CHAPTER 2

African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Advancing African Agency or Amplifying Neo-imperial Interests?

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Introduction

Regional economic integration (REI) is one of the pillars of development strategies undertaken by both the Global North and the Global South to advance their agency and amplify their voices. In a way, this move reflects the globalisation pretension of establishing a 'world without poverty' (Oloruntoba and Nshimbi 2023). The World Bank, which is among the global organisations that Stiglitz (2002) calls 'the governors of globalization', states its mission thus: 'Our dream is a world free of poverty' (World Bank 2019). To achieve this dream, 'the governors of globalization' encouraged the establishment of free-regulating markets, liberal policies and a set of instruments and programmes that would enable free movement of goods and services. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is one of the free trade areas that African Union (AU) member states created in May 2019 to foster greater intracontinental trade and investment. As such, 54 out of 55 AU member states have signed a framework agreement establishing the AfCFTA to promote economic integration and growth in Africa (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025; Kiiza 2023). The agreement focuses on the implementation and phased negotiation of various commitments to reduce or eliminate tariffs, prospectively including up to 97 per cent of all tariff lines and non-tariff barriers to trade. The AfCFTA covers a region with a joint gross domestic product of approximately US$3.4 trillion and a potential market of about 1.4 billion people.

This move is historically important for advancing African agency (asserting African autonomy, self-determination and control over African affairs) for three reasons. First, AfCFTA is the largest free-trade area globally in terms of the number of participating states since the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (World Bank 2020). Second, it represents the boldest attempt to promote Afrocentricity and a new face of African unity that ideologically facilitates the vision of African problems being solved by African solutions. This ideology – what Baldwin (2012) calls the 'discourse of futurity' – underpins AfCFTA, and can be seen as a move against imperialism. Lastly, the AfCFTA reflects the African Agenda 2063, a master plan for Africa to transform the continent into what the AU (2019) considers to be 'a global powerhouse in the future'. The AU notes that AfCFTA feeds into Agenda 2063, which is a strategic framework for Africa that aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development. This move is a manifestation of the pan-African drive for self-determination, freedom and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance (African Union 2019). Ighobor (2020) explains that the AfCFTA Secretary-General supported this idea by stating that Africa continues to be trapped in a colonial economic model, which requires that Africans need to aggressively implement the AfCFTA as one of the means of achieving fundamental structural transformation of Africa's economy. Ighobor advises that African countries have to take action now to dismantle this colonial economic model. We see that economic complexities of the binaries reflect how bigger economies perceive the location of Africa vis-à-vis how Africa prefers to or actually locates itself in the power shifts and fixes.

Undeniably, the African political economy has been lagging, compared to other countries, especially in the Global North. In his conceptualisation of Africa using international political economy perspective, Niringiyimana (2025) explains how in 2020 only 17 per cent of African exports were heading to other African states. This is significantly low compared with other intraregional trade shares, such as 30 per cent in North America, 61 per cent in Asia and 68 per cent in Europe. As such, the World Bank (2020) estimates that the implementation of the AfCFTA could increase

intra-African trade by 81 per cent, elevate Africa-wide real income by 7 per cent (US$450 billion) and improve the standard of living of about 30 million people in the next 15 years (World Bank 2020). Other scholars, such as Tralac (2019) and Shinyekwa and Bulime (2020), share the same optimism that AfCFTA has the potential to promote employment, industrial linkages, economic diversification and structural transformation in Africa.

These remarks reveal the importance of establishing the AfCFTA as a means of challenging neo-imperial powers through rethinking and (re)igniting the long-term African initiatives. As Bedjaoui (2019) explains, the AfCFTA will support the decolonising of the 'fictitious political independence and effective economic subordination which neocolonialism and imperialism maintained in Africa'. Moreover, the AfCFTA potentially presents an opportunity to transform Africa's role in global trade from export of primary commodities to competitive diversification of its exports (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025). These submissions indicate that the AfCFTA is probably the means for Africa to amplify its voices and achieve its agency in the world.

Nonetheless, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2021) is concerned that much will depend on African political will and the management of AfCFTA investment protocol. Moreover, various challenges affecting the African continent may limit the AfCFTA in delivering the desired outcomes. Kiiza (2023) summarises African trade challenges as follows: First, it is a continent still struggling with structural challenges to economic integration, such as infrastructure deficits like standard gauge railways and information and communication technology. Second, it is a continent whose economy and trade is underpinned by mono-economies, primary commodities and the informal sector. This implies that Africa has fewer competitive advantages compared to the Global North and other countries in the Global South with manufactured goods. Third, weak governance in African states characterised by political instability, corruption and perpetual conflicts affect free movement of goods. Fourth, the dominance of neo-imperialism in AfCFTA exerts pressure on the AU to implement orthodox market-oriented ideologies. This creates unequal exchange due to asymmetrical power relations in

international trade. It also interferes with the African desire to have the 'Africa we want' through 'African solutions to African problems'. The ways in which neo-imperialism disrupts AfCFTA processes – and thereby constrains Africa's efforts to advance its agency and amplify its voice – form the core of this discussion.

At the centre of the paper is a critical analysis of how neo-imperial states weaponise the AfCFTA to amplify their global economic interests in Africa. To advance this, I demonstrate how global powers have influenced AfCFTA leadership to adapt and implement conventional market ideologies that amplify imperial interests, contrary to pragmatic and strategic trade that would enable AfCFTA to advance African agency. I explain how the global integrationist ideology underpinned by global free-regulating trade is part of the WTO and advanced by the 'governors of globalization', such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to enable powerful economies to dominate the international political economy. I show how global free-regulating trade encourages the AfCFTA to homogenise its trade policies, in the way it is done in the advanced economies and to the detriment of AU member states, whose economies are still weak and at varying development stages.

In the process, I demonstrate that neo-imperialism unfolds through financing AfCFTA programmes under the pretext of promoting capacity building and guiding the AfCFTA policy agenda. I argue that lack of financial capacity on the side of the AU has made AfCFTA vulnerable to neo-imperialism. I also reveal that different workshops and training sessions offered by the imperial powers are manifestations of altering the initial Afrocentric logic that African leaders had when establishing AfCFTA, so that orthodox neoliberal ideologies are enforced. Finally, I submit that meaningful advancement of African agency requires the formation of a 'United States of Africa (USAfrica)' to ensure that economic nationalism based on strategic and pragmatic trade is implemented.

These articulations were approached using qualitative desk review and interrogation of literature from various sources. Specifically, journal articles, books and official reports on the African Union, AfCFTA and other regional integration documents were analysed and interpreted

to understand the main question of this chapter. The discussion is thematically organised into six sub-sections. The introduction is followed by an analysis of regional economic integration in advancing African agency. The third and fourth sections articulate the focus of AfCFTA and the neo-imperial interests in AfCFTA. The fifth section documents the manifestations of neo-imperialism in the operationalisation of AfCFTA, and the last section concludes the paper with the way forward.

Regional economic integration as a means for advancing African agency

African attempts to advance its agency have been combined around the vision of pan-African aspiration and solidarity espoused in Afrocentrism logic. Mangeni and Calestous (2019) document how the aim of pan-African aspiration was to 'provide [a] solution for structural injustices that have long marginalised the Global South through establishing a new international economic order'. In the same vein, Ismail (2021) explains how the protest of the unjust global trade order encouraged African leaders to rethink regional integration. This was viewed as an opportunity to establish regional economic structures and reshape the international order that would gradually advance African agency and amplify its voices. However, the ideological foundation that pan-Africanism employed has been a theatre of rigorous contestation. Therefore, other integration replicas were developed and analysed in order to understand the most appropriate ideological position for AfCFTA to enable it to advance African agency.

The first was the traditional approach, which followed a linear progression to regional integration. This approach to integration and trade liberalisation was developed by David Viner in the 1950s. Ismail (2017) documents how this approach 'proposes a step-wise progression from "preferential trade agreements" to "free trade areas" to "customs union" to "common market" and lastly to a "monetary union"'. Despite its advantages, this model was criticised as being inappropriate and inadequate for a nuanced approach to Africa's development challenges that would advance its position to the global level.

As a result, African states espoused a 'state-led approach to development' and regional integration. Ismail (2021) avers that this approach was aimed at creating the means to avoid overdependence on the advanced economies and the international economic order. It therefore emphasised import substitution industries, driven by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and protectionism to promote development (Akinkugbe 2020). However, Akokpari (2008) shows that, by the 1980s, the state-led approach to development and regional integration had been discredited, discarded and replaced by what Murphy (2024) calls 'neoliberal open regionalism'.

As such, from the 1980s onwards, neoliberalism was identified as the solution to poor development outcomes in the Global South. It needs to be highlighted that the nature of the policies in the neoliberal-driven regional integration resulted in the notion of 'open regionalism' (Ismail 2017). In this approach, states are encouraged to open their national economies to the international market through free trade, trade liberalisation and liberal economic rules. Therefore, Akinkugbe (2020) asserts that 'open regionalism' advocated the 'linear integration of national and regional economies into the global economy with emphasis on export-led growth'. The implication is that 'open regionalism' requires limited government in economic intervention; and that it emphasises private property rights, the abandonment of the welfare state, and encourages monetary and fiscal discipline.

After two decades of implementation, opponents such as Lee (2002) highlight that, instead of improving African economies and advancing its agency, neoliberalism through 'open regionalism' led to further marginalisation of African economies. Evidence shows that intra-African trade did not increase significantly, and African markets were flooded by cheaper, unauthentic manufactured goods from developed economies. Legodi (2024) names these unauthentic cheap goods, which mostly bear a 'Made in China' label, as 'zhing-zhongs' and 'fong-kongs'. Lee (2002) shows how, in a self-reflective critique, the World Bank admitted that 'its policies and programmes in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s had gone too far and were too narrow in focus'. These scholars point out that the effect of open regionalism was the closure of some local industries, leading to de-industrialisation in Africa. They also reveal

how the objectives of the Abuja Treaty to create the African Economic Community (AEC) were undermined. These policies dismantled state-led development by promoting privatisation and maintaining commodity export. The implication is that building social capital through human development and innovation was ignored. These challenges show how open regionalism shackled African economies and limited them in their pursuit of their own policy and ideological direction.

In a manner that continues the domination of neo-colonialism and imperialism in African political economy, Akokpari (2008) reveals how some advanced economies manoeuvred through another technology of power – that is, a mechanism used to maintain influence – known as the External Guarantor Model (EGM). Through the lens of EGM's neo-imperial agenda, for instance, France has continued to cling to its influence in West Africa. To be sure, the currency of West African states is pegged to the Euro, and the monetary reserves are held by the Banque de France. It needs to be highlighted that the IMF and World Bank play a superintendent role in the process. This state of affairs invariably entails disturbing and pauperising conditions that limit the amplification of African voices. Like open regionalism, EGM restricts Africa's policy options because external pressure is exerted on Africa to follow policies that satisfy the guarantor's preferences even when they go against African aspirations. This implies that EGM is an inappropriate ideological stance for regional integration in Africa.

To right the wrongs of the above state of affairs, other theorists have advocated for a multidimensional approach by employing development integration theory and its evolved successor, 'developmental regionalism' (Ismail 2021). Ismail points out that these concepts incorporate the need to adopt a regional integration approach founded on 'heterodox economic theory'. This idea resonates with solidarity as a crucial principle of African regional economic integration. Moreover, Ismail confirms how development integration resonates with the need for both macro- and micro-coordination in a multi-sectoral approach through endorsing production, infrastructure and trade. The aim is to achieve an equitable balance to regional integration through 'regional industrial development'.

Drawing on the framework of Davies and the United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Ismail identifies four key interconnected pillars of 'developmental regionalism'. These are (a) fair trade integration, (b) transformative industrialisation, (c) cross-border infrastructure and trade facilitation, and (d) cooperation on promoting democracy, good governance, and peace and security. It needs to be added that developmental regionalism stresses cooperation and collaboration among countries in a broader range of areas beyond just trade and trade facilitation. In this respect, economies are encouraged to collaborate in areas of regional infrastructure, industrial development, research, investment and information-sharing. Thus, it reflects the heterogeneity of approaching development. This enables the rearrangement of the African economy by building strong regional manufacturing capacity to compete in global markets and establishing competitive regional value chains (CRVCs). This is timely in Africa, with its 54 countries, including 16 landlocked and 34 that the United Nations (UN) classifies as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). It needs to be added that landlocked countries face unique challenges in advancing their agency, as they are isolated from global markets. They experience high transit costs, which hamper their socioeconomic development (Ismail 2018). For instance, it is estimated that landlocked countries in the Global South spend almost twice as much of their export income on transport and insurance services versus coastal developing countries, and three times as much as developed economies.

In light of this context, the development of regional infrastructure is necessary to reduce trade costs and amplify trade benefits. It also dictates that imperial roads and trade routes be re-oriented as a means of promoting developmental regionalism. This is because infrastructure established in the colonial period was designed to support the exploitative strategies of the imperialists. The existing infrastructures direct trade out of Africa to the imperial states rather than promoting intra-African trade. Moreover, the colonial partition of Africa worsened the poor connectivity on the continent. Therefore, industrialisation is central to Africa's structural transformation, with infrastructure development being the catalyst. However, these need to be established in the context of developmental regionalism that caters for cooperation on cross-border infrastructure.

This enables the intra-African trade to connect isolated markets to the global economy.

Thus, the ideological and analytical framework for AfCFTA needs to be aligned with the appropriate integration approach. As such, viewing AfCFTA through the lens of a linear comparison to its Global North counterpart has reinforced a narrative of failure. Thus, African regional economic integration (AREI) plans need to be redirected towards a multidimensional approach which encompasses economic, legal, cultural, political and technological objectives. This is to ensure the multidimensional and nuanced nature of African development outcomes that have been ignored by the Global North. What is also ignored is unequal regional development, the legacies of colonialism, neo-imperialism and the informal nature of African economies. These seriously impact the success of AREI and their role in amplifying African voices. Put differently, Africa must pivot away from the Eurocentric institutionalist market-led approach to regional integration and instead adopt the developmental regionalism model as its pillar of regional cooperation.

The above analysis locates AfCFTA within the broader AREI agenda of the AU. It demonstrates that despite some encounters, REI has been high on the African agenda since the independence era. The analysis shows that AfCFTA is itself a consequence of the Abuja Treaty of 1991, which sought to create an African Economic Community (AEC). The Abuja Treaty specifies the sequence through which Africa will create an AEC over a period of 34 years. Article 6 of the Abuja Treaty specifies that 'the Community shall be established gradually in six (6) stages of variable duration over a transitional period not exceeding thirty-four (34) years'. It also implies that AfCFTA resonates with Pan-African ideology that nurtures REI in Africa. In short, the success of AfCFTA depends on how it responds to Afro-realism that speaks to key ideas such as 'African solutions to African problems' and resource nationalism. This African-based epistemology becomes possible by questioning the dominant economic ideologies and epistemologies from the West and reclaiming African perspectives, experiences and knowledge systems that enable Africa to develop a distinctive policy agenda through which AfCFTA can advance African agency. Before these ideas are articulated in detail, in the

subsequent section I argue that the continued domination of imperialism in African affairs makes it unlikely for AfCFTA to advance African agency.

The focus of the AfCFTA

It needs to be noted that the AfCFTA was established by the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. Theoretically, the AfCFTA framework agreement aims to remove trade barriers to intra-African trade and investment through the phased negotiation and implementation of various commitments (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025; Kiiza 2023). In the process, AfCFTA seeks to create a single market for goods, services and capital, and to enable the intra-regional free movement of persons. The AfCFTA also focuses on the diversification of African economies through industrialisation, promotion of services sectors, and innovation (Oloruntoba and Nshimbi 2023). A long-term goal of AfCFTA is 'to lay the foundations for the establishment of a unitary African customs union, which, like the EU, would require a common external tariff structure' (Kiiza 2023). To be precise, Article 6 of the AfCFTA Agreement stipulates that it 'shall cover trade in goods, services, investment, intellectual property rights and competition policy'. This detailed scope highlights the misalignment between the Agreement and country-specific development policy spaces.

Article 5 of the AfCFTA outlines various principles to govern the agreement (Kiiza 2023). First, the free-trade agreements (FTAs) of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) shall serve as the building blocks for the AfCFTA. This implies that the AfCFTA is being used to deepen, rather than question, the global FTAs, which were propagated by the WTO model of trade liberalisation. This means that FTAs are used to embed, not soften, the conventional RECs agenda. Second is variable geometry, which permits a high level of flexibility that ultimately compromises African rules of the game to accommodate neo-imperial interests. Third, special and differential treatment within the AfCFTA has often been structured in ways that ultimately favour Global North interests, particularly by creating incentives aimed at attracting their investment into Africa. Fourth, transparency and disclosure of

information, which disadvantages African commercial secrets, African epistemologies and innovations. Fifth is the preservation of the *acquis,* which implies that earlier levels of trade liberalisation can only be deepened, instead of being uprooted and supplanted with strategic trade in Africa. Sixth is the 'Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) treatment', which defeats the idea of 'flexibility' mentioned under the principle of 'variable geometry'. Seventh is the national treatment of foreign capital, which in essence encourages neo-imperialism. Eighth is reciprocity, which is hard to achieve on the African side because of unequal exchange due to trade in primary commodities and the general mono-economies that underpin African political economies. The last is substantial liberalisation, which calls for the regulation of the free market in ways that function as an imperial mechanism for controlling African political economies.

Taken together, these ideas suggest that the AfCFTA is deeply rooted in free-trade fundamentalism. It reveals how operationalising these principles requires 'the international conventions to be binding on the AU member-states' (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025; Kiiza 2023). This implies that these neoliberal policies seek to entrench the WTO trade style within the African political economy. In other words, dressed up in the robes of African interests, the AfCFTA policies are, at their core, the 'smart industrial policies of advanced capitalist countries' (Kiiza 2023). Yash Tandon (2020) argues that the ideas of 'economic openness', the 'national treatment' of foreign investors, 'transparency' in government procurement and 'non-discrimination between local and foreign companies' are all entrenched into the WTO space by the Global North for their own benefit. Therefore, it is worth noting that the AfCFTA is dressed up in African attire to beautify and entrench the WTO's free-trade policies. These policies tend to strengthen the interests of Western powers rather than strengthening African agency. In the next section, neo-imperial interests that are deep-rooted in AfCFTA are theoretically articulated.

AfCFTA and neo-imperialism: theoretical articulation

As already mentioned, the purpose of AfCFTA may be understood in the

context of what Baldwin (2012) calls the 'discourse of futurity', because it mirrors the struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Put differently, the aims of AfCFTA are in line with the idea of anti-imperialism. Despite this move, evidence from the literature shows that the goals of AfCFTA are intertwined within the neoliberal ideological orientation. This is a continuation of imperialism. This questions how AfCFTA promotes economic and political independence in Africa that in turn advances African agency. Since Africa depends on foreign ideas to advance its agency, it is appropriate to use Booth's words of 'practical impracticality' (Booth 1991), to argue that AfCFTA cannot advance African agency and amplify its voices. To be sure, this argument is developed here below.

To start with the goals, objectives, aims and principles of AfCFTA, evidence reveals that they are based on neoliberal ideological orientations. The purpose of this ideology is to propagate neo-imperial economic and political interests in Africa (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025; Kiiza 2023). It needs to be asserted that this ideological orientation is reinforced in AfCFTA through embedding of the trade standards, policy choices and preferences of economies in the Global North. These economies create unequal exchange with Africa because they have already progressed and transformed into highly competitive economies characterised by industrialisation and digitalisation of the economy. This is contrary to the African agrarian economies, which are highly engaged in primary commodities and the informal sector. This implies that African economies get blocked, instead of being promoted and transformed into agencies of global political economy. It needs to be added that when AfCFTA is driven by these 'Washington consensus parameters', the neo-imperial interests and policy preferences of the Global North are represented, instead of those of Africa. In other words, the interests of powerful industrial and digital economies dominate the WTO space, which works against the interests and values of transforming African political economies.

Moreover, neoliberal policy ideologies propagate the 'globalist integrationist agenda' represented by the global FTAs (Niringiyimana and Rwengabo 2025; Kiiza 2023). This global trade agenda is associated with institutional arrangements that deepen conventional trade practices such as free regulating markets across all nations. These free regulating

markets are underpinned by the following principles: First, the globalist agenda claims 'worldwide convergence' of all economies on the Anglo-American 'norm' of free-market capitalism. Second, it calls for the 'universalisation' of trade policies and development practices across all political economies. This includes both industrial and agrarian, rich and poor, Global North and Global South. Third, it pushes for the 'rapid institutionalisation of free-market fundamentalism'. Fourth, it clai ms that 'full capital account liberalisation' and unregulated trade is a solution to economic transformation in Africa. Fifth, it argues that foreign direct investment (FDI) is the economic salvation of developing economies. These principles do not necessarily work in tandem with developing economies such as those in Africa, which are predominantly characterised by informal sectors. Also, African economies are at different levels of development and so they can neither be homogenised nor converged. This implies that AfCFTA can only advance African agency if it bases its principles on 'Afro-realism' that acknowledge the diversity of African political economy and banks on African values and knowledge rather than a global market agenda that propagates neo-imperialism in Africa.

Also, through the "global integrationist agenda", the AfCFTA is fortified by the WTO principles that were established to serve the imperial interests of the big capitalist economies and their trade diplomats from the Global North. To be sure, the WTO is premised on key principles, namely trade without discrimination; national treatment – implying treating foreigners and locals equally; free trade through lowering trade tariffs and gradual negotiations; promoting transparency; and encouraging fair competition and non-discrimination. The Global North economies tend to popularise these market-based policy spaces in Africa through economic diplomacy. Put differently, representatives and diplomats of the advanced economies tend to mediate their policy preferences through trade diplomacy. This may also involve the use of African elites, who are deployed in African institutions such as the African Economic Commission to operationalise Global North trade policies (Khor 2010). In other words, while the principles of the WTO seem to encourage equal global trade, in reality these practices cannot work in good terms with Africa, for various reasons.

First, fair competition is not possible in Africa when trading with the

Global North, because these parties have unequal trade power relations. As Yash Tandon stipulates, 'trade is war, not benign' (Tandon 2010). This implies that trading parties are at war and that whoever has more power, politically and economically, takes more benefits. Similarly to the WTO, the tariff reductions encouraged under the AfCFTA work well for advanced economies but not for developing economies that rely heavily on taxation. Therefore, while on the face value AfCFTA is the flagship project of the AU and therefore noticeably African, in reality it is a mere representation of a 'global integrationist agenda' for advanced economies to reap from the arrangements of integration. What this means is that the AfCFTA represents the official diplomacy of Africa, since it was passed by African Heads of State. However, the elites of Africa simply acted to entrench the free-trade canon of the WTO and its hegemonic members from the Global North. Thus, the aims, objectives and goals of AfCFTA underpin neo-imperial interests, as they neither originate from the Global South nor promote the values and strategic interests of the Global South.

In addition, the AfCFTA embraces the mainstream trade that stresses economic liberalism, but the market exchange is based on export of primary commodities and God-given comparative advantages to the competitive global marketplace (Niringiyimana 2025). Pierre (1977) and Evans (1976) account that this is disadvantageous to African economies because it promotes unequal exchange in the global market. These scholars explain that owing to the variation in the prices of primary commodities from Africa and manufactured goods from the Global North, Africa is usually placed in the disadvantaged position in the political economy. In other words, African countries end up producing and exchanging goods that are relatively undervalued in exchange for manufactured goods from the Global North which are overvalued. With this, Pierre (1977) draws the analogy that if coffee or cocoa produced in Africa were produced in the Global North, then they would attract much higher prices than they do in Africa.

This condition is further worsened by unequal economic treaties signed between African states and the imperial states. As Niringiyimana and Rwengabo (2025) explain, these unequal treaties and international

laws are usually drafted by imperial powers and forced onto colonised peoples. Some of these treaties include bilateral investment treaties (BiTs) between a state from the advanced economy and a poor economy. For example, Jamaica signed an unequal treaty with the USA. This is also known as the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). Similarly, Kenya signed a Bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement (BEPA) with the United Kingdom. Under this agreement, Kenya commits to liberalising approximately 83 per cent of its tariff lines for UK goods over a 25-year transition period. This implies that UK manufactured products imported into Kenya will, in time, circulate within the AfCFTA market.

Related to the above is the hegemonic international law under which the AfCFTA Dispute Settlement Mechanism (AfCFTA DSM) is anchored. Niringiyimana and Rwengabo (2025) argue that instead of AfCFTA-DSM being guided by the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), they are guided by WTO principles attached to the Dispute Settlement Body, the Appellate Body and the panel system. While these principles are praised for enhancing security, predictability and rule of law in intra-African trade, following this dogma could encourage AfCFTA to incline to orthodox market-based principles that may end up hurting the generally weaker African economies. By implication, this condition may undermine the advancement of African agency. Consequently, Niringiyimana and Rwengabo (2025) advise that considering the adaptation of TWAIL in the implementation of AfCFTA would enhance Africa's ability to exert its agency and voice in the international political economy. According to these scholars, TWAIL boosts the voices of marginalised groups in intra-African trade and considers power dynamics in international trade. In the next section, I present the manifestations of neo-imperialism in AfCFTA.

Manifestations of neo-imperialism in AfCFTA

This section analyses how advanced economies have executed their neo-imperial interests in AfCFTA. Neo-imperialists wield their neo-imperial power through financial support to AfCFTA programmes, signing

economic partnership agreements (EPAs) and supporting different trade programmes that feed into AfCFTA. In addition, they provide policy guidelines and mobilise and sensitise African leaders on global economic integration (Cook and Wong 2023). The main neo-imperial actors in AfCFTA include stakeholders such as the USA and European Union in the Global North, and parts of the Global South, especially China, Russia and India. These actors and their actions have influenced the nature of the AfCFTA in a manner that suits imperial trade and foreign policy interests. These issues are analysed below.

First, different neo-imperial states and multinational companies have provided financial support to AfCFTA activities (Cook and Wong 2023). These actions hinder the AfCFTA's ability to advance African agency and, instead, propagate foreign dependence in Africa. Various examples have been cited to verify this claim. First, and generally, Cook and Wong (2023) highlight that trade between China and Africa was estimated to reach US$254 billion in 2021. This amount was nearly four times larger than American trade with Africa, which amounted to US$64 billion. Second, in September 2021, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the United Kingdom and the AfCFTA secretariat to aid in implementation of the AfCFTA (Business and Financial Times (2021). The UKAid Development Tracker (2021) explains that funding for this initiative totalled £35 million between 2021 and 2026. Third, Germany has supported AfCFTA activities through the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), its federal development agency. This has included negotiating preparation and implementation, policy research and advice, as well as stakeholder outreach and training. Evidence reveals that funding for these activities totalled €34.5 million between mid-2020 and mid-2024 (German Corporation for International Cooperation 2021). Fourth, the Canadian government has funded a C$15 million programme implemented by the African Trade Policy Centre (ATPC) within UNECA to support the development of the AfCFTA (Government of Canada 2021). Fifth, the Danish government has funded a programme worth US$3.8 million to support AfCFTA-implementing institutions within the African Union and UNECA (Danish Foreign Affairs Ministry 2019).

The question, however, is this: if the AfCFTA's activities are financed by foreign powers, how can it leverage its position to amplify African voices and advance African agency? In other words, the financial support to the AfCFTA is intended to influence the policy decisions and actions of African states on how to operationalise the AfCFTA. This is because funding AfCFTA is considered a technology of power extended by the neo-imperial states to limit Africa in its attempts to advance its interests in the global political economy. It also aims to advance the interests of neo-imperial states through creating debt traps from strategic loans. For example, Daly (2017) opines that debt levels in Djibouti are high because China built its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 and invested in its ports and infrastructure. In Kenya, China's Standard Gauge Railway (CSGR) has faced criticism because of high costs and corruption scandals, which are likely to cause the country to default on its loans (Deborah and Bhalaki 2022). These examples illustrate the advanced economies' privileges of power in controlling AfCFTA arrangements. They show how the advanced economies mediate the political and economic outcomes of the continental trade area through financial manipulations. These outcomes need not be in tandem with the needs and values of Africa.

In addition, advanced economies provide 'capacity building' to African leaders on the process of operationalising the AfCFTA. Advanced economies such as the US and China provide technical support in the form of ad-hoc workshops, training and dialogues. To be sure, in 2019 US and AU representatives signed a joint statement explaining that the 'AfCFTA is a common goal for both US and Africa' (Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) 2019). As a result, the USTR and State Department officials hosted AU Commission officials in 2019 to discuss trade policy approaches and US–AU cooperation in the AfCFTA. The key issues discussed in the meeting included that 'both sides reaffirmed their support for AfCFTA as a strategic means to increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of Africa to US business' (USTR 2021). In addition, the 2019 visit led to US-sponsored workshops in 2020 on intellectual property rights (IPR) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Support (SPS) rules, and digital trade pertaining to AfCFTA negotiations. Although these activities would be seen as fostering AfCFTA implementation

and encouraging US–Africa trade and investment cooperation, these training sessions were aimed at changing the ideological orientation of African leaders. As already noted, the primary goal of the AfCFTA was to promote strategic trade and economic nationalism in Africa as a means of advancing African agency. Nonetheless, the foreign-directed trainings and workshops propagated 'globalist integrationist ideologies' under the orbit of WTO style. Free-regulating ideologies disorient African leaders, thereby failing to advance African interests.

Moreover, the AfCFTA secretariat benefits from agenda-setting and policy development by the advanced economies. These include the AfCFTA's collaboration with the US government to 'work on the planned AfCFTA protocol on the inclusion of women and youth in trade' (USTR 2021). Also, the International Trade Centre (ITC), a multilateral agency which has a joint mandate with the WTO and the UN, established a policy arrangement known as She Trades Africa AfCFTA. This arrangement aims to provide guidelines that build the 'capacity of women-owned businesses to use the AfCFTA'. In addition, the US provides technical advice on policy issues, more particularly on the SPS policy framework and cross-border trade infrastructure projects. These policy-related programmes fall under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) regional compact initiative. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that the agenda-setting and policy development initiated by the advanced economies interfere with the functionality of African-initiated policy values. This is because foreign-advanced policy initiatives tend to promote free-trade orthodoxy that does not promote context-specific development values. Moreover, such trade policies dance to the dictates of demand and supply. They also promote capitalist development characterised by what Wade (1990) conceives as the 'invisible hand of the market, instead of visible head of public policy'.

Other than individual states, multiple donor governments and multinational organisations have provided support to the AfCFTA, particularly in tracking its implementation and tariff negotiations (Cook and Wong 2021). The AU launched an African Trade Observatory (ATO) with the EU, to support AfCFTA efforts. This initiative led the EU to

support the AfCFTA with €74 million between 2014 and 2020 (African Union 2021). The European Economic and Social Committee and European Commission reveal that this aid has supported the AfCFTA across various programmes. These include negotiation facilitation, advocacy and country ratification, tariff classification and harmonisation, as well as AfCFTA national implementation strategies (European Economic and Social Committee 2021). Others include 'rules of origin' implementation by African customs services, capacity building, and the creation of regional geographical indications for products.

These findings point to Nunes's notions of 'reality and power' and the 'politics of materialization' (Nunes 2012). Although Nunes explained these ideas in the context of security, I draw their attention to the AfCFTA to impute the role of power in political and economic outcomes. Drawing from ideas of Nunes, Kaweesi (2023) explains how the 'politics of materialization' is about the 'control over privileges of power and how they mediate political and economic outcomes'. Considering the 'materiality of the privileges of power', I contend that the AfCFTA is unable to promote autonomy, self-determination and, thereafter, advance African agency. This is because Africa has less power and is placed in a less privileged position. Consequently, the fragility of the African political economy makes the continent heavily dependent on financial support from the imperial powers. Second, the embeddedness of African institutions with those of free market fundamentalism make local institutions serve the interests of the imperial institutions and powers. Third, the need for foreign funding creates political patronage among African leaders, who collaborate with the hegemonic and imperial leaders from the Global North for 'deal-making', instead of 'rule- and policy-making' in Africa. In short, weak financial capacity, lack of a home-grown ideological orientation and poor governance have continued to make Africa dependent on the Global North. These conditions create asymmetrical relations that place Africa in a disadvantaged position to advance its own initiatives.

As Friedrich List would comment, 'the popular theory of political economy propounding the virtues of free trade, property rights and "unfettered markets" has assumed the status of a "hegemonic political

economy" ideology' (List 1885). Therefore, since neo-imperial funds and ideologies claim higher space in the initiation and enforcement of AfCFTA through donor-driven programmes, the AfCFTA bureaucrats religiously owe their allegiance, their economic wisdom and their political clout to the neo-imperial fraternity. This fraternity is insulated from the local political demands for concrete developmental outcomes. They are then captured by the Washington-based forces of global capitalism and operationalised by the 'governors of globalization'. Through various support mechanisms offered, the advanced economies conduct surveillance on the AfCFTA and enforce compliance with conventional economic policies underpinned by market fundamentalism. In other words, from the hegemonic ideological perspective, African leaders are told that an effective and successful African leader is the one who has successfully paid allegiance to the imperial powers and implemented dictated universalised policies. These conditions have enhanced and sustained pauperisation in Africa, because advanced economies have continued to place themselves in the driving seat of international political economy as African leaders continue to implement policies they did not initiate.

Conclusion and the way forward

The main question pursued in this chapter was whether the AfCFTA advances African agency or amplifies neo-imperial interests. I demonstrated that advanced economies weaponise the AfCFTA to amplify their economic and political dominance to the disadvantage of AfCFTA. They use *economic* and *political* complexities of the binaries to shape how Africa is perceived – and even the way Africa desires to, or actually does, locate itself in the power shifts and fixes. To prove this, I argued that global powers influenced AfCFTA leadership to adapt and implement conventional market ideologies, contrary to pragmatic and strategic trade that would enable the AfCFTA to advance African agency. This 'global integrationist ideology', underpinned by global free-regulating trade is part of WTO-aligned policies advanced by the 'governors of globalization' to enable powerful economies to dominate the international

political economy. As discussed within these ideas, the AfCFTA was encouraged to universalise its trade policies, like the WTO does, to the detriment of AU member states and the AfCFTA itself. Therefore, the discussion shows how neo-imperialism unfolds through financing AfCFTA programmes under the pretext of promoting capacity building and guiding the AfCFTA policy agenda. Based on this state of affairs, it is concluded that lack of financial capacity on the side of the AU has made the AfCFTA vulnerable to neo-imperialism through overreliance on the more powerful economies' funds and ideas. This was manifested in the form of workshops and training offered at different stages. These trainings altered the initial Afrocentric logic and 'Afro-realism' that underpinned the commencement of the AfCFTA. Stated differently, the AfCFTA cannot advance African agency, because it lacks capacity to determine its own policies and declarations. It also heavily depends on advanced economies for financial support to operationalise its different programmes.

Therefore, the way forward is: if African countries are to benefit from the AfCFTA, they need to engage partners of their own political, military and economic size. Equal partnerships are mutually beneficial to FTAs. An example is the FTA between the USA and the European Union. In such situations, the symmetrical power relations of these political entities rule out the possibility of one actor bulldozing their trade partner.

Also, the AU needs to consider the importance of forming a United States of Africa (USAfrica) as the institutional space for regulating, coordinating and guiding an AfCFTA that would fundamentally advance African agency. Moreover, African leaders need to have political buy-in and get ready to push politics and economics concurrently. This would enable Africa to 'build the Africa we want together'. A USAfrica would enable the building of strong political institutional arrangements that eventually promote firm alliances and partnerships among different trade partners – which are essential for advancing African agency and amplifying African voices.

Lastly, economic nationalism underpinned by pragmatism and strategic trade need to be adopted in the AfCFTA to advance African agency. Chang (2002) and Kiiza (2023) aver that economic nationalism is strategic in nature, engaging in selected activities and regulating

foreign exchange and capital flow. They highlight how the approach pushes for distinctive national industrial policies and calls for politically constructed competitive advantages. Policy issues considered include state emphasis on industrial manufacturing, digital economy and other politically constructed competitive advantages as drivers of meaningful global market integration. Achieving this requires transformative state involvement in capitalist development, which involves the use of state power, domestic institutions and public resources to build development-enhancing infrastructure. It also requires a skilled labour force and shifting economic actors from low-productivity activities to high value-added economic activities.

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