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RESOURCE DIPLOMACY AND ROGUE ACTORS: INTERROGATING CHINESE INVOLVEMENT IN ILLEGAL MINING IN NIGERIA AND GHANA WITHIN SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study interrogates the contradiction between China's formal diplomatic overtures in Africa and the informal, often illicit activities of its nationals engaged in illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Ghana and Nigeria. While China promotes a development-oriented, non-interventionist foreign policy under the rubric of South–South cooperation, recurring incidents of environmental degradation, community displacement, and regulatory violations linked to Chinese actors undermine the credibility of this narrative. Anchored in the theoretical frameworks of soft power and transnational governance, this paper employs a qualitative comparative case study methodology to analyse patterns of Chinese involvement in illegal mining across both countries. It highlights how Ghana's relatively responsive institutional mechanisms and active civil society contrast with Nigeria's fragmented regulatory environment and weaker enforcement. The paper argues that these discrepancies in national governance structures directly affect the diplomatic leverage and behavioural accountability of foreign actors. The findings expose the limits of China's soft power in Africa when confronted by unregulated economic practices and state-level governance deficiencies. The paper concludes by recommending policy measures for host governments, regional institutions, and China itself to harmonise resource diplomacy with responsible conduct in the extractive sector.

Keywords: China–Africa Relations; Ghana; Illegal Mining; Nigeria; Resource Diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, China's expanding footprint in Africa has become a defining feature of 21st-century international relations. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure investments, and robust trade relations, China has positioned itself as Africa's largest bilateral trading partner and a strategic development partner (Alden & Alves, 2009; Brautigam, 2009). This engagement is often framed within a narrative of "win-win cooperation" and mutual respect, in contrast to the conditionalities typically associated with Western aid (Tan-Mullins et al., 2010). However, beneath this diplomatic veneer lies a more complex reality: the increasing presence of Chinese nationals in Africa's informal extractive sectors, particularly in illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), which has triggered social unrest, environmental degradation, and a re-evaluation of the legitimacy of China's soft power diplomacy.

Nowhere is this paradox more visible than in Ghana and Nigeria – two of West Africa's most resource-endowed yet governance-challenged nations. While both countries maintain strong formal ties with Beijing and benefit from Chinese-backed infrastructure and development loans, they have also become hotspots for unauthorised mining activities involving Chinese individuals and syndicates (Hilson et al., 2014; Ogege, 2020).

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In Ghana, the issue reached national crisis levels with the emergence of the "Galamsey" phenomenon, prompting a coordinated governmental crackdown and diplomatic strain. In Nigeria, media reports and security investigations have also linked Chinese nationals to illicit gold mining operations in several states, albeit with a weaker state response and less public scrutiny (Okoli & Orinya, 2014).

This study seeks to unpack this duality by exploring how the conduct of Chinese actors in illegal ASM affects both the domestic governance of extractive resources and the broader architecture of Sino-African diplomacy. It probes the tension between China's rhetorical commitment to non-interference and mutual benefit and the on-the-ground realities of unregulated foreign economic activities that contravene local laws and undercut state authority. In doing so, the paper adopts a comparative case study approach, examining both structural and agency-based factors that explain the different outcomes in Ghana and Nigeria.

By situating the analysis within the theoretical frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2004) and transnational governance (Rosenau, 1992), the paper highlights the implications of informal economic behaviour for formal diplomatic relations. The findings contribute to a growing body of literature that interrogates the unintended consequences of South–South cooperation and calls for a more ethically grounded and mutually accountable model of resource diplomacy in Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The expanding influence of China in Africa has generated a substantial body of scholarship that cuts across political economy, international relations, and development studies. At the centre of this scholarly attention is the nature, scope, and implications of China's engagement with African states, particularly in the extractive and infrastructure sectors. Scholars such as Brautigam (2009), Alden (2007), and Lee (2017) have attempted to unravel the strategic motivations behind China's Africa policy, describing it variously as pragmatic, opportunistic, or developmentalist. Much of the early literature emphasised China's 'non-interference' doctrine and infrastructure-for-resources exchange model, which sharply contrasted with Western development paradigms that prioritised governance reforms and conditional aid.

China's growing involvement in the extractive sector has, however, exposed deeper contradictions in the South–South cooperation paradigm. While formal diplomatic engagements between China and African states often stress mutual benefit and win-win partnerships, informal economic actors – including small-scale Chinese miners – frequently operate in regulatory grey zones, undermining the legitimacy of these diplomatic narratives. Scholars such as Hilson et al (2014) and Crawford and Botchwey (2017) have demonstrated how Chinese migrants in Ghana's artisanal gold mining industry have come into conflict with local communities, state authorities, and environmental protection mandates. These unauthorised activities often result in

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diplomatic tensions, revealing the complex interplay between state and non-state actors in shaping foreign relations.

The literature reveals that the tension between formal diplomacy and informal economic behaviour is not merely incidental but symptomatic of broader governance challenges within African states. As Mohan and Lampert (2013) argue, the agency of African actors is central in shaping China–Africa relations. Thus, while Chinese actors may exploit weak institutions, the permissive environment is often sustained by elite collusion, corruption, and lack of enforcement. In Ghana, civil society activism and a relatively responsive state apparatus have led to a visible crackdown on illegal mining activities. In contrast, Nigeria’s decentralised mining sector, porous borders, and politicised security environment create a fertile ground for informal and often illegal transnational economic networks to thrive.

From a theoretical standpoint, the notion of soft power as articulated by Nye (2004) provides an important lens for examining China’s strategic outreach. Nye defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. China’s use of soft power in Africa – manifested through Confucius Institutes, state media outreach, scholarships, and infrastructure aid – has been presented as a deliberate attempt to counter Western narratives and gain legitimacy. However, as Kurlantzick (2007) and d’Hooghe (2015) note, the credibility of soft power depends not only on state rhetoric but also on the behaviour of its citizens and companies abroad. When Chinese actors are seen as violating environmental regulations or exploiting vulnerable communities, the efficacy of China’s soft power narrative is significantly diminished.

The discourse on resource diplomacy further enriches this analysis by highlighting the ways in which natural resources serve as instruments of geopolitical leverage and economic exchange. Scholars like Klare (2001) and Humphreys et al (2007) emphasise that access to natural resources, particularly in the Global South, is often mediated by unequal power relations, historical dependencies, and governance deficits. In the China–Africa context, resource diplomacy has taken the form of loan-for-oil agreements, infrastructure-for-minerals swaps, and direct investment in extractive industries. While these arrangements have often been welcomed by African elites seeking rapid development, they also risk locking countries into resource dependency and undermining long-term sovereignty over natural assets.

There is also a growing body of work examining transnational governance and the role of non-state actors in shaping global regulatory outcomes. Rosenau (1992) introduced the idea of 'governance without government' to describe the emergence of networks, norms, and informal institutions that operate beyond the reach of formal state authority. In the case of illegal mining, transnational networks involving Chinese traders, local brokers, and corrupt officials form a shadow governance structure that can rival or undermine formal state institutions. This complicates the ability of African governments to regulate the extractive sector and enforce environmental or labour standards.

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Environmental governance literature adds another layer of complexity to the discourse. Studies by Hilson (2002), Carstens and Hilson (2009), and Armah et al (2013) have highlighted the ecological consequences of ASM, including mercury contamination, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. The environmental damage caused by unauthorised Chinese mining activities not only affects immediate localities but also has long-term implications for food security, public health, and regional stability. The failure of both host states and foreign governments to enforce ecological safeguards illustrates a governance vacuum that emboldens rogue actors.

Gaps in the literature remain, particularly with respect to comparative studies that examine how different African states respond to similar challenges posed by illegal Chinese actors. While Ghana has received significant scholarly attention due to its high-profile Galamsey crisis, Nigeria has been relatively under-examined, despite facing parallel dynamics. This study seeks to fill this gap by juxtaposing the Ghanaian and Nigerian experiences, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how governance, diplomacy, and civil society shape responses to informal foreign economic incursions.

In summary, the existing literature provides valuable insights into the complexities of China–Africa relations, particularly in the realm of resource extraction and informal economic practices. It reveals a tension between diplomatic rhetoric and economic reality, between formal agreements and informal behaviours. This study builds on these insights while offering a comparative and policy-relevant analysis that connects the behaviour of Chinese actors in illegal mining with broader questions of governance, diplomacy, and development in Africa.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated at the intersection of international relations theory and transnational political economy, drawing on the concepts of soft power, resource diplomacy, and transnational governance to unpack the complexities of Chinese involvement in illegal mining in Africa. The aim is to explore how informal economic behaviours challenge formal diplomatic narratives, and to understand the broader implications for governance and sovereignty in host African states.

First, Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power provides a foundational lens for analysing China's global strategy. Soft power, according to Nye, refers to the ability of a state to influence other actors through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or monetary inducements. China's soft power agenda in Africa has been pursued through tools such as development aid, public diplomacy, Confucius Institutes, cultural exchanges, and infrastructure investment. However, the actions of non-state Chinese actors – particularly those engaged in illegal or unethical practices – risk eroding the very attractiveness that underpins soft power. Scholars like Kurlantzick (2007) and d'Hooghe (2015) have observed that the credibility and effectiveness of soft power depend not just on state messaging but on the congruence between rhetoric and practice. The

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involvement of Chinese nationals in illicit activities such as unregulated mining undermines China's soft power ambitions and calls into question the ethical and regulatory coherence of its overseas engagement.

The concept of resource diplomacy further deepens the theoretical frame. Resource diplomacy refers to the strategic use of natural resource investments and agreements as instruments of foreign policy and economic leverage. In the China–Africa context, this often takes the form of infrastructure-for-resources swaps or loan-for-oil deals, as outlined by Brautigam (2009) and Klare (2001). These arrangements are usually framed within a discourse of mutual development and non-interference, but they often obscure unequal power dynamics and governance challenges in host states.

However, resource diplomacy is not only about formal contracts; it also shapes and is shaped by informal networks and practices. The entry of Chinese actors into the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) space represents a non-state extension of China's economic footprint, creating a grey zone where state policy, local governance, and private interests intersect. As Lee (2017) notes, the 'global China' phenomenon is as much about state strategy as it is about the dispersed actions of Chinese firms, individuals, and informal actors. To further understand the governance implications of these transnational interactions, the study also draws on the theoretical framework of 'governance without government' as proposed by Rosenau (1992). This concept captures the emergence of global and regional governance mechanisms that operate beyond the control of any single nation-state. In the context of illegal mining, networks of Chinese miners, local brokers, and complicit officials often form an informal governance system that competes with or subverts formal state institutions.

This multi-theoretical framework – linking soft power, resource diplomacy, and transnational governance – allows for a comprehensive interrogation of the roles, responsibilities, and contradictions inherent in China–Africa engagements. It provides a nuanced lens through which the actions of both state and non-state actors can be analysed, particularly in relation to sovereignty, accountability, and the limits of state control. By applying this theoretical triad, the study advances an interdisciplinary understanding of how formal diplomatic norms are often challenged by informal economic behaviour, and how the lines between diplomacy and delinquency can become blurred in the complex terrain of African extractive politics.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology anchored in a comparative case study design. The central objective is to explore how Chinese involvement in illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) manifests differently in Ghana and Nigeria, and what these variations reveal about the interplay between informal economic activity and formal diplomatic relations. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of perceptions, motivations, and context, which are critical for understanding transnational and informal behaviours (Maxwell, 2013).

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The comparative case study approach, as articulated by Yin (2018), is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts. By comparing two countries with different regulatory environments, governance structures, and levels of public engagement, the study is able to generate nuanced insights into how local contexts mediate the impact of foreign actors. Ghana and Nigeria were purposively selected due to their shared characteristics as resource-rich West African nations facing rising challenges from illegal mining, but with varied state responses and diplomatic strategies. Both countries also share common colonial links and easily pass as two economic power houses in the region.

Data collection relied on documentary analysis and expert interviews. Sources included academic literature, policy reports, investigative journalism, and statements from government officials, civil society actors, and international organizations. The use of multiple data sources supports triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of findings (Patton, 2002). Where available, public records and legal documents concerning mining regulation, environmental impact assessments, and foreign investment protocols were analysed to contextualise observed practices. Expert interviews were conducted with policymakers, academics, journalists, and civil society leaders in both countries. Semi-structured interview protocols allowed for flexibility while ensuring thematic consistency across interviews. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, with attention paid to balancing national and local perspectives. Interviews were conducted virtually and recorded with consent, following ethical guidelines for social research (Bryman, 2016).

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was both inductive – emerging from the data – and deductive – guided by the theoretical framework of soft power, resource diplomacy, and transnational governance. This approach ensured that findings were grounded in empirical evidence while being theoretically informed. The comparative nature of the study facilitates both within-case and cross-case analysis. Within-case analysis enables an in-depth understanding of each country's regulatory, diplomatic, and socio-political dynamics, while cross-case analysis highlights similarities and divergences that offer theoretical and practical insights. For example, while Ghana has implemented task forces and policy reforms to combat illegal mining, Nigeria's approach remains fragmented and reactive, underscoring the importance of institutional and civil society capacity.

This methodological approach is justified not only by the nature of the research questions but also by the sensitivity and fluidity of the subject matter. Illegal mining involves clandestine networks and politically sensitive relationships, making quantitative data difficult to obtain or unreliable. As Maxwell (2013) argues, qualitative methods are indispensable for exploring meanings, processes, and contextual factors that cannot be captured through statistical techniques.

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In summary, the chosen methodology allows for a holistic and context-sensitive exploration of how Chinese actors engage in illegal ASM in Ghana and Nigeria. It bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering insights that are both empirically grounded and analytically robust. The study adheres to ethical standards and methodological rigour to ensure validity, reliability, and relevance.

5. CASE STUDY I: GHANA

Ghana has emerged as a central focus in discussions on illegal artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASM), particularly due to the influx of foreign actors – most notably Chinese nationals – into the sector. Often referred to locally as 'galamsey,' illegal gold mining in Ghana has become a pressing political, environmental, and socio-economic issue. The involvement of Chinese miners has escalated tensions, prompted diplomatic friction, and drawn attention to the challenges of regulating transnational extractive activities in the Global South.

Historically, ASM in Ghana has provided livelihoods for millions and played a critical role in the rural economy. Hilson (2002) estimated that the sector accounted for over 60% of the country’s total mining labour force. However, in the past two decades, rising gold prices and technological innovations have transformed galamsey from a largely subsistence activity to a capital-intensive operation. Chinese miners introduced mechanised equipment such as excavators and dredgers, which significantly boosted output while also intensifying environmental degradation.

According to Crawford and Botchwey (2017), the presence of Chinese actors in Ghana’s ASM sector accelerated around 2007, coinciding with the global financial crisis and a surge in gold prices. These migrants often entered on tourist visas and partnered with Ghanaian landowners and political elites to bypass regulatory restrictions. While Ghanaian law prohibits foreign participation in ASM, enforcement was historically weak, and local complicity enabled this illicit collaboration to flourish.

Empirical investigations by the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) and media outlets such as Al Jazeera and the BBC have detailed how Chinese involvement has intensified environmental degradation in Ghana. Deforestation, mercury contamination of rivers, and the destruction of arable farmland have become widespread. These effects have been particularly severe in the Ashanti, Eastern, and Western regions, where mining operations are concentrated. Local communities have protested the destruction of their ecosystems, demanding accountability from both local authorities and foreign actors.

The government’s response to the galamsey crisis has been multifaceted but fraught with contradictions. In 2013, the first Mahama administration launched Operation Halt, a military-style intervention to evict illegal miners. While the initiative succeeded in deporting over 4,500 Chinese nationals, it was criticised for its lack of legal oversight and the indiscriminate destruction of mining equipment. Amnesty International (2015) and Human Rights Watch (2017) raised concerns about human rights abuses and selective

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targeting. The diplomatic fallout was significant. The Chinese government expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment of its citizens and accused Ghanaian authorities of xenophobia and selective enforcement. In response, Ghana sought to temper enforcement with diplomacy. In 2017, under President Nana Akufo-Addo, a new Inter-Ministerial Committee on Illegal Mining (IMCIM) was established, tasked with developing a more sustainable strategy. The committee launched a community mining programme aimed at formalising small-scale operations and promoting environmentally responsible practices.

Despite these efforts, illegal mining persists. Scholars such as Luning and Pijpers (2017) argue that ASM in Ghana is embedded within complex social, political, and economic networks that defy top-down regulation. The collusion of local chiefs, assembly members, and even security forces undermine the enforcement of mining laws. Moreover, the economic desperation of unemployed youth continues to fuel participation in galamsey, making it both a livelihood strategy and a form of political resistance. Notably, Chinese miners have become symbols of both opportunity and exploitation. In interviews conducted by Howard (2018), some Ghanaian miners expressed admiration for the Chinese work ethic and machinery, while others lamented the unequal profit-sharing and the erosion of indigenous mining practices. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of Chinese involvement, which cannot be reduced to a binary of victim and villain.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of the galamsey crisis. Ghanaian newspapers such as the Daily Graphic and Joy News have consistently framed Chinese miners as central culprits, sometimes using inflammatory rhetoric. This media discourse influences public opinion and state policy, but it also risks racialising the debate and obscuring the role of Ghanaian elites in perpetuating illegality. As Dankwah (2021) notes, the 'moral panic' surrounding foreign miners serves to divert attention from structural governance failures.

Civil society organisations have attempted to reframe the conversation toward governance reform. The Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), IMANI Africa, and WACAM have advocated for increased transparency in mining licensing, stronger community participation in environmental assessments, and a crackdown on elite complicity. Their policy briefs have called for integrating customary landowners into formal governance processes and revisiting mineral rights legislation to reflect contemporary realities.

The Ghanaian case exemplifies the tension between state sovereignty and economic pragmatism. On the one hand, the government is under pressure to uphold environmental regulations and assert national control over its resources. On the other hand, the economic benefits of gold exports, political patronage, and the need to maintain foreign diplomatic ties constrain enforcement. This dilemma is well captured in the notion of 'governance ambivalence' (Hickey & Mohan, 2005), where policy inconsistencies emerge from the competing priorities of statecraft and economic dependency.

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In conclusion, Ghana's encounter with Chinese illegal miners reveals the layered dynamics of informal diplomacy, elite collusion, and state capacity. The state's oscillation between crackdown and accommodation reflects broader struggles to reconcile resource nationalism with global economic entanglements. The galamsey phenomenon thus serves as a lens through which to interrogate the limits of formal diplomacy and the role of rogue actors in shaping transnational governance. While efforts at regulation continue, the persistence of illegal mining underscores the need for structural reforms in governance, enforcement, and international cooperation.

6. CASE STUDY II: NIGERIA

Nigeria, like Ghana, faces significant challenges related to illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), particularly in its mineral-rich northern and central regions. While the scale of foreign involvement is less documented than in Ghana, evidence increasingly points to the participation of Chinese nationals in illegal mining activities, often in collusion with local actors. These operations are intertwined with governance weaknesses, regulatory gaps, insecurity, and political clientelism, creating a complex web of informal diplomacy and resource exploitation.

The Nigerian Mining and Minerals Act of 2007 mandates the formalisation of ASM and prohibits foreigners from engaging in small-scale mining activities. However, enforcement has been weak due to institutional fragmentation and a lack of political will. According to reports by Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (2021), many Chinese nationals circumvent these laws by partnering with Nigerian intermediaries who acquire licences or gain access to land through traditional authorities.

In Osun, Zamfara, and Niger States, investigative reports by the Premium Times, ICIR, and the Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) have highlighted incidents where Chinese companies or individuals are found operating in gold-rich communities without appropriate licences or environmental safeguards. For instance, in 2020, the Osun State government sealed the mining operations of a Chinese firm accused of unauthorised gold extraction in protected forest reserves. Despite the crackdown, the firm reportedly resumed activities with political backing.

The security implications of illegal mining are more pronounced in Nigeria than in Ghana. Northern Nigeria has witnessed increasing violence linked to criminal gangs, bandits, and insurgents who exploit and profit from illegal mining activities. In Zamfara State, the nexus between gold mining and banditry has led to massive displacements, loss of lives, and environmental devastation. According to the International Crisis Group (2020), proceeds from illegal mining have been used to fund arms purchases and insurgent activities, exacerbating the region's instability. Chinese involvement in these zones of insecurity introduces a new dimension to transnational crime and resource diplomacy. In interviews conducted by the BBC Africa Eye (2021), local informants noted that Chinese nationals often rely on armed escorts and operate under the protection of corrupt security officials. The failure of the Nigerian state to assert control over its mineral resources enables the

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flourishing of such rogue economic behaviours, which in turn undermines China's soft power claims on the continent. The Nigerian government has responded with rhetorical commitments to reform, but implementation remains sluggish. The National Gold Purchase Programme, launched in 2020, aims to integrate artisanal miners into formal value chains and improve transparency. However, corruption, bureaucratic delays, and elite capture have hampered progress. According to NEITI (2022), over 80% of Nigeria’s gold is smuggled out of the country through informal networks, many of which involve Chinese buyers operating through frontmen.

Unlike Ghana, Nigeria lacks a coordinated, multi-agency response to illegal mining. The Ministry of Mines and Steel Development (MMSD), the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) operate in silos, often duplicating efforts or failing to share intelligence. Furthermore, federal-state jurisdictional conflicts create enforcement vacuums. As Akinrinsola (2022) argues, the failure to harmonise governance across tiers of government has prolonged the informalisation of the mining sector.

Diplomatic relations between Nigeria and China have remained largely cordial despite mounting evidence of illegal Chinese mining activity. China remains Nigeria’s largest bilateral trade partner and a key financier of infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This economic interdependence complicates the ability of Nigerian authorities to act decisively against Chinese offenders. In some cases, local enforcement agencies have been pressured to release arrested Chinese miners to avoid disrupting bilateral negotiations.

Civil society advocacy around illegal mining in Nigeria is gradually growing, though still nascent compared to Ghana. Organisations like Global Rights Nigeria and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) have called for stricter oversight of foreign involvement in the extractive sector. Investigative journalism, particularly by platforms like TheCable.ng and HumAngle, has brought public attention to the environmental and social costs of unchecked mining. However, civic activism remains constrained by funding limitations and political interference.

Environmental degradation from illegal gold mining is widespread. Rivers in Kebbi, Kwara, and Osun States have been contaminated with mercury and other heavy metals, posing public health risks. A 2021 report by the Nigerian Geological Survey Agency (NGSA) confirmed high levels of soil and water pollution in mining communities, attributing much of it to unregulated mining techniques introduced by foreign actors. These effects mirror the situation in Ghana, though in Nigeria they often unfold in more insecure and inaccessible environments.

An underexplored but important dimension of Chinese involvement in Nigeria’s mining sector is its link with land acquisition and displacement. Traditional rulers have at times leased communal lands to foreign entities without community consent, leading to evictions, farmland loss, and cultural tensions. In an ethnographic study by Uzondu

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(2023), community leaders in Kogi State reported feeling powerless against the influence of Chinese firms backed by local politicians. Such dynamics foster distrust and widen the gap between state policy and grassroots realities.

The legal framework in Nigeria remains ambiguous in terms of accountability. While the Mining Act prohibits foreign participation in ASM, enforcement is discretionary and politically mediated. As Ogege (2020) notes, regulatory loopholes allow for 'proxy arrangements' where Nigerians front for foreign investors. These grey areas facilitate impunity and weaken the state’s leverage to demand environmental and labour compliance from rogue actors. Moreover, the opacity surrounding mining licences has led to duplication and fraud. In 2022, the Ministry of Mines and Steel Development admitted that over 1,200 licences were either inactive or obtained under questionable circumstances. Chinese firms, often operating through Nigerian middlemen, have exploited this chaos to establish semi-legal operations, further blurring the lines between legality and illegality.

In summary, the Nigerian case illustrates a more diffuse but equally concerning form of Chinese engagement in illegal mining. The absence of a coherent regulatory framework, compounded by insecurity, elite complicity, and economic desperation, creates fertile ground for foreign exploitation. Unlike Ghana, where state response has been visible if inconsistent, Nigeria’s institutional inertia has allowed rogue actors to entrench themselves with minimal resistance. As China continues to pursue its resource diplomacy in Africa, the Nigerian experience underscores the need for recipient states to develop not only technical capacity but also political will. Stronger regulatory harmonisation, community inclusion, and anti-corruption measures are essential to mitigating the adverse impacts of foreign participation in ASM. The failure to do so risks not only environmental collapse and social unrest but also the erosion of state sovereignty in the face of transnational economic interests.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: GHANA AND NIGERIA

The comparative experiences of Ghana and Nigeria with respect to illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) involving Chinese nationals illuminate the complexities of state capacity, transnational governance, and resource diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa. While both countries share the phenomenon of foreign incursion into their mining sectors, they differ markedly in institutional response, public accountability, and international diplomacy. This comparative analysis highlights the systemic and structural divergences that shape how each country manages external engagement in their resource sectors.

Ghana's regulatory environment has been more active and visible in confronting illegal mining. The establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Illegal Mining (IMCIM) and the implementation of the community mining scheme represent deliberate state interventions aimed at formalising ASM and deterring illegal activities. In contrast, Nigeria lacks a cohesive national policy specifically targeting illegal mining involving foreign

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actors. Institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and jurisdictional conflicts have diluted efforts to combat the problem (Akinrinsola, 2022).

In both countries, Chinese nationals have exploited legal loopholes and weak enforcement mechanisms to participate in ASM despite legal prohibitions. However, the modes of entry differ. In Ghana, Chinese miners often enter through informal partnerships with local chiefs and landowners, using mechanised equipment to increase gold yield. Their operations are embedded in patron-client relationships that extend into political and bureaucratic elites (Crawford & Botchwey, 2017). In Nigeria, foreign actors rely more heavily on proxy arrangements and local intermediaries who acquire licences or access land in their name, creating a web of legal ambiguity and impunity (Ogege, 2020).

Environmental degradation is a common consequence in both countries, but Ghana has undertaken more systematic environmental assessments and remediation efforts. Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and media outlets have played an active watchdog role. Conversely, Nigeria's response has been ad hoc, and environmental oversight remains underfunded and largely reactive. The Nigerian Geological Survey Agency (NGSA, 2021) noted extensive mercury contamination in key mining zones, but response mechanisms remain weak.

Security outcomes also vary. In Nigeria, illegal mining is linked to rising insecurity, including armed banditry and insurgency in the North-West. Chinese actors are alleged to collaborate with criminal networks, adding a layer of complexity to state responses (International Crisis Group, 2020). In Ghana, while tensions exist, they have not morphed into widespread violence. This contrast reveals differences in internal security governance and the broader socio-political environment in which mining occurs. The role of civil society and media is comparatively stronger in Ghana. Organisations like IMANI Africa and WACAM have successfully mobilised public discourse and influenced policy debates on mining governance. Investigative journalism has exposed elite complicity and foreign malfeasance. In Nigeria, civil society remains constrained by political interference, funding limitations, and restricted access to information. While outlets like TheCable.ng and HumAngle have highlighted the dangers of illegal mining, their impact has been relatively muted.

Diplomatically, both countries have had to navigate the sensitivities of bilateral relations with China. Ghana faced a brief period of diplomatic tension following mass deportations of Chinese miners in 2013. However, the government subsequently adopted a softer approach through diplomatic channels, emphasising policy reform over mass expulsions. In Nigeria, enforcement is even more tempered, with evidence of political pressure on agencies to avoid offending China due to significant infrastructure dependence and trade ties. The conceptual frameworks of soft power and resource diplomacy help explain these patterns. China's economic influence, bolstered by Belt and Road Initiative investments, generates strategic leverage that shapes how African governments respond to illegal mining activities involving Chinese nationals (Brautigam, 2009). Ghana has demonstrated

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a relatively stronger degree of policy autonomy, whereas Nigeria's dependency on Chinese capital has contributed to regulatory inertia.

Importantly, both cases reveal the limitations of formal diplomacy in addressing non-state, transnational actors. The phenomenon of 'rogue diplomacy' – where unauthorised or informal agents shape international outcomes – challenges traditional International Relations models centred on state actors. Chinese miners, often operating with limited or no oversight from Beijing, nonetheless influence bilateral perceptions, provoke diplomatic tensions, and complicate state authority (Large, 2008).

Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that while Ghana and Nigeria share vulnerabilities to illegal foreign mining, they diverge significantly in how those vulnerabilities are managed. Ghana's partial success lies in its relatively stronger institutions, more assertive civil society, and policy coherence. Nigeria's struggles reflect deeper issues of governance decay, security fragility, and elite complicity. Addressing these challenges will require not just technical reforms, but a reconfiguration of the political economy of extractive governance in both countries.

8. DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of Chinese involvement in illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) across Africa – specifically in Ghana and Nigeria – raises critical questions about sovereignty, state capacity, and the dynamics of global south diplomacy. The implications of this engagement transcend environmental degradation or loss of state revenue. Instead, they expose deeper structural imbalances within African governance systems, while also interrogating China's soft power diplomacy under the guise of mutual economic benefit.

At the heart of this discussion lies a paradox: while African states, particularly Ghana and Nigeria, formally prohibit foreign participation in ASM, these same states often facilitate or tolerate Chinese incursions through informal networks, elite complicity, and regulatory inertia. This duality – of restrictive laws and permissive practices – creates a governance vacuum. Chinese actors, sometimes state-affiliated but more often private entrepreneurs, exploit this contradiction by forming partnerships with local power brokers to bypass national regulations.

A core theme that emerges is the failure of both Ghanaian and Nigerian states to effectively assert regulatory sovereignty over their natural resources. This failure is not merely a technical problem of enforcement, but a reflection of what Mbembe (2001) refers to as the 'postcolony' – a political condition marked by personalised rule, fragmented authority, and the intertwining of formal and informal power. Ghana's deployment of military task forces and public crackdowns contrast with Nigeria's silence and sporadic efforts at reform. Chinese actors challenge traditional notions of diplomacy. While China's foreign policy espouses non-interference, the activities of many of its nationals abroad – often conducted in violation of host country laws – suggest a de facto extraterritoriality.

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As Alden (2007) notes, China's global engagement is shaped by a hybrid diplomacy that merges commercial expansion with political restraint. The Ghanaian and Nigerian cases illustrate how this model breaks down when Chinese nationals commit illegal acts with little recourse.

Political elites play a pivotal role. Chinese operators are rarely functioning independently; they engage through alliances with chiefs, politicians, and civil servants who provide legitimacy or protection. These local actors enable violations by offering cover or actively participating in extractive ventures. As Ferguson (2006) highlights, globalisation in Africa often unfolds through networks of transnational elites whose interests undermine sovereignty from within. The growing presence of Chinese actors in African ASM reflects broader trends in global resource geopolitics. Rising demand for gold, coupled with global market volatility, has made African minerals more lucrative. Some view Chinese engagement as neocolonial, yet this framing oversimplifies the reality. Many actors are entrepreneurial migrants, not directly representing the Chinese state, though benefiting from China's expanding footprint and infrastructure.

The environmental degradation linked to illegal ASM is severe. Forests are razed, rivers poisoned with mercury, and biodiversity irreversibly harmed. In both Ghana and Nigeria, these activities destroy farmland and displace rural populations. The Nigerian Geological Survey Agency (2021) reported mercury contamination levels far exceeding international standards. Yet, enforcement is selective, and remediation efforts are minimal.

Public discourse and media coverage significantly shape perceptions. In Ghana, the term 'galamsey' has entered national vocabulary as a symbol of moral panic, with Chinese actors often portrayed as invaders. This framing can obscure the role of local collaborators. In Nigeria, the media landscape is more fragmented, though investigative journalists from TheCable.ng and HumAngle have documented the spread of illegal Chinese operations in gold-rich regions. Civil society has responded unevenly across both countries. Ghana's IMANI Africa and WACAM have pressured the state to act, while Nigeria's Global Rights and SERAP struggle under more restrictive political environments. Despite these challenges, these organisations remain pivotal in demanding transparency and justice for affected communities.

From a theoretical perspective, this situation reflects the failure of neoliberal development models that prioritise foreign direct investment (FDI) over sustainability and equity. As Carmody and Kragelund (2016) argue, Africa's openness to capital inflows has encouraged a permissiveness that undermines governance. The result is a structural dependency where illegality becomes normalised. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while not directly implicated in ASM, facilitates Chinese mobility, logistics, and access. Infrastructure projects funded by China enable deeper market penetration into Africa's interior, increasing the mobility of Chinese entrepreneurs – both legitimate and rogue. As Lee (2017) noted in her work on Zambia, this infrastructural soft power expands China's informal diplomatic presence.

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Public opinion in both countries has responded to these dynamics with ambivalence. While infrastructure investments and medical aid enhance China's soft power, illicit activities by many of its nationals erode public trust. In Ghana, opinion polls post-galamsey crises revealed declining trust in Chinese partnerships. In Nigeria, perceptions remain mixed, especially in mining host communities. The concept of 'rogue diplomacy' becomes useful here. As Nye (2011) noted, soft power can be undercut by non-state actors who act in contradiction to official foreign policy. Illegal miners act as informal ambassadors – often exacerbating tensions and undermining bilateral goodwill. Their conduct has concrete diplomatic consequences.

Policy responses remain weak and inconsistent. Ghana has oscillated between harsh enforcement and policy experimentation, while Nigeria lacks a coherent national ASM strategy. Regional institutions like ECOWAS and frameworks such as the African Mining Vision (AMV) remain largely aspirational and under-implemented. To address these issues, reforms must be multi-pronged. First, both states must strengthen their mining regulatory institutions, close legal loopholes, and professionalise enforcement agencies. Second, host communities must be empowered with rights and representation. Third, China must be engaged diplomatically – not only to curtail illegal activity, but to hold rogue actors accountable.

In sum, illegal Chinese mining in Ghana and Nigeria is not simply a matter of law enforcement, but a symptom of deeper political-economic contradictions. These include elite complicity, weak statehood, geopolitical asymmetry, and structural dependency. Addressing the problem will require political courage, regional collaboration, and genuine commitments to sustainable development and sovereignty.

9. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The issue of illegal Chinese involvement in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Ghana and Nigeria presents a compelling case for the re-examination of policy frameworks governing extractive industries, foreign investment, and diplomatic relations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The multi-dimensional nature of this problem – spanning environmental, economic, political, and diplomatic domains – demands equally layered policy interventions that address root causes and build institutional resilience.

First and foremost, both Ghana and Nigeria must urgently revise their national mining policies to reflect the contemporary realities of foreign involvement in ASM. Current frameworks either inadequately regulate foreign participation or remain silent on informal arrangements that allow foreign actors to exploit loopholes. For example, while Ghana's Minerals and Mining Act explicitly prohibits foreign participation in small-scale mining, enforcement remains inconsistent, and political interference undermines regulatory action. In Nigeria, laws governing mining are largely outdated and lack specific provisions addressing foreign encroachment into artisanal operations.

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Secondly, capacity-building for enforcement agencies is critical. In both countries, agencies such as the Minerals Commission in Ghana and the Mining Cadastre Office in Nigeria are underfunded, understaffed, and in many cases subject to political manipulation. Strengthening these institutions will require better resourcing, autonomous operational mandates, and robust monitoring mechanisms. Public-private partnerships could support technology transfer, training, and monitoring, especially in the use of satellite imagery and mobile reporting systems to detect and track illegal mining hotspots.

Thirdly, the problem of elite complicity must be addressed through transparency and anti-corruption initiatives. Investigative reports and academic research suggest that some political and traditional elites actively protect or profit from illegal mining activities.

Anti-corruption agencies should prioritise high-level accountability, and whistle-blower protection mechanisms must be institutionalised. Ghana's Right to Information (RTI) Act and Nigeria's Freedom of Information (FOI) Act provide useful legal tools for ensuring openness in public records and contracts. Community empowerment represents another vital policy domain. Mining-affected communities often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and social displacement yet remain excluded from decision-making processes. Governments should promote participatory governance by recognising community land rights, institutionalising grievance redress mechanisms, and supporting community-led monitoring systems.

In Ghana, this may involve strengthening community mining schemes to ensure local ownership and equitable resource distribution. In Nigeria, formalising artisanal operations could help incorporate local miners into legal frameworks while limiting foreign infiltration. Furthermore, both countries should develop regional regulatory frameworks under the auspices of ECOWAS or the African Union. Transnational challenges such as illegal mining require regional coordination, intelligence-sharing, and harmonised standards.

The African Mining Vision (AMV) provides a policy framework that could be operationalised through binding protocols and peer review mechanisms. A regional task force on illicit mining could enhance cooperation and deter cross-border criminal networks. Diplomatic engagement with China is another essential avenue. While illegal miners may not be officially sanctioned by the Chinese government, they benefit from the cover of China's economic influence and diplomatic presence. African governments must demand accountability through formal diplomatic channels while also involving Chinese embassies in bilateral enforcement coordination. Memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on responsible investment and mining practices should be made public and enforceable.

African states should also work collaboratively with multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and INTERPOL to develop international frameworks for regulating foreign actors in ASM. These collaborations could provide technical assistance, policy guidance, and international oversight that strengthens national enforcement capabilities.

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Technology also has a role to play in policy innovation. Satellite monitoring, blockchain-based mineral traceability systems, and mobile grievance apps can be integrated into mining governance. Rwanda's example of using blockchain to track tantalum minerals could serve as a model for Ghana and Nigeria.

Finally, policy reforms must be accompanied by public awareness campaigns that reshape societal attitudes toward illegal mining and foreign exploitation. In both countries, informal mining is often seen as a livelihood necessity. While this may be true for local miners, it should not be conflated with foreign incursions that often exacerbate local vulnerabilities.

Media, civil society, and educational institutions must play active roles in transforming public discourse and building consensus for reform. In sum, the policy implications of illegal mining by Chinese nationals in Ghana and Nigeria are far-reaching. They point to the urgent need for legal reform, institutional capacity-building, anti-corruption safeguards, regional cooperation, and diplomatic rebalancing. Without bold and coordinated action, both countries risk entrenching a pattern of extractive dependency and governance decay that undermines their developmental aspirations and regional stability.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Recapitulation of Findings

This study has critically examined the dynamics of Chinese involvement in illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Ghana and Nigeria, framed within the broader context of Sino-African relations and global resource diplomacy. It highlights the paradox between the formal diplomatic engagements that China maintains with African nations – often under the banners of South-South cooperation and mutual development – and the rogue activities of some Chinese actors operating illegally in the ASM sectors of host countries.

Through empirical analyses of both Ghana and Nigeria, the study found that despite legal frameworks explicitly restricting foreign involvement in ASM, Chinese nationals have persistently engaged in illegal mining practices, facilitated by governance gaps, elite complicity, and weak regulatory enforcement. These practices not only contravene domestic laws but also inflict significant environmental damage, disrupt local economies, and undermine public trust in state institutions. The practices question and undermine the otherwise well-intended cordial relationships being forged by China with Africa on a large scale, and, China and both Ghana and Nigeria in specific instances.

10.2 Theoretical Reflections

The patterns of Chinese engagement in illegal mining operations in Ghana and Nigeria resonate deeply with core concepts in postcolonial and dependency theories. As articulated by Achille Mbembe (2001), the African postcolony is characterised by hybrid sovereignties, wherein state institutions coexist and often compete with informal systems

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of authority. These conditions allow foreign actors – including illegal miners – to thrive amid institutional incoherence and the politicisation of state enforcement mechanisms.

Dependency theorists like Samir Amin (1976) and Walter Rodney (1972) argue that African states are structurally constrained to serve as extractive peripheries under global capitalism. The reliance on primary commodities, especially minerals, encourages a policy tolerance – if not outright complicity – for external actors that deliver quick but unsustainable economic returns. The widespread tolerance for illegal Chinese mining activities reflects this cyclical dependency and the inability of host countries to break free from exploitative economic arrangements.

China's long-standing policy of non-interference has traditionally granted it favour among African governments wary of Western conditionalities. However, this policy is increasingly strained by the actions of Chinese nationals engaged in illegal activities abroad. While these actors may not officially represent the Chinese state, their conduct carries diplomatic consequences, particularly when local populations associate them with broader Chinese influence (Alden, 2007).

Soft power, as conceptualised by Joseph Nye (2011), refers to the ability of a country to attract and co-opt rather than coerce. Illegal mining scandals threaten China's soft power appeal in Africa by undermining its narrative of 'win-win cooperation.' In Ghana, anti-Chinese sentiment has surged in areas affected by environmental destruction linked to illegal mining. Similarly, in Nigeria, communities in gold-rich regions have voiced concern over the impunity enjoyed by Chinese operators.

Moving forward, African states must recalibrate their approach to international economic engagement. They must distinguish between genuine development cooperation and exploitative practices cloaked in diplomatic language. Policy reform must begin with tightening regulatory loopholes, investing in enforcement capacity, and empowering local communities to monitor and manage their natural resources.

At the regional level, frameworks such as the African Mining Vision (AMV) should be operationalised to promote a unified continental approach to responsible resource governance. For China, maintaining its developmental reputation in Africa depends on its willingness to hold its nationals accountable. If left unaddressed, illegal mining will continue to sour China-Africa relations and jeopardise the strategic gains of South-South cooperation.

In closing, the Chinese role in illegal ASM in Ghana and Nigeria illustrates the complex intersection of diplomacy, development, and illicit economic behaviour. It demonstrates that diplomacy is not limited to official channels but is also shaped by the actions of private actors operating in foreign jurisdictions. Addressing this challenge will require renewed political will, improved governance, and a commitment to justice and sustainability from all parties involved.

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10.3 Diplomatic and Soft Power Implications

China's presence in Africa has long been justified by its unique foreign policy approach, one rooted in the principles of mutual benefit, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has extended soft power across Africa by investing in infrastructure, education, and public health systems. However, the persistent reports of Chinese nationals engaging in illegal mining, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria, cast a shadow over these strategic cooperation narratives and raise questions about the coherence of Chinese foreign policy in practice.

Soft power, as Joseph Nye (2004) theorises, rests not on coercion but attraction – the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and legitimacy. For years, China's development model has appealed to many African leaders, offering an alternative to Western conditional aid. Yet, as Chinese illegal miners devastate farmlands, pollute rivers with mercury, and displace indigenous livelihoods, the moral high ground that underpins Chinese soft power is increasingly being questioned.

In Ghana, where the 'Galamsey' crisis has become a major national issue, local protests and media reports have drawn a direct line between Chinese nationals and environmental destruction. The Ghanaian government has faced diplomatic tightropes – balancing public outrage with the desire to preserve diplomatic ties and economic cooperation with China. In 2013 and again in 2017, Ghana deported hundreds of Chinese illegal miners, an action that sparked formal diplomatic protests from Beijing.

Similarly, in Nigeria, Chinese nationals have been arrested for operating unauthorised mining ventures in Zamfara, Osun, and Kaduna States. These activities not only fuel local grievances but complicate Nigeria's strategic partnership with China, especially in the energy and technology sectors.

Chinese embassies often respond to these incidents with denials of state involvement, framing the actors as rogue individuals. However, African publics frequently perceive these denials as evasive, intensifying suspicions of broader complicity. The credibility crisis that emerges from these activities necessitates a recalibration of China's diplomatic strategy in Africa. It must recognise that the legitimacy of its foreign policy rests not just on intergovernmental agreements but also on the conduct of its nationals abroad. Embassies must play proactive roles in liaising with local law enforcement, facilitating legal accountability, and rebuilding public trust.

For African governments, the challenge lies in navigating the dual imperatives of maintaining foreign partnerships and preserving domestic legitimacy. Failure to prosecute foreign offenders – or worse, appearing complicit – could erode public confidence in democratic governance and fuel anti-foreign populism. Consequently, diplomatic relations must evolve beyond elite-to-elite engagement and reflect the aspirations and grievances of ordinary citizens affected by transnational crimes.

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10.4 Future Outlook and Final Thoughts

Addressing the entrenched issue of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana and Nigeria requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates local, national, and international responses. At the national level, there must be a concerted effort to revamp legal and institutional frameworks governing artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). Laws must be updated to clearly delineate permissible and impermissible foreign involvement in mining operations, accompanied by stringent penalties and effective enforcement mechanisms.

Institutional capacity building is central to this process. Regulatory agencies such as Ghana's Minerals Commission and Nigeria's Mining Cadastre Office must be granted full operational autonomy and resources to carry out their mandates. This includes access to advanced surveillance technologies, geospatial monitoring systems, and real-time mineral tracking platforms. Capacity building should also extend to local law enforcement, judiciary, and environmental watchdogs, ensuring inter-agency cooperation and coherence in implementation. Regionally, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) must play more proactive roles. Cross-border cooperation is essential to tackle the transnational nature of illegal mining networks, which often span porous frontiers. Harmonised mining regulations, shared intelligence frameworks, and coordinated border enforcement initiatives could significantly reduce illicit operations. The African Mining Vision (AMV) must be transformed from a policy aspiration into a binding continental standard for resource governance.

Diplomatically, China must assume greater responsibility for the conduct of its citizens abroad. Beijing cannot plausibly claim to be a partner in African development while turning a blind eye to the actions of its nationals who violate host country laws. Future bilateral agreements between China and African states should include accountability clauses requiring embassies to cooperate in investigations, extradition processes, and public information campaigns. These agreements must also contain mechanisms for restitution and environmental remediation where damage has occurred. Civil society and local communities must be empowered as critical actors in mining governance. Community monitoring committees, inclusive consultation processes, and grassroots environmental advocacy can serve as deterrents to foreign encroachment. Public education campaigns should highlight the environmental and social costs of illegal mining, fostering a culture of resistance to foreign exploitation and elite collusion.

Ultimately, the illegal mining crisis exposes broader structural vulnerabilities in African states' capacity to govern transnational economic activities. But it also offers a pivotal moment for transformation. Through policy reform, institutional strengthening, regional coordination, and diplomatic recalibration, African countries can reclaim sovereignty over their natural resources and realign international partnerships around principles of equity, justice, and mutual accountability. In sum, the challenge of Chinese illegal mining in West Africa is not insurmountable. It offers an opportunity for governments, civil societies, and international partners to act collectively in reshaping the governance of extractive

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industries. Only through such holistic engagement can resource diplomacy be redefined to prioritise sustainability, transparency, and the dignity of affected communities.

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