is positioned within analyses of multipolarity. The continent is frequently framed as an arena of competition among external powers, particularly in narratives of a "new scramble for Africa," rather than as a historically situated actor whose diplomatic choices are shaped by colonial memory, symbolic violence, and ongoing struggles for recognition and epistemic sovereignty (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Zondi, 2020). Such framings risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to explain by denying African agency and overlooking the affective and cultural logics through which African states and societies evaluate external partnerships.

This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding cultural diplomacy as a central, rather than peripheral, mechanism through which multipolarity is reshaping cultural hegemony within the Global South. Building on Gramscian insights that durable power rests on consent and cultural leadership rather than coercion alone (Gramsci, 1971), the study interrogates how legitimacy, attraction, and moral authority are negotiated in a context where Western normative dominance is increasingly contested. The central question of this study is: *How does cultural diplomacy operate within a multipolar order to reconfigure cultural hegemony in the Global South, and what does this reveal about African agency in global politics?*

By centring culture and affect, the study aims to respond directly to calls within Global IR and decolonial scholarship to move beyond Eurocentric analytical frameworks and to recognise alternative modes of power, legitimacy, and world-making (Acharya, 2014a, 2014b; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Rather than treating cultural diplomacy as a tool of persuasion deployed by powerful states, the study conceptualises it as a relational practice through which recognition, dignity, and equality are negotiated across asymmetrical historical contexts.

The significance of this approach lies in its reframing of Africa not as a passive recipient of external influence but as an active agent navigating multipolarity through cultural resonance and strategic selectivity. By examining how African actors engage with emerging powers that emphasise respect, historical solidarity, and narrative alignment, the study illuminates how affective engagement increasingly shapes international legitimacy within the Global Majority. In doing so, it contributes to

broader debates on decolonisation, global governance, and the cultural foundations of hegemony, offering a more nuanced understanding of how power operates in a multipolar world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines three interrelated bodies of scholarship that inform the study: (1) multipolarity and global order, (2) cultural hegemony and postcolonial/decolonial critiques, and (3) cultural diplomacy and soft power. While each field has generated substantial insights, their intersections, particularly in relation to Africa and the Global Majority, remain under-theorised. This review demonstrates how integrating these literatures enables a more culturally grounded understanding of power transitions in a multipolar world.

Multipolarity and global order: beyond materialist accounts

Classical International Relations (IR) theories conceptualise multipolarity primarily as a systemic configuration defined by the distribution of material capabilities among states. Structural realism, for instance, understands multipolarity in terms of balance-of-power dynamics and assesses its implications for stability, alliance formation, and conflict (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity is largely a question of whether rising powers can constrain or replace the dominant hegemon. Liberal institutionalist accounts similarly focus on shifts in institutional authority and rule-making power, emphasising the resilience or decline of Western-led institutions under conditions of power diffusion (Ikenberry, 2011).

While analytically influential, these approaches exhibit two major limitations. First, they privilege material capabilities and formal institutions at the expense of ideational, cultural, and affective dimensions of power. Second, they remain deeply embedded in Western epistemic frameworks, often assuming that global order is defined by the extent to which non-Western actors integrate into, revise, or challenge existing liberal norms. As a result, legitimacy is frequently treated as derivative of institutional participation rather than as culturally negotiated process that is shaped by historical experience and symbolic meaning.

In response to these limitations, Global IR scholars have advanced more pluralistic understandings of world order. Acharya (2014a, 2018) argues that contemporary multipolarity is characterised not only by the diffusion of material power but also by normative pluralism and regional agency. Rather than a single hegemonic order being replaced by another, the emerging system reflects multiple centres of authority, values, and governance practices. This perspective opens analytical space for recognising non-Western histories, regional institutions, and alternative diplomatic traditions.

However, even within Global IR, culture often remains under-theorised. While normative diversity is acknowledged, the mechanisms through which legitimacy is constructed, consent is generated, and authority is culturally embedded receive limited sustained attention. Multipolarity is still frequently discussed in terms of "who rules" rather than "how rule is made meaningful." This gap is particularly evident in analyses of Africa, where engagement with emerging powers is often interpreted through the lenses of dependency, strategic hedging, or elite bargaining, with insufficient attention to cultural resonance, affective alignment, and symbolic politics (Zondi, 2020).

Cultural hegemony and postcolonial critiques of global order

The concept of cultural hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971), provides a critical framework for addressing these omissions. For Gramsci, domination is sustained not primarily through coercion but through consent, secured by normalising particular worldviews as universal and commonsensical. Cultural hegemony thus operates through institutions, language, education, and everyday practices that shape how power is perceived and accepted.

Postcolonial scholars have extended this insight to analyse how colonialism entrenched enduring hierarchies of culture, knowledge, and value. Said's (1978) analysis of Orientalism demonstrates how Western representations of the non-Western world functioned as instruments of domination, producing epistemic authority alongside political control. In the African context, Mudimbe (1988) and Mbembe (2001) show how colonial knowledge systems constructed Africa as an object of study, intervention, and governance, rather than as a producer of legitimate knowledge.

These critiques are further developed in decolonial theory, particularly through the concept of the "coloniality of power." Quijano (2000) argues that colonialism did not end with political independence but persists through global structures of knowledge, race, and economic organisation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) applies this framework to Africa, emphasising how Eurocentric epistemologies continue to shape development discourse, governance norms, and diplomatic practices. From this perspective, cultural domination is not an accidental by-product of global order but a constitutive element of modernity itself.

Within this theoretical landscape, cultural diplomacy emerges as a critical site of hegemonic reproduction and contestation. Diplomatic norms, development narratives, and cultural exchange programmes often function as mechanisms through which dominant actors assert moral authority and define the terms of "proper" statehood, governance, and progress. Western cultural diplomacy, despite its emphasis on universal values such as democracy and human rights, has been criticised for reproducing symbolic violence by positioning Western norms as benchmarks against which others are judged (Bourdieu, 1991; Ziai, 2015).

Decolonial scholars therefore call for greater attention to how power operates through culture, affect, and recognition. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that decoloniality requires not only material redistribution but also epistemic disobedience, which means the refusal to accept Western knowledge systems as the sole arbiters of legitimacy. In this context, shifts in global power cannot be understood without analysing how cultural hegemony is challenged, negotiated, or reconstituted.

Cultural diplomacy and soft power: from instrumentalism to relationality

The study of cultural diplomacy is most commonly associated with Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, defined as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Cultural diplomacy, in this framework, serves as a key mechanism for projecting soft power by promoting national culture, values, and policies abroad. Language institutes, educational exchanges, media outreach, and artistic programmes are understood as tools for enhancing a state's attractiveness and international standing.

While influential, Nye's framework has been subject to sustained critique. Both Brian McCormack (2005) and Janice Bially Mattern (2005) argue that soft power underestimates the coercive dimensions

of attraction, overlooking how narratives and representations can discipline subjects by shaping what appears natural or desirable. Similarly, postcolonial scholars note that soft power often operates asymmetrically, with powerful states defining the terms of attraction and framing engagement as benevolent while maintaining normative superiority (Ayhan, 2018).

Cull (2008) distinguishes between propaganda-driven public diplomacy and more dialogical forms of cultural exchange that emphasise listening, trust-building, and reciprocity. Literature is increasingly reframing cultural diplomacy as relational, dialogical, and contested. Ang et al. (2015) conceptualise international cultural relations as processes of mutual recognition and co-creation rather than unilateral projection. This relational turn is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, where historical experiences of domination shape how cultural engagement is interpreted. Cultural diplomacy that fails to acknowledge colonial legacies or local epistemologies risks reinforcing mistrust and resistance. Conversely, diplomatic practices that foreground respect, historical awareness, and cultural affinity may generate affective legitimacy even in the absence of material superiority.

Multipolarity, cultural diplomacy, and the Global Majority

The intersection of multipolarity and cultural diplomacy becomes especially salient when examined through the lens of the Global Majority. The term challenges the deficit-oriented connotations of "Global South" by emphasising demographic centrality, political assertiveness, and epistemic agency (Acharya, 2018). Within this framing, Africa is not a peripheral recipient of global change but a central participant in shaping emerging orders.

Emerging and resurgent powers increasingly deploy cultural diplomacy as a means of distinguishing their engagement from that of Western actors (Fijałkowski, 2011; Özkan, 2018; Stronski, 2019).These strategies suggest a transformation not only in the distribution of power but in the cultural grammar of diplomacy itself. Rather than seeking to socialise African states into a single normative order, emerging powers often emphasise pluralism, sovereignty, and mutual respect. While such approaches are not free from strategic interest or power asymmetry, they resonate within African contexts shaped by long histories of epistemic marginalisation.

Africa's diplomatic diversification thus reflects a broader rebalancing of global authority, in which cultural alignment increasingly matters alongside economic incentives. This literature review demonstrates that understanding these dynamics requires integrating insights from IR, postcolonial theory, and cultural diplomacy studies, which are an integration that remains insufficiently developed in existing scholarship.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interdisciplinary theoretical framework underpinning this study directly informs its methodological orientation, data selection, and analytical strategy. Given the paper's emphasis on meaning-making, legitimacy, affect, and cultural authority within an increasingly multipolar global order, a qualitative, interpretivist research design is most appropriate (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2012). Rather than seeking causal generalisation, the study aims to generate contextually grounded and theoretically informed interpretations of how cultural diplomacy functions as a mechanism of influence and hegemonic reconfiguration within the Global Majority, with Africa as the primary empirical focus.

This methodological approach reflects the ontological and epistemological commitments of postcolonial theory, decoloniality, associationism, critical soft power studies, and affect theory, all of which conceptualise power as relational, historically embedded, discursive, and affectively mediated rather than as a purely material attribute of states (Bially Mattern, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Consequently, the study prioritises qualitative methods capable of capturing symbolic meaning, narrative construction, and emotional resonance in diplomatic practice.

Postcolonial Theory and Historically Situated Analysis

Postcolonial theory necessitates a methodological sensitivity to history, memory, and enduring power asymmetries rooted in colonial encounters. Methodologically, this translates into a historically informed qualitative analysis that situates contemporary cultural diplomacy within longer trajectories of imperial domination, decolonisation, and postcolonial state formation (Said, 1978; Mudimbe, 1988). Diplomatic texts are therefore approached not as neutral policy statements but as historically situated discursive artefacts shaped by unequal relations of power and authority.

This orientation informs the selection of empirical material, privileging policy documents, diplomatic speeches, and institutional narratives that reveal how actors invoke history, frame partnership, and articulate claims to legitimacy. It also shapes the interpretive stance of the researcher, who adopts a critical reflexivity toward Western, emerging, and African diplomatic discourses alike, recognising that claims to universality or neutrality often obscure culturally specific and historically contingent positions (Mbembe, 2001; Ziai, 2015).

Decoloniality and critical discourse analysis

Decolonial theory provides the epistemological rationale for employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a core methodological tool. CDA enables the study to interrogate how power operates through language, representation, and narrative, particularly in contexts where Eurocentric epistemologies have been naturalised as universal standards of legitimacy (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). Through this method, diplomatic texts are examined for how they construct subject positions, define appropriate political identities, and delimit the boundaries of acceptable global participation.

In practical terms, CDA is used to analyse how emerging powers articulate concepts such as sovereignty, respect, partnership, and development in their engagement with Africa, and how these discourses contrast with or challenge Western diplomatic narratives historically associated with conditionality and normative hierarchy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Decoloniality further informs the interpretation of African responses, foregrounding moments of narrative appropriation, selective alignment, or resistance as expressions of epistemic agency rather than deviation or dependency.

Associationism and Relational Analytical Strategies

Associationism reframes diplomacy as a relational process grounded in social bonds, mutual recognition, and shared meaning rather than hierarchical authority or transactional exchange (Donati, 2010). Methodologically, this perspective informs a relational analytical strategy that focuses on patterns of association, symbolic alignment, and discursive reciprocity across diplomatic engagements. Rather than treating states as isolated units, the study examines how relationships are constructed through repeated cultural practices such as summits, forums, educational exchanges, humanitarian initiatives, and commemorative events.

This relational approach justifies the use of comparative qualitative case studies, specifically China-Africa, Qatar-Africa, Russia-Africa relations, and Turkey-Africa, not to establish causal superiority but to identify how different actors deploy associational narratives and how African partners respond

to them. Comparative analysis is thus used to reveal variation in relational logics and affective resonance across cases (George and Bennett, 2005).

Critical soft power studies and representational analysis

Critical soft power scholarship shapes the study's focus on representation, narrative framing, and symbolic authority. While Nye's (2004) formulation conceptualises soft power as attraction, critical scholars argue that attraction itself is politically constituted and often intertwined with coercive representational practices (Bially Mattern, 2005). From this perspective, cultural diplomacy is understood as a site of representational struggle rather than a neutral instrument of image projection.

Methodologically, this leads to a close analysis of how cultural programmes, media outputs, and diplomatic messaging construct meanings of partnership, hierarchy, and belonging. Attention is paid not only to explicit narratives but also to silences, exclusions, and implicit assumptions that reveal underlying power relations (Ayhan, 2018). This approach allows the study to assess how emerging powers reposition themselves symbolically in Africa and how these representations challenge or reconfigure Western cultural authority.

Affect theory and interpretive analysis of emotion

Affect theory provides the tools necessary to examine how emotions function as political resources in cultural diplomacy. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions circulate socially, shaping collective attachments and political alignments. Methodologically, this requires an interpretive approach that traces affective cues, such as references to dignity, respect, humiliation, trust, and solidarity, within diplomatic discourse.

Since affect cannot be directly measured, the study relies on close textual analysis to interpret how emotional narratives are mobilised and received. This enables an understanding of why cultural diplomacy that symbolically recognises historical suffering or affirms equality may generate legitimacy even in the absence of immediate material benefits. Affect theory thus informs both the analytical focus and interpretive depth of the study, ensuring that emotional resonance is treated as central to hegemonic negotiation (Clough and Halley, 2007).

Integrated theoretical and methodological coherence

By integrating postcolonial theory, decoloniality, associationism, critical soft power studies, and affect theory, the study adopts a coherent qualitative methodology capable of capturing the historical, relational, representational, and emotional dimensions of cultural diplomacy. Policy analysis, critical discourse analysis, and comparative case studies are employed in a complementary manner, allowing theoretical insights to guide empirical interpretation while remaining attentive to contextual specificity.

This explicit alignment between theory and method strengthens the study's analytical rigour and enhances its contribution to debates on multipolarity, cultural hegemony, and African agency. It demonstrates that cultural diplomacy is not merely an instrument of foreign policy but a key arena in which global power is felt, contested, and reimagined within the Global Majority.

Research questions

Building on the foregoing theoretical and empirical discussions, this study is guided by a set of research questions designed to interrogate the role of cultural diplomacy in reshaping power relations within an increasingly multipolar global order. Rather than approaching cultural diplomacy as a peripheral or instrumental aspect of foreign policy, the questions foreground it as a central mechanism through

which influence, legitimacy, and consent are produced and contested, particularly within postcolonial contexts.

The first question examines how cultural diplomacy functions as a mechanism of influence under conditions of multipolarity, where no single actor can unilaterally define global norms or values. This shifts analytical attention from coercive or institutional power to the cultural and symbolic practices through which authority is negotiated. The second question explores how emerging powers use culturally resonant strategies in Africa to challenge or reconfigure long-standing Eurocentric forms of cultural hegemony. The third question allows to examine African agency by investigating how African states and societies interpret, appropriate, resist, or strategically engage these cultural overtures, rather than treating Africa as a passive site of competition. Finally, the fourth question situates these dynamics within broader debates on decoloniality and global governance, probing the extent to which evolving cultural diplomatic practices contribute to more plural, equitable, and culturally grounded global orders. These are the research questions that allow to respond to persistent gaps in International Relations scholarship that privilege material power while under-theorising culture, affect, and recognition:
Q1. How does cultural diplomacy function as a mechanism of influence within a multipolar global order?
Q2. In what ways do emerging powers deploy cultural diplomacy to reshape cultural hegemony in Africa?
Q3. How do African states and societies respond to and negotiate these cultural engagements?
Q4. What are the implications of these shifts for decoloniality and global governance?

Case Studies: cultural diplomacy through the paradigm of *New Scramble for Africa*
The contemporary "new scramble for Africa" differs fundamentally from its nineteenth-century antecedent in both form and logic. Whereas the earlier scramble was driven by overt territorial conquest, military domination, and the imposition of formal colonial administrations, today's competition is far more diffuse and subtle. It operates primarily through soft power mechanisms such as associationism, symbolic capital, development narratives, and claims to cultural legitimacy. External actors seek to embed themselves within African political, economic, and social landscapes by presenting their engagement as partnership rather than domination, cooperation rather than control. As Africa's demographic weight, economic potential, and geopolitical importance continue to expand, global powers increasingly recognise that influence can no longer be secured through coercion, unilateral conditionality, or prescriptive governance models. Instead, credibility and access are negotiated through the ability to resonate with African aspirations for sovereignty, dignity, and agency in global affairs. Narratives of "win-win" cooperation, South-South solidarity, and respect for national ownership have become central to contemporary engagement strategies, even when material asymmetries persist.
This shift reflects a broader transformation in the international system toward multipolarity, in which African states are no longer passive objects of external competition but active participants capable of diversifying partnerships and leveraging rivalries to their advantage (Acharya, 2018). Consequently, legitimacy has emerged as a critical currency of influence. Actors perceived as dismissive of African priorities or overly paternalistic risk marginalisation, while those able to align their discourse and practices with local development agendas and cultural sensibilities are more likely to secure enduring influence. In this sense, the new scramble is less about occupation and extraction, and more about

recognition, persuasion, and the politics of belonging in a changing global order (Chabal, Engel, and Gentili, 2005).

Rethinking the *New Scramble for Africa* through cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a central instrument in this reconfigured landscape. It operates at the intersection of identity, memory, education, religion, media, and humanitarianism, shaping how partnerships are perceived and legitimised. More importantly, these practices challenge Western cultural hegemony by pluralising the sources of normative authority and embedding Africa within a multipolar world order that privileges choice and strategic diversification (Nye, 2004; Taylor, 2016).

The following case studies, such as China-Africa, Qatar-Africa, Russia-Africa, and Turkey-Africa, illustrate distinct but equally overlapping models of cultural diplomacy. Each actor mobilises history, values, and symbolic narratives to position itself as an alternative to traditional Western powers, thereby contributing to shifts in cultural hegemony within the global majority.

China-Africa: Associationist narratives of collective victimhood and respect

China's engagement with Africa represents one of the most comprehensive and institutionalised examples of cultural diplomacy underpinning contemporary multipolar realignment. Beijing's approach is anchored in carefully cultivated narratives of shared historical experience, particularly collective victimhood under Western imperialism and a common struggle for national sovereignty and development. By emphasising its own history of colonial humiliation and revolutionary resistance, China presents itself not as an external hegemon but as a partner that has faced analogous challenges to those confronting African states (Taylor, 2006). This framing situates China within a broader Global South identity, fostering a sense of ideological and historical solidarity.

These narratives are reinforced through diplomatic rituals, political discourse, and institutional forums such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which formalise China-Africa engagement and symbolically affirm principles of equality, non-interference, and mutual respect. Cultural exchanges, training programmes, and people-to-people initiatives further embed these ideas at the societal level, translating abstract solidarity into lived interaction. Together, these practices function as cultural diplomacy by shaping perceptions, expectations, and norms that govern China-Africa relations.

Within a multipolar international order, this cultural alignment enhances the legitimacy of China's expanding economic and political presence in Africa. By grounding material cooperation in shared narratives and symbolic recognition, Beijing mitigates concerns about power asymmetries. As a result, China's engagement is often interpreted not simply as strategic expansion, but as participation in a reconfigured global order that challenges Western dominance while affirming alternative pathways to development and international partnership.

Cultural infrastructure and knowledge production

Confucius Institutes across African universities function as key nodes of China's cultural diplomacy, promoting Mandarin language acquisition, Chinese philosophy, and cultural exchange. While western critics argue these institutes advance state propaganda, African host institutions often emphasise their pragmatic value in enhancing educational capacity and employability within China-linked economies (King, 2013). In contrast to Western cultural institutions, Confucius Institutes are frequently perceived as less ideologically prescriptive, reinforcing China's narrative of non-interference.

Chinese media expansion, through China Global Television Network (CGTN Africa) and Xinhua bureaus, further reshapes epistemic hierarchies by amplifying African perspectives within non-

Western global media ecosystems. This challenges Western dominance in framing African realities and international affairs (Zhang, Wasserman, and Winston, 2017).

Developmentalism as cultural diplomacy

China's emphasis on infrastructure-led development in Africa operates not only as an economic strategy but also as a powerful form of cultural diplomacy. By prioritising roads, railways, ports, and industrial parks, China signals attentiveness to African-defined development priorities, particularly those centred on connectivity, industrialisation, and state-led growth. These projects communicate respect for African agency by responding to long-standing demands for tangible development outcomes rather than prescriptive political reforms. As Alden and Large (2019) argue, infrastructure functions symbolically as well as materially, embodying a vision of modernity that is decoupled from Western liberal governance models and conditionalities. In this regard, Chinese engagement offers an alternative developmental imaginary in which sovereignty and rapid modernisation coexist.

The symbolic value of infrastructure is especially significant in postcolonial contexts where underdevelopment is often associated with historical extraction and neglect. Chinese-built projects are frequently framed by local governments as visible markers of progress and national renewal. This framing reinforces the cultural resonance of China's development discourse. This resonance enhances China's soft power by aligning its presence with narratives of pragmatism, mutual benefit, and South-South cooperation, even when projects are financed through complex loan arrangements.

Nevertheless, this relationship is not without asymmetries and contestation. Critics point to rising debt burdens, labour disputes involving Chinese firms, and environmental degradation linked to large-scale construction projects. Despite these concerns, many African political elites portray engagement with China as strategic diversification rather than dependency. This framing reflects a broader multipolar logic in which partnerships with China are understood as a means of balancing Western influence. Within this context, cultural affinity and shared experiences of development mitigate perceptions of inequality, which allows symbolic alignment to partially offset material imbalances (Brautigam, 2020).

Qatar-Africa: mediation, media power, and moral positioning

Qatar's African engagement exemplifies a niche model of cultural diplomacy, grounded less in material scale than in symbolic mediation, media influence, and identity politics. As a small but very wealthy state, Qatar leverages soft power to position itself as not only a credible investor, but also a neutral interlocutor within Africa's complex political landscapes (Kamrava, 2015).

Mediation and conflict diplomacy

Qatar has increasingly positioned itself as a diplomatic mediator in a range of African conflicts, including Darfur, the Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, and tensions and war between Rwanda, M23-AFC rebels and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Through these interventions, Qatar frames its role not as that of a coercive external power, but as a facilitator of African-led and consent-based solutions. This positioning is particularly significant in a postcolonial context, where skepticism toward Western-led intervention remains strong due to historical experiences of domination and imposed governance. By emphasising neutrality, dialogue, and mutual respect, Qatar presents itself as an alternative diplomatic partner whose involvement is not tied to military pressure or political conditionality (Ulrichsen, 2014).

These mediation efforts are culturally coded through recurring appeals to reconciliation, respect for sovereignty, and the moral value of dialogue over force. Such framing aligns closely with the normative language used by African regional organisations and leaders, thereby increasing the resonance and acceptance of Qatari involvement. Rather than projecting power through material leverage alone, Qatar relies on symbolic practices, such as hosting peace talks, facilitating negotiations, and offering humanitarian or reconstruction support, to embed itself within local and regional diplomatic cultures. This approach allows Qatar to operate within African political spaces without triggering perceptions of neocolonial interference.

Mediation thus functions as a form of cultural diplomacy, constructing Qatar as a moral and ethical actor on the international stage. By prioritising consensus-building and restraint, Qatar enhances the legitimacy of its interventions and builds reputational capital. This legitimacy is derived less from structural dominance or coercive capacity and more from symbolic authority, trust, and the performative enactment of shared diplomatic values, enabling Qatar to expand its influence through credibility rather than control.

Al Jazeera and discursive power

The global reach of Al Jazeera constitutes Qatar's most significant cultural and communicative asset, functioning as a central pillar of its soft power strategy. Through its extensive coverage of African political, social, and economic issues, Al Jazeera foregrounds African voices that are often marginalised in dominant Western media narratives. By providing platforms for African journalists, intellectuals, and political actors, the network contributes to greater discursive pluralism within global information flows, enabling alternative perspectives on conflict, development, and governance to circulate internationally (Zayani, 2015). In particular, Al Jazeera's frequent critiques of Western foreign policy and interventionism resonate strongly within postcolonial contexts, where media representation has historically been shaped by external power structures.

This editorial positioning challenges the hegemony of Western news outlets by disrupting their monopoly over agenda-setting and framing. In doing so, Qatar aligns itself with broader Global South narratives that emphasise resistance, autonomy, and epistemic sovereignty. Rather than presenting itself as a neutral observer, Qatar leverages Al Jazeera to signal ideological affinity with states and societies seeking greater representational equity in the international system. The network thus operates not merely as a media organisation but as a cultural-diplomatic instrument that embeds Qatar within transnational debates about power, voice, and legitimacy.

Beyond media, Qatar's educational initiatives further consolidate this image. Scholarships, academic exchanges, and partnerships with African universities and research institutions position Qatar as an enabler of intellectual mobility and knowledge production. These efforts emphasise collaboration and capacity-building rather than extraction, reinforcing the perception of Qatar as a partner in intellectual exchange rather than a neo-imperial actor seeking dominance.

Russia-Africa: memory politics and anti-imperial symbolism

Russia's renewed engagement with Africa relies heavily on the politics of memory and the symbolic continuity it claims with the Soviet Union's historic support for African liberation movements. During the Cold War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) positioned itself as a patron of anti-colonial struggles, offering military, educational, and diplomatic support to independence movements

across the continent. Contemporary Russia draws selectively on this legacy to frame its current presence as a revival of principled solidarity rather than a new form of external domination. Although Russia does not match the economic scale and infrastructural capacity of China, it nevertheless compensates through cultural diplomacy that foregrounds anti-imperial narratives and shared resistance to Western hegemony (Stronski, 2019).

This strategy is particularly effective in political contexts where dissatisfaction with Western interventionism, sanctions regimes, and governance conditionalities has grown. By invoking historical memory, Russia situates itself as a continuity actor that never colonised Africa and instead contributed to its liberation. Such framing allows Moscow to re-enter African political spaces with moral legitimacy disproportionate to its material capabilities. Memory politics thus functions as a low-cost but high-impact diplomatic resource, enabling Russia to amplify its influence within an increasingly multipolar order. However, this reliance on symbolism often exposes the limits of Russia's engagement, as legitimacy derived from history must contend with contemporary expectations of development, investment, and long-term partnership.

Soviet legacies and educational diplomacy

Educational diplomacy constitutes a central pillar of Russia's memory-based engagement with Africa. During the Soviet period, thousands of African students received higher education and military training in Soviet universities, creating enduring networks of political elites, technocrats, and professionals with personal ties to Moscow. These alumni networks serve as reservoirs of symbolic capital, embodying lived experiences of solidarity and opportunity associated with Soviet support. Contemporary Russia actively revives and commemorates these connections, framing them as evidence of long-standing partnership rather than opportunistic engagement.

High-profile events such as the Russia-Africa Summits institutionalise this memory politics by invoking shared struggles against colonialism, apartheid, and Western domination (Neethling, 2020). Official discourse frequently highlights the role of Soviet-trained African leaders in national liberation and post-independence governance, reinforcing narratives of mutual respect and ideological alignment. Scholarships, renewed academic exchanges, and cultural programmes are presented as a continuation of this legacy, which signals Russia's commitment to people-to-people ties rather than purely transactional relations.

This strategy resonates particularly strongly in contexts where Western education and aid are increasingly associated with conditionality, paternalism, and normative governance agendas. By contrast, Russian educational diplomacy emphasises sovereignty, technical expertise, and political autonomy. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on Russia's ability to update symbolic legacies with contemporary relevance. While historical memory provides emotional and political resonance, its long-term impact is contingent on sustained institutional investment and meaningful opportunities for new generations, not solely nostalgia for past solidarities.

Cultural forums and strategic messaging

Cultural centres, language programmes, media outreach, and elite-focused forums that reinforce narratives of sovereignty, traditional values, and resistance to Western liberal universalism facilitate Russian cultural diplomacy in Africa. These initiatives are designed to normalise Russia's geopolitical positions by embedding them within broader moral and civilisational discourses. Russian state-linked

media and cultural programming frequently frame global politics as a struggle between imposed Western norms and pluralistic models of governance, positioning Russia as a defender of cultural diversity and national self-determination (Abramova and Fituni, 2019).

While security cooperation, such as arms sales and private military involvement, often dominates analyses of Russia, Africa relations, cultural diplomacy plays a crucial legitimising role. It provides the ideological and symbolic scaffolding that makes security partnerships politically palatable, especially in regimes seeking alternatives to Western security assistance. By aligning strategic interests with anti-imperial rhetoric, Russia presents its involvement as supportive rather than coercive, thereby mitigating perceptions of external interference.

Nevertheless, this approach carries inherent risks. The heavy reliance on anti-colonial symbolism may result in the instrumentalisation of historical grievances without delivering broad-based developmental outcomes. If cultural messaging is not matched by tangible economic or social benefits, its appeal may fade away over time. Consequently, the sustainability of Russia's cultural diplomacy in Africa will depend on its ability to translate symbolic resonance into credible, long-term partnerships that extend beyond rhetoric and security-focused engagement.

Turkey-Africa: Cultural affinity and humanitarian diplomacy

Turkey's engagement with Africa illustrates a hybrid model of cultural diplomacy that combines religious affinity, humanitarian engagement, and selective historical narrative. Since the early 2000s, Ankara has strategically expanded its diplomatic footprint across the continent by increasing the number of embassies, trade missions, and high-level visits (Özkan, 2018). This expansion has been accompanied by a discourse that emphasises shared histories, South-South cooperation, and Turkey's identity as a non-Western power that nevertheless possesses modern state capacity. By framing its involvement as both culturally familiar and development-oriented, Turkey positions itself as an intermediary actor between Western donors and other non-Western powers such as China and the Gulf states.

A key feature of Turkey's Africa policy is its emphasis on relational diplomacy. Rather than prioritising large-scale infrastructure or extractive investment, Ankara highlights interpersonal ties, religious commonality, and visible engagement at the societal level. This approach has proven particularly effective in regions where historical mistrust of Western intervention remains high and where cultural proximity is valued as a marker of political sincerity. Turkey's narrative of shared ethical values and mutual respect thus enhances its soft power appeal. However, the success of this model may depend on maintaining credibility between rhetoric and practice, especially as Turkey's geopolitical ambitions and domestic political developments increasingly shape perceptions of its external engagement.

Turkish soft power and cultural institutions

Turkish soft power plays a central role in its cultural diplomacy in Africa, particularly through institutions such as the Yunus Emre Institute and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). These organisations promote Turkish language education, cultural programming, and Islamic scholarship, embedding Turkey's presence within local religious and educational landscapes. In Muslim-majority African states, these initiatives resonate strongly through shared religious identity, enabling Turkey to cultivate trust and familiarity that secular Western actors often struggle to achieve.

Unlike Gulf-based religious outreach, which is frequently associated with Salafi or Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, Turkey presents its religious diplomacy as moderate, historically grounded, and culturally pluralistic. This positioning allows Ankara to offer an alternative Islamic reference point that aligns with local traditions while remaining institutionally connected to the modern state (Siradag, 2022). Cultural centres, mosque restoration projects, and imam training programmes reinforce this message, portraying Turkey as both a custodian of Islamic heritage and a contemporary partner.
At the same time, Turkish Islamic soft power is not purely theological; it is deeply political. By shaping religious education and discourse, Turkey indirectly influences norms related to governance, social order, and moral authority. While this strategy enhances Turkey's appeal, it could also raise concerns about external influence in domestic religious affairs. The sustainability of Turkey's Islamic soft power thus may depend on its ability to balance religious solidarity with respect for local autonomy and pluralism.

Humanitarianism as cultural legitimacy

Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy constitutes another critical dimension of its cultural engagement with Africa. Highly visible in contexts such as Somalia, Sudan, and the Sahel, Turkish assistance combines emergency relief with long-term development initiatives, including hospitals, schools, infrastructure rehabilitation, and vocational training. These interventions are often delivered through a close partnership between state agencies, faith-based organisations, and Turkish NGOs, which create a dense network of on-the-ground or field presence.

Unlike Western aid frameworks that are frequently associated with bureaucratic conditionality and donor-driven priorities, Turkish humanitarian assistance is framed as solidarity rooted in shared humanity and, in many cases, shared faith. This narrative emphasises dignity, reciprocity, and partnership rather than charity, reinforcing perceptions of cultural proximity and mutual respect (Huda, and Ismail, 2022). The personalisation of aid, through high-level visits, symbolic gestures, and direct engagement with local communities, strengthens further Turkey's moral legitimacy.

However, some critics argue that humanitarian engagement may be instrumentalised to advance strategic interests, potentially undermining its ethical credibility. If humanitarianism becomes closely associated with political leverage, Turkish soft power benefits may be affected. Consequently, the long-term effectiveness of Turkey's cultural diplomacy in Africa may depend on maintaining a clear distinction between solidarity-driven assistance and overt geopolitical and geostrategic ambitions.

Comparative insights

As global power configurations shift toward an increasingly multipolar order, one can argue that Africa has emerged as a central arena where economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, and narrative power intersect. While material indicators such as foreign direct investment (FDI), trade, and contracting provide visible measures of influence, they also function as vehicles through which emerging powers project culturally resonant forms of partnership. China's engagement illustrates this dynamic clearly: despite fluctuations in annual flows, China remains Africa's largest external economic partner, with cumulative FDI stock estimated in the tens of billions of dollars and trade volumes exceeding US$250 billion in recent years (Hamilton (2023). These material ties are reinforced through culturally embedded diplomacy, such as Confucius Institutes, media cooperation, and narratives of shared anti-imperial history, that frame economic presence as solidarity rather than dominance.

Russia's footprint, by contrast, is narrower but symbolically potent. Accounting for less than 1 percent of Africa's total FDI stock (He, Sologoub, and Fedyk, 2023), Russian engagement is concentrated in strategic sectors such as energy and mining, complemented by cultural instruments emphasising sovereignty, historical memory, and resistance to Western conditionality. As Hamilton (2023) notes, this selective economic presence amplifies Russia's cultural and ideological messaging disproportionate to its investment scale.

Turkey and Qatar reinforce the argument around how economic engagement is entwined with cultural outreach. Turkey's trade with Africa, which exceeds US$35 billion, and nearly US$100 billion in contracting projects, is accompanied by mosque construction, educational exchanges, humanitarian diplomacy, and a discourse of Ottoman-African historical continuity (Yade, 2025). Qatar's smaller but strategic investment footprint, embedded within broader Gulf-Africa trade and investment flows, similarly leverages media, religious networks, and mediation diplomacy to cultivate influence (Ecanow, 2025).

These comparative patterns demonstrate that in a multipolar system, economic figures acquire meaning through culture, affect, and recognition, underscoring cultural diplomacy as a central mechanism through which Africa navigates competing global partnerships.

Comparative figures: Chinese versus Russian investments in Africa

a) Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock and flows

Metric	China	Russia	Notes
Total FDI into Africa (2003-2021)	~$51 billion	~$1.7 billion	China's FDI stock vastly exceeds Russia's, with Russia representing a tiny share of African FDI flows (He, Sologoub, and Fedyk, 2023)
Annual Average Chinese Investment (2024-2027 estimate)	~$17 billion per year	~$1-5 billion per year	Based on comparative strategic investment data (Cristo, 2025)

b) Trade and contracting (proxy for economic engagement)

Metric	China-Africa Trade (2024)	Russia-Africa Trade (2024)
Total trade value	$295 billion	$24.5 billion

c) Sectoral and strategic footprint (Hamilton, 2023)

Dimension	China	Russia
Infrastructure Projects	Thousands of km of railways, ports, highways	Few projects, selective, including nuclear and military-linked agreements.
Major Investment Targets	South Africa, Zambia, Nigeria, Angola, DRC	Egypt (nuclear plant agreements), mineral deals tied to security/political partnerships
Political/Economic Strategy	Belt and Road Initiative (participation by most African states)	Focus on security cooperation and strategic political alliances.

In relation to the strategic focus, China emphasises infrastructure and broad economic partnerships, which are often under the Belt and Road Initiative, whereas Russia's presence is often tied to security cooperation and a limited set of strategic projects.

Comparative figures: Turkey versus Qatar in Africa

a) Direct Investment and Economic Footprint

Measure	Turkey (Türkiye)	Qatar
Direct Turkish Investments in Africa	~US$10 billion: total stock of investments by Turkish businesses (WAM, 2025)	Estimates vary greatly: some claims suggest up to ~$135 billion across sector projects (Yade, 2025)
Turkish Contracting Projects in Africa	~US$96.6 billion *project value* undertaken by Turkish firms (WAM, 2025)	Not directly aggregated in comparable contractor totals as Qatar's investments tend to be sovereign-led and project-specific, such as aviation and infrastructure stakes (Yade, 2025)
Notable Qatar Pledges (2025)	No available data	Qatar pledged *multi-billion packages*, including ~US$21B for DRC, ~$12B for Burundi, and ~$19B in Zambia, though many are commitments rather than realised FDI totals (Ecanow, 2025)

b) Trade with Africa

Measure	Turkey-Africa Trade	Gulf (incl. Qatar)-Africa Trade
Turkey-Africa Trade Volume	~$36.5-$40 billion (2024 data); ~8 times growth since 2003 Yildiz, and Yildirim, 2025)	Qatar part of broader GCC-Africa trade which doubled to ~$121 billion (2016-2023), though data isn't broken out by Qatar alone (Yade, 2025)

c) Sector highlights (Bojang Jnr, 2025; Klein, 2025; Vial and Bouvier, 2025)

Dimension	Turkey (Türkiye)	Qatar
Infrastructure and contracting	Extensive involvement in airports, convention centres, housing, and transport corridors through Turkish contractors operating across Africa.	Selective infrastructure engagement, often linked to aviation hubs, logistics, and flagship projects embedded in strategic partnerships.
Economic engagement profile	Broad-based and trade-driven, centred on machinery, electrical goods, chemicals, and automotive	Capital-intensive and investment-led, focused on energy-related services, aviation, and high-value

	products, reflecting Turkey's industrial export model.	strategic assets rather than diversified trade.
Energy and aviation	Limited direct energy investments; engagement occurs mainly through construction and service provision supporting energy infrastructure.	Core pillar of engagement, with Qatar Airways investments in African airlines, including RwandAir and Airlink, and airport development projects, such as Bugesera Airport in Rwanda.
Telecommunications and digital infrastructure	Secondary but growing role in ICT and digital services, complementing physical infrastructure projects.	Prominent role through firms such as Ooredoo Corporate, advancing digital connectivity and data infrastructure.
Strategic investment modality	Predominantly private-sector-led investments supported by proactive state diplomacy and development cooperation frameworks.	Government-led investment pledges, such as 2025 accords with DRC, Zambia, and Burundi, which are often embedded in formal strategic cooperation memoranda.

DISCUSSION

Cultural diplomacy, affect, and hegemonic shifts in a multipolar Africa

Across these case studies, several comparative patterns emerge regarding the role of cultural diplomacy in Africa's evolving multipolar order, revealing it as a central arena in which power, legitimacy, and agency are negotiated. First, cultural diplomacy functions as a key mechanism through which multipolarity is normalised and rendered politically intelligible to African audiences. As global influence diffuses beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic core, non-Western actors deploy alternative narratives of partnership that draw on shared historical experiences, religious affinities, development trajectories, and memories of colonial domination. China's emphasis on South–South cooperation and anti-imperial solidarity, Russia's invocation of sovereignty and resistance to Western interventionism, Turkey's appeal to historical and religious continuity, and Qatar's projection of mediation and Islamic soft power all contribute to diluting the cultural monopoly historically exercised by Western powers. This pluralisation of symbolic frameworks allows African states and societies to imagine global engagement beyond a single Western reference point, making multipolarity not merely a structural condition but a culturally meaningful and socially acceptable order.

Second, these engagements demonstrate that cultural diplomacy is not merely symbolic or ornamental but deeply political in its effects. Cultural narratives shape norms of legitimacy, define acceptable forms of authority, and influence how concepts such as sovereignty, development, and partnership are understood. In African contexts where historical experiences of exploitation remain salient, the

framing of external engagement often matters as much as its material content. Infrastructure finance, military cooperation, or investment flows are interpreted differently depending on whether they are embedded in narratives of mutual respect and recognition or in discourses of conditionality and normative hierarchy. While asymmetries of power and resources between African states and external actors persist, cultural resonance frequently determines whether such asymmetries are perceived as tolerable and pragmatic or as coercive and extractive. In this sense, soft power does not displace hard power but conditions its reception, shaping the social and political environments in which material capabilities operate.

Third, the comparative cases highlight how cultural diplomacy contributes to the reconfiguration of cultural hegemony within the international system. Western influence in Africa has long relied on the universalisation of liberal norms, development models, and epistemic authority. The rise of multiple external actors offering competing cultural frames disrupts this dominance by relativising Western claims to moral and intellectual leadership. Rather than replacing one hegemon with another, multipolar cultural diplomacy produces a fragmented and contested symbolic landscape in which no single narrative commands universal legitimacy. This fragmentation creates space for epistemic plurality, allowing African actors to draw selectively on diverse global repertoires when articulating their own visions of development, governance, and international alignment. Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a site of epistemic struggle, where meanings, values, and identities are continuously negotiated.

Fourth, these dynamics underscore the centrality of African agency in shaping the contours of multipolar engagement. African governments, political elites, civil society actors, and publics are not passive recipients of external cultural influence but active participants in its production and circulation. They strategically engage with competing cultural narratives to advance national interests, regime legitimacy, or developmental goals. Governments may leverage Chinese or Turkish narratives of non-interference to resist Western political conditionalities, while simultaneously engaging Western partners for security cooperation or development finance. Societal actors may appropriate elements of external cultural diplomacy, such as media content, educational exchanges, or religious networks, to reinforce local identities or contest domestic power structures. In this way, cultural diplomacy is co-constructed through interaction, adaptation, and selective appropriation rather than imposed unilaterally.

Furthermore, African agency operates not only at the state level but also within transnational and subnational spaces. Universities, religious institutions, business associations, and cultural organisations serve as intermediaries that translate global narratives into local contexts. These actors can amplify, reinterpret, or dilute the intentions of external powers, shaping how cultural diplomacy is ultimately experienced on the ground. The effectiveness of cultural engagement therefore depends not solely on the resources invested by external actors but on their capacity to engage authentically with African social realities and aspirations.

Taken together, these comparative patterns challenge reductive interpretations of a contemporary "scramble for Africa" driven exclusively by external competition. While strategic rivalry among emerging and established powers is undeniable, outcomes are not predetermined by material capabilities alone. Instead, they are mediated through cultural diplomacy and African strategic choice within an increasingly plural international order. Multipolarity, in this sense, is not simply a

redistribution of power but a transformation in how power is legitimised, communicated, and contested. Cultural diplomacy emerges as a central arena in which Africa both navigates and shapes global change, asserting greater agency in redefining its place within an evolving world system.

This paper has demonstrated that cultural diplomacy within a multipolar international system operates less through ideological conversion than through affective alignment and symbolic recognition. Across the cases examined, emerging powers engage African partners by acknowledging historical grievances, affirming sovereignty, and resonating with locally meaningful identities. This mode of engagement contrasts sharply with Western approaches that have historically relied on conditionality, institutional benchmarking, and moral supervision, often reproducing perceptions of hierarchy and asymmetry (Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2001; Taylor, 2006).

Cultural diplomacy thus emerges as a critical mechanism through which Eurocentric cultural hegemony is contested and reconfigured. Rather than replacing Western dominance with a new singular hegemon, multipolar engagement pluralises the sources of legitimacy and authority in global politics (Acharya, 2014b, 2018). However, this shift does not eliminate power asymmetries. Instead, it reshapes the terrain on which power is negotiated by embedding material interests within affective and symbolic frameworks that render external partnerships more politically and emotionally acceptable to African actors.

Affective engagement and the politics of recognition

The findings underscore the centrality of affect in contemporary cultural diplomacy. Emerging powers gain traction in Africa not by exporting universal values, but by engaging with long-standing demands for recognition that have historically been denied under Eurocentric diplomatic and development paradigms (Honneth, 1996). These demands are deeply shaped by colonial legacies in which Africa was positioned as peripheral, deficient, or in need of tutelage rather than as an equal participant in global modernity (Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2001).

Drawing on Honneth's (1996) theory of recognition, this study conceptualises diplomacy in postcolonial contexts as operating through a moral grammar in which respect, dignity, and symbolic equality are indispensable to legitimacy. Cultural diplomacy becomes effective when it affirms African agency and historical experience, even where material inequalities persist. Narratives of shared anti-imperial struggle, religious affinity, or parallel development trajectories function as affective appeals that generate emotional legitimacy and diplomatic trust (Taylor, 2006; Özkan, 2018).

At the same time, affective engagement constitutes a form of power. By shaping perceptions of partnership and mutuality, cultural diplomacy influences how inequalities are interpreted and tolerated. As such, affective diplomacy represents neither a purely emancipatory practice nor simple manipulation, but a relational form of power characteristic of post-hegemonic global orders (Acharya, 2018).

"Win-Win" cooperation as symbolic politics

The discourse of "win-win cooperation," frequently employed by China and echoed by other emerging actors, illustrates the symbolic politics of multipolar cultural diplomacy. Its effectiveness lies not in guaranteeing symmetrical outcomes, but in explicitly rejecting civilisational hierarchy and moral supervision (Taylor, 2006). In postcolonial contexts where Western development discourse has often

encoded asymmetry through conditionality and reform imperatives, the language of mutual benefit carries significant affective weight.

From a critical perspective, "win-win" cooperation functions as symbolic politics by reframing inequality as negotiable and situational rather than as evidence of moral failure. This symbolic shift weakens the normative authority of Western actors whose engagement models continue to frame Africa through compliance, evaluation, and reform benchmarks (Alden and Large, 2019). As a result, African actors are able to reposition themselves discursively as strategic partners rather than recipients of discipline.

Nevertheless, symbolic egalitarianism does not negate structural constraints. Debt relations, trade imbalances, and elite capture remain persistent challenges within multipolar engagement (Brautigam, 2020). What distinguishes contemporary cultural diplomacy is not the absence of inequality, but the transformation of its meaning. Inequality becomes politically manageable when it is embedded within narratives of respect, choice, and sovereignty rather than moral hierarchy.

Cultural diplomacy as counter-hegemonic practice

The analysis suggests that multipolar cultural diplomacy functions as a counter-hegemonic practice by fragmenting Western monopolies over norms, values, and development pathways. Rather than consolidating a new hegemonic centre, emerging powers contribute to a dispersed configuration of authority in which legitimacy is negotiated across multiple actors and cultural registers (Gramsci, 1971; Acharya, 2014a).

Cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in this process by challenging the presumed universality of Western liberal norms and legitimising alternative visions of modernity and governance. Through educational exchanges, media engagement, religious solidarity, and humanitarian narratives, emerging powers expand the range of culturally acceptable partnerships available to African states (Zhang, Wasserman, and Winston, 2017; Özkan, 2018). This pluralisation weakens the capacity of any single actor to define the terms of global participation.

However, counter-hegemonic practices should not be conflated with normative neutrality. Emerging powers pursue their own strategic, economic, and security interests, and their cultural diplomacy may obscure new forms of dependency or elite consolidation (Stronski, 2019). What distinguishes the current multipolar moment is Africa's enhanced capacity to navigate these risks through strategic diversification and symbolic leverage.

Africa's strategic agency in a multipolar cultural order

A key implication of this discussion is the centrality of African agency. Africa is not merely an object of competing cultural influences, but an active participant in shaping the contours of multipolar engagement. African states and societies selectively appropriate, reinterpret, and instrumentalise cultural diplomacy in line with domestic political priorities and regional dynamics (Chabal et al., 2005).

Multipolarity expands Africa's room for manoeuvre by enabling the diversification of partnerships, the pursuit of issue-specific alignments, and the assertion of symbolic autonomy in global forums (Acharya, 2018). Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a space of negotiation rather than passive

reception. African actors increasingly deploy multipolar rhetoric to resist external pressure, renegotiate terms of engagement, and assert sovereignty within international institutions.

Implications for global governance

The findings of this study suggest that dominant approaches to global governance require conceptual recalibration. Prevailing models tend to prioritise institutional design, rule compliance, and formal authority, while underestimating the role of affective legitimacy and cultural recognition (Nye, 2004). In the absence of symbolic respect and emotional resonance, governance frameworks risk being perceived as externally imposed and morally alien, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

In an increasingly multipolar world, legitimacy is contingent upon the ability of global governance actors to engage with plural histories, identities, and normative frameworks (Acharya, 2014a). Cultural diplomacy is therefore not peripheral to governance but constitutive of its effectiveness. Governance initiatives that neglect affective dimensions are likely to encounter resistance, selective compliance, or disengagement in the Global South.

Toward African-led cultural strategies

The analysis points to the necessity of developing African-led cultural diplomacy frameworks that move beyond reactive engagement with external powers. Such frameworks should be grounded in African epistemologies and historical narratives, ensuring that cultural representation is not outsourced to external actors (Bhabha, 1994; Mbembe, 2001). By articulating indigenous narratives of modernity, development, and global belonging, African states can contest inherited hierarchies of knowledge and value.

Investment in intercultural competence within African diplomatic institutions is equally critical. This includes the capacity to interpret affective strategies deployed by external partners and to deploy cultural diplomacy proactively within bilateral and multilateral settings (Nye, 2004). Cultural literacy thus becomes a strategic asset rather than a symbolic add-on.

Finally, African-led strategies should leverage the openings created by multipolarity to enhance symbolic sovereignty. By navigating among multiple partners and discourses, Africa can transform cultural diplomacy into a resource for negotiating power rather than a site of dependency. In this sense, cultural diplomacy becomes integral to broader projects of political autonomy and global repositioning (Acharya, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Cultural diplomacy, the reconfiguration of global geostrategic narratives and African positioning in a multipolar order

This journal article has argued that cultural diplomacy is not a peripheral or secondary dimension of international relations, but a central mechanism through which cultural hegemony is being reconfigured in an increasingly multipolar world. Focusing on Africa as a critical arena of global contestation, the study has demonstrated that emerging powers deploy culturally resonant strategies that challenge long-standing Western dominance by foregrounding respect, recognition, and affective legitimacy rather than ideological conversion or normative imposition.

The empirical analysis of China-Africa, Qatar-Africa, Russia-Africa, and Turkey-Africa relations illustrates how cultural diplomacy operates through narratives of shared history, sovereignty, religious

or civilisational affinity, and developmental parallelism. These narratives function as affective appeals that address historical experiences of misrecognition produced under colonial and postcolonial Western engagement (Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2001). In doing so, they alter the emotional foundations upon which legitimacy is constructed in global politics. Rather than seeking to universalise values, emerging powers gain influence by recognising African identities and aspirations, thereby resonating with demands for dignity and autonomy (Honneth, 1996; Acharya, 2018).

This shift reflects a broader transformation in global governance. Whereas Western hegemony historically relied on the naturalisation of liberal norms as universally valid, multipolar cultural diplomacy pluralises the sources of authority and legitimacy. As demonstrated throughout the article, this process does not eliminate power asymmetries; material inequalities, strategic interests, and structural constraints remain deeply embedded in Africa's global relations (Brautigam, 2020; Alden and Large, 2019). However, the terms through which these asymmetries are interpreted and negotiated have changed. Power is increasingly mediated through affect, symbolism, and cultural recognition rather than overt coercion or moral supervision.

Crucially, this transformation should not be understood as a simple replacement of Western dominance with a new hegemon. Instead, it reflects a fragmented and contested hegemonic landscape in which authority is dispersed across multiple actors and cultural registers (Gramsci, 1971; Acharya, 2014). Africa's role in this process is not passive. African states and societies actively navigate multipolar engagements, leveraging cultural diplomacy to diversify partnerships, resist conditionality, and enhance symbolic sovereignty within global forums (Chabal et al., 2005).

In this regard, the findings point toward a decolonial shift in global politics. Legitimacy increasingly depends on recognition, emotional intelligence, and cultural respect rather than on institutional compliance alone. Cultural diplomacy thus emerges as a decisive site where the future contours of global order are negotiated, contested, and reshaped from the Global South outward.

Contribution to the body of knowledge

This study makes four interrelated contributions to scholarship in international relations, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial political theory.

First, the article reframes cultural diplomacy as a core geostrategic instrument rather than an auxiliary tool of foreign policy. While existing literature often treats cultural diplomacy as a soft complement to material power, this study demonstrates that cultural practices are central to how power itself is legitimised and contested in a multipolar order (Nye, 2004; Acharya, 2018). By embedding strategic interests within affective narratives, emerging powers reshape the conditions under which influence is accepted, resisted, or normalised. This reconceptualisation challenges materialist and institutionalist biases in mainstream IR theory.

Second, the study advances the concept of affective multipolarity. Unlike traditional accounts of multipolarity that focus on shifts in military or economic capabilities, affective multipolarity foregrounds the emotional and symbolic dimensions of global power. It highlights how recognition, dignity, and historical resonance shape alignment choices in postcolonial contexts (Honneth, 1996; Mbembe, 2001). This conceptual contribution opens new analytical space for examining legitimacy, consent, and resistance beyond rationalist or normative frameworks.

Third, the article centres Africa as an active agent in hegemonic transformation. Rather than treating the continent as a passive site of great power competition, the analysis demonstrates how African actors strategically interpret and instrumentalise cultural diplomacy to renegotiate global hierarchies. This intervention responds directly to critiques of Eurocentrism in international relations by foregrounding African agency, epistemologies, and historical experience as constitutive of global order rather than derivative of it (Fanon, 1963; Acharya, 2014a, 2014b).

Finally, the study bridges postcolonial theory and empirical diplomatic analysis. By integrating insights from Fanon, Mbembe, Gramsci, and Honneth with contemporary case studies of Africa's multipolar engagements, the article demonstrates how critical theory can be operationalised without losing analytical rigour. This synthesis contributes methodologically by showing how affect, recognition, and cultural meaning can be systematically analysed within empirical international relations research.

Taken together, these contributions position the article at the intersection of cultural diplomacy studies, Global South international relations, and decolonial scholarship. They suggest that understanding the future of global order requires taking culture, affect, and recognition seriously, not as soft variables, but as foundational elements of power itself.

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