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## The African Union Agenda 2063 and Africa's Modernization Goals: Lessons From China's Experience

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### Abstract

*This study examines how China's modernization experience can inform the implementation of the African Union's Agenda 2063, a continental blueprint aimed at achieving a prosperous, integrated, and globally influential Africa. Drawing on the Developmental State Theory, the research explores how China's strategic reforms—encompassing export-led economic growth, large-scale infrastructure investment, coordinated governance, and human capital development—produced transformative socio-economic outcomes that hold relevance for Africa's long-term development aspirations. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative design, relying exclusively on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, AU policy documents, international institutional reports, and comparative development analyses. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns across key themes including industrialization, regional integration, governance capacity, infrastructure development, and sustainable growth. Findings reveal that China's modernization provides valuable lessons for Africa, particularly in areas such as coordinated planning, strategic investment in productive sectors, infrastructure-driven connectivity, and people-centered development. However, the study highlights that context-specific adaptation is essential, as Africa's diverse political systems, governance realities, and socio-economic conditions differ significantly from China's centralized model. Case studies from Ethiopia and Kenya demonstrate both the opportunities and risks associated with adapting China's strategies, including enhanced trade facilitation and job creation, alongside concerns over debt sustainability, limited local content, and technology transfer gaps. The study concludes that for Agenda 2063 to succeed, African states must strengthen institutional capacity, improve financing mechanisms, deepen regional coordination, and prioritize sustainable, inclusive development models that safeguard African agency. It recommends the adoption of context-appropriate industrial policies, diversification of infrastructure financing, reinforcement of governance reforms, and the promotion of mutually beneficial partnerships that align external investments with African priorities.*

**Keywords:** Agenda 2063, Modernization, China, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The African Union (AU) launched Agenda 2063 in 2013, a transformative blueprint designed to propel Africa toward a future of inclusive socio-economic development, regional integration, and global prominence over a 50-year horizon. Envisioned as "The Africa We Want," Agenda 2063 articulates a pan-African vision rooted in unity, self-determination, and sustainable progress, aiming to reposition the continent as a dynamic global player (African Union, 2022). This ambitious framework responds to the historical imperatives of overcoming colonial legacies, fostering economic prosperity, and addressing persistent challenges such as poverty, governance deficits, and infrastructural underdevelopment (Itumeleng, 2019). As African nations strive to achieve these goals, the rapid modernization of China since its economic reforms in the late 20th century offers a compelling case study for strategic adaptation. China's transformation from a developing economy to a global powerhouse, characterized by robust economic growth, massive infrastructure development, and strategic governance, provides valuable insights for African policymakers and scholars (Gummi et al., 2020).

Agenda 2063 emerges from a historical context marked by the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union in 2002, reflecting a shift from anti-colonial struggles to a focus on inclusive development and continental integration (African Union, 2022). The agenda's seven aspirations emphasize a prosperous, integrated, and peaceful Africa, driven by its people and underpinned by good governance, cultural renaissance, and sustainable development (DeGhetto et al., 2020). However, the implementation of this vision faces significant hurdles, including resource constraints, geopolitical tensions, and governance challenges, which have slowed progress in the first decade of its implementation (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). The First Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063, presented in 2020, highlighted uneven progress across its 15 flagship projects, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African High-Speed Railway Network, underscoring the need for innovative strategies to achieve transformative outcomes (African Union, 2020).

China's modernization trajectory offers a relevant model due to its remarkable achievements in economic growth, poverty reduction, and infrastructure development. Since the initiation of economic reforms in 1978, China has lifted over 700 million people out of poverty and developed world-class infrastructure, including high-speed rail networks and urban centers, positioning itself as a global economic leader (Chen, 2021). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has further extended China's influence, particularly in Africa, through investments in infrastructure and industrialization, aligning with Agenda 2063's priorities of connectivity and economic transformation (Gummi et al., 2020). The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has facilitated projects like the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway and the Ethiopian-Djibouti Railway, which exemplify China's role in supporting Africa's development aspirations (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). However, China's model is not without critique, as concerns over debt sustainability, environmental impacts, and unequal partnerships necessitate a cautious approach to adopting its strategies (Custer et al., 2023). The paper examines how China's pragmatic economic policies, large-scale infrastructure projects, and governance models can inform Africa's strategies, with a focus

on tailoring these lessons to promote inclusive growth, regional integration, and sustainable development.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEVELOPMENTAL STATE THEORY

The idea of the "developmental state" gained prominence with Chalmers Johnson's seminal analysis of post-war Japan, which showed how the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) orchestrated structural transformation through selective industrial policy, export promotion, and close, but disciplined, state-business coordination (Johnson, 1982). Building on Johnson, Peter Evans theorized the institutional preconditions for successful state activism, coining the notion of "embedded autonomy", a Weberian, meritocratic bureaucracy that is simultaneously insulated from rent-seeking and embedded in dense, information-rich ties with productive firms (Evans, 1995). Subsequent syntheses (e.g., Meredith Woo-Cumings, ed., 1999) broadened the framework beyond Japan to South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, while also interrogating conditions and limits in non-East Asian contexts. Recent scholarship argues the concept has evolved rather than disappeared, as states pursue new forms of economic statecraft and mission-oriented industrial policy in the twenty-first century (Weiss & Thurbon, 2021). In Africa, Thandika Mkandawire (2001) challenged narratives that a developmental state is "impossible," documenting African experiences and capacity conditions under which developmentalist ambitions can take root.

### Core Assumptions of Developmental State Theory.

At its core, the theory posits that late-industrializing countries can accelerate structural transformation through strategic, coordinated, and capable state intervention. First, a strong, purposive state formulates long-term national strategies, prioritizing industrial upgrading and export competitiveness, while using targeted tools (credit, subsidies, protection, procurement, technology policy). Second, embedded autonomy balances bureaucratic insulation (meritocratic recruitment, corporate coherence) with embeddedness in productive sectors to gather information, solve coordination failures, and steer investment without capture (Evans, 1995). Third, industrial policy is central: governments identify strategic sectors, build domestic capabilities, manage rents, and condition support on performance (e.g., exports, technology upgrading). Fourth, successful cases invest heavily in state capacity and bureaucratic professionalism, often via elite economic agencies, coordinated planning, and performance management. Evidence from East Asia, especially Korea's meritocratic bureaucracy, reinforces these institutional predicates for transformative growth.

### Strengths of the Theory

A principal strength is explanatory power: the framework convincingly accounts for East Asia's rapid catch-up, including Japan, Korea, Taiwan and, in important respects, contemporary China's state-steered industrial rise (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995; Weiss & Thurbon, 2021). It also foregrounds state capacity, planning competency, policy coherence, and disciplined execution, as an overlooked determinant of development outcomes, moving the debate beyond laissez-faire vs. command economies to institutionally grounded mixed strategies (Woo-Cumings, 1999). Moreover, newer work shows the theory's adaptability to present challenges (green transition, tech rivalry), illustrating how mission-oriented, innovation-centric industrial policy extends the

developmental toolkit to new domains (Thurbon, Kim, Tan & Mathews, 2023; Weiss & Thurbon, 2021).

### **Weaknesses and Critics**

Critiques fall into five clusters. (1) Authoritarian bias): Observers caution that classic cases often featured restricted political pluralism; translating these practices to democracies risks illiberal drift unless accountability and rule-of-law safeguards are robust (Woo-Cumings, 1999; Leftwich, 2000).(2) Context specificity): East Asian successes reflected distinctive geopolitical, historical, and social conditions (war mobilization legacies, Cold War alliances, cohesive bureaucracies), complicating transposition to other regions (Mkandawire, 2001).(3) Overreach and capture): State activism can generate rent-seeking, misallocation, and cronyism if embeddedness slides into capture, one reason Evans's autonomy condition is central and empirically contested (Evans, 1995; critical review in Wright, 1998).(4) Debt and inefficiency): Large, state-led projects risk fiscal stress where capacity is thin, an issue for some Belt and Road projects in Africa, underscoring the need for prudent financing and strong procurement governance.(5) Conceptual drift): Contemporary debates warn that "developmental state" is sometimes used loosely to describe any activist government; scholars urge sharper distinctions between developmentalism and broader economic statecraft (Weiss & Thurbon, 2021).

### **Relevance of the Theory to the Study.**

Developmental State Theory offers the clearest conceptual bridge. First, Agenda 2063's aspirations, prosperity through industrialization, an integrated market (AfCFTA), capable and accountable institutions, infrastructure corridors, and a people-driven transformation, presuppose state capacity for long-term coordination, precisely what developmental state theory formalizes. Second, China's post-1978 trajectory exemplifies twenty-first century developmentalism: mission-oriented industrial policy (e.g., Made in China 2025), strategic financing (policy banks, guidance funds), and multilevel coordination that nurtured new industries (renewables, EVs, advanced equipment) while upgrading value chains, albeit with uneven sectoral performance that Africa can learn from (USCC, 2025; Asia Society/SCCEI, 2023). Third, the theory highlights the implementation gap Africa must close: embedded autonomy implies upgrading bureaucratic capability (meritocratic recruitment, performance management), tightening procurement and debt governance, and conditioning support on performance (exports, technology, jobs), thereby mitigating common risks (capture, project underperformance). Fourth, the regional integration thrust of Agenda 2063 (AfCFTA, PIDA) aligns with the developmental playbook's emphasis on coordination and scale—continental standards, logistics platforms, and regional industrial corridors can reduce fragmentation and enable African firms to reach productivity thresholds similar to East Asia's regional production systems. Finally, the adaptation principle is crucial: the theory does not prescribe copying China; it provides criteria for context-sensitive state activism—prioritize sectors where Africa has or can build comparative capabilities (e.g., green minerals processing, agro-processing, EV value chains), link support to performance, and embed democratic accountability to suit Africa's diverse political systems (Mkandawire, 2001; Weiss & Thurbon, 2021). In sum, Developmental State Theory supplies the analytical backbone for this study: it explains why China's modernization delivered rapid upgrading; clarifies the state capacities Africa must strengthen to realize Agenda 2063; and illuminates safeguards (meritocratic

bureaucracy, performance-based support, fiscal prudence) to avoid pitfalls. Used alongside your case evidence on Ethiopia and Kenya, it enables a structured, theory-driven assessment of what to emulate, what to adapt, and what to avoid in pursuing "The Africa We Want."

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying entirely on existing literature as its primary source of data. The research synthesizes evidence from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, African Union reports, international development publications, and analytical studies on China's modernization and Africa-China cooperation. Literature from organizations such as the African Union, AUDA-NEPAD, World Bank, UN agencies, and various academic databases forms the core evidentiary base for the analysis. Data collection followed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, focusing on materials published between 2010 and 2025 to capture both historical evolution and contemporary interpretations of China's development trajectory and Agenda 2063's implementation. The search strategy involved identifying publications that addressed themes such as Africa's development aspirations, China's modernization strategies, Sino-African cooperation frameworks, industrial policy, infrastructure development, governance reforms, and socio-economic transformation. Sources were screened for relevance, credibility, and conceptual alignment with the study's objectives.

Extracted information was organized around recurring analytical themes, including: China's modernization model and strategic reforms, Economic and industrial transformation strategies, Infrastructure-led development pathways, Governance and institutional coordination, Human capital development, Lessons applicable to Agenda 2063's aspirations, Risks, constraints, and contextual limitations for Africa. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method enabled the identification of patterns, shared features, and divergences across the literature, allowing the study to derive nuanced insights into how China's experience can inform Africa's modernization agenda. Through coding, categorization, and thematic mapping, the study examined the intersections between China's development trajectory and the pillars of Agenda 2063, especially around industrialization, regional integration, governance, and sustainable development.

Validity and reliability were strengthened through triangulation, comparing insights from diverse authors, institutions, and methodological traditions. The research critically appraised each source for conceptual rigor, empirical depth, and relevance, ensuring that conclusions were grounded in high-quality evidence rather than anecdotal interpretations. Since the study is based entirely on secondary data, ethical considerations primarily involve the accurate citation of all sources, proper acknowledgment of intellectual contributions, and adherence to academic integrity standards. Following recommendations by Bowen (2009) and Snyder (2019), the study ensures transparency in literature selection, avoids plagiarism, and respects the intellectual property rights of authors and institutions.

## **OVERVIEW OF AU AGENDA 2063**

Agenda 2063 emerged from extensive consultations across African stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and the diaspora, reflecting a collective resolve to chart a transformative

path for the continent (African Union, 2020). The agenda builds on earlier AU initiatives, such as the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) but introduces a more comprehensive and long-term vision (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). Launched during the AU's 50th anniversary celebrations, Agenda 2063 is framed as "The Africa We Want," emphasizing a break from external dependency and a focus on African agency (DeGhetto et al., 2020). Its development was informed by the recognition that previous frameworks often lacked coherence, adequate financing, and effective implementation mechanisms, necessitating a unified strategy to address both structural and emerging challenges (Nwebo, 2019). The agenda is operationalized through a series of 10-year implementation plans, with the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) serving as a critical benchmark for progress (African Union, 2020).

## KEY GOALS OF AGENDA 2063

The AU's Agenda 2063 is structured around seven aspirations that collectively articulate a vision for a transformed Africa by 2063. These aspirations serve as the guiding principles for the continent's socio-economic, political, and cultural development, addressing historical inequities and positioning Africa as a global leader. Each aspiration is operationalized through specific goals and flagship projects, such as the AfCFTA and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), which align with the continent's modernization ambitions (African Union, 2022). Below, each aspiration is discussed as an individual item, highlighting its objectives, significance, and relevance to Africa's development trajectory, with insights into how these goals can draw from global experiences like China's modernization.

**A Prosperous Africa Based on Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development:** This aspiration seeks to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, and foster economic growth that benefits all segments of society while ensuring environmental sustainability. It emphasizes industrialization, agricultural modernization, and access to basic services like healthcare and education (African Union, 2020). The AfCFTA, launched in 2021, is a cornerstone of this goal, aiming to boost intra-African trade by 52% by 2035, creating jobs and diversifying economies (World Bank, 2020). Sustainable development is prioritized through initiatives like the African Green Stimulus Programme, which promotes renewable energy and climate resilience (African Development Bank, 2023). This aspiration is critical as Africa grapples with a youthful population and high poverty rates, with 29% of Africans living below the international poverty line in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). China's experience in poverty alleviation, having lifted over 700 million people out of poverty through targeted economic reforms, offers a model for scalable interventions (Chen, 2021).

**An Integrated Continent, Politically United and Based on the Ideals of Pan-Africanism:** This goal envisions a politically and economically integrated Africa, rooted in the principles of pan-Africanism and unity. It promotes regional connectivity through projects like the African High-Speed Railway Network and the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), which aim to enhance trade and mobility (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). The AfCFTA further supports this by creating a single market for 1.3 billion people, fostering economic interdependence (World Bank, 2020). However, achieving political unity remains challenging due to diverse governance systems and historical rivalries (Mlambo, 2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has

facilitated cross-border infrastructure like the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway, provides a blueprint for regional connectivity, though Africa must navigate risks of external dependency (Custer et al., 2023). This aspiration is vital for overcoming fragmentation and amplifying Africa's global influence.

**An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, and Respect for Human Rights:** This aspiration focuses on strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring transparent governance, and upholding human rights across the continent. It seeks to address corruption, weak judicial systems, and electoral irregularities, which undermine development (Nwebo, 2019). The AU's African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2012) is a key instrument, though its adoption remains uneven, with only 34 of 54 member states ratifying it by 2023 (African Union, 2023). Progress is evident in initiatives like the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which promotes governance best practices, but challenges persist, as seen in recent coups in West Africa (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). China's centralized governance model, which balances national planning with local execution, offers insights for strengthening institutional frameworks, though its applicability is limited by Africa's democratic diversity (Gummi et al., 2020).

**A Peaceful and Secure Africa:** This goal aims to eliminate conflicts, terrorism, and insecurity to create a stable environment for development. The AU's Silencing the Guns initiative, part of Agenda 2063, targets ending all wars by 2030, yet ongoing conflicts in regions like the Sahel and the Horn of Africa highlight persistent challenges (African Union, 2020). In 2023, over 20 million Africans were displaced due to conflict and violence, straining resources and development efforts (UNHCR, 2023). Investments in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, such as the African Standby Force, are central to this aspiration. China's contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and its non-interference policy provide a model for supporting stability, though Africa must prioritize homegrown solutions to ensure sovereignty (Custer et al., 2023). Peace is foundational to achieving other Agenda 2063 goals, as insecurity diverts resources from development.

**An Africa with a Strong Cultural Identity, Common Heritage, Values, and Ethics:** This aspiration seeks to foster a shared African identity by promoting cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and pan-African values. It includes initiatives like the Great African Museum and the promotion of African languages to counter colonial legacies (African Union, 2022). Cultural revitalization is seen as a driver of social cohesion and global soft power, with Africa's creative industries projected to contribute \$20 billion to GDP by 2030 (UNESCO, 2021). Challenges include urbanization and globalization, which erode traditional practices (DeGhetto et al., 2020). China's emphasis on cultural confidence, through initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, offers lessons for promoting cultural identity, though Africa's diverse ethnic landscape requires tailored approaches (Chen, 2021). This goal strengthens social unity, essential for collective development efforts.

**An Africa Whose Development is People-Driven, Especially Leveraging Women and Youth:** This aspiration emphasizes inclusive development by empowering women, youth, and marginalized groups as key drivers of progress. With over 60% of Africa's population under 25, harnessing the demographic dividend is critical (African Development Bank, 2023). Initiatives like the African Youth Charter and gender equality programs aim to

enhance education, skills, and economic opportunities (African Union, 2020). However, youth unemployment, at 13% in 2022, and gender disparities in leadership remain significant hurdles (World Bank, 2022). China's focus on human capital development, through mass education and vocational training, provides a model for scaling skills programs, though Africa must address structural barriers like access to quality education (Gummi et al., 2020). Empowering people ensures sustainable and equitable growth.

**An Africa as a Strong, United, and Influential Global Player and Partner:** This goal envisions Africa as a formidable global actor, leveraging its resources, population, and strategic position to shape international agendas. It includes strengthening the AU's global advocacy and fostering partnerships like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). Africa's growing influence is evident in its role in global climate negotiations and trade agreements, yet its fragmented voice in institutions like the UN limits impact (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). China's rise as a global power, through strategic diplomacy and economic leverage, offers lessons for building Africa's international clout, though avoiding over-reliance on external partners is crucial (Custer et al., 2023). This aspiration positions Africa to negotiate equitable global partnerships, aligning with Agenda 2063's vision of self-determination.

## CHALLENGES TO AGENDA 2063 IMPLEMENTATION

The AU's Agenda 2063 envisions a transformative future for the continent, but its implementation faces significant obstacles that threaten its ambitious goals. The First Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063 (2020) highlighted that only 43% of the agenda's targets were achieved by 2020, underscoring systemic barriers that require innovative solutions (African Union, 2020). These challenges include financial limitations, governance deficits, political instability, and the complexities of coordinating 54 diverse nations. These issues are discussed subsequently

**Financial Limitations:** A primary obstacle to Agenda 2063's implementation is the significant funding gap that constrains the continent's ability to finance its flagship projects. The African Development Bank (2023) estimates Africa's infrastructure financing needs at \$68–108 billion annually, far exceeding domestic resources and external aid. The First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) relies heavily on member state contributions, domestic resource mobilization, and external partnerships, yet progress has been hampered by limited fiscal capacity (African Union, 2020). By 2023, Africa's external debt reached \$1.1 trillion, with debt service obligations consuming significant portions of national budgets, limiting investments in critical areas like education, healthcare, and infrastructure (African Development Bank, 2023). For instance, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) requires substantial funding for trade facilitation and capacity building, but resource constraints have slowed its operationalization (World Bank, 2020). China's experience in leveraging public-private partnerships and foreign direct investment (FDI) to fund infrastructure, as seen in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offers a potential model, though Africa must navigate risks of debt dependency (Custer et al., 2023). Addressing this financial challenge is essential to scaling Agenda 2063's transformative initiatives.

**Governance Challenges:** Weak governance structures, including corruption, inefficient institutions, and lack of policy coherence,

pose significant barriers to Agenda 2063's success. Corruption remains a pervasive issue, with Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index ranking 43 African countries below the global average, diverting resources from development priorities (Transparency International, 2022). The African Union's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) aims to promote governance best practices, but its voluntary nature and limited adoption—only 23 countries had completed reviews by 2023—limit its impact (African Union, 2023). Weak institutional frameworks also hinder effective policy implementation, as seen in delays in projects like the African High-Speed Railway Network (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). Furthermore, inconsistent adherence to democratic principles and rule of law undermines investor confidence and public trust (Nwebo, 2019). China's centralized governance model, which combines strategic planning with decentralized execution, provides lessons for strengthening institutional coordination, though Africa's diverse political systems require context-specific adaptations (Gummi et al., 2020). Overcoming governance deficits is crucial for ensuring accountability and effective delivery of Agenda 2063's goals.

**Political Instability and Conflict:** Political instability and ongoing conflicts in regions like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa undermine Agenda 2063's aspiration for a peaceful and secure continent. In 2023, over 20 million Africans were displaced due to conflict and violence, straining resources and disrupting development efforts (UNHCR, 2023). The AU's Silencing the Guns initiative, aimed at ending all wars by 2030, faces challenges from persistent insurgencies, terrorism, and recent coups in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). These conflicts divert resources from critical Agenda 2063 projects, such as the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), and exacerbate humanitarian crises, with 282 million people facing acute food insecurity in 2022 (FAO, 2022). China's contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and its non-interference policy offer a framework for supporting stability, but Africa must prioritize homegrown peacekeeping mechanisms, such as the African Standby Force, to maintain sovereignty (Custer et al., 2023). Political stability is foundational to achieving other aspirations, as insecurity hampers economic growth and regional integration.

**Coordination Challenges Across Diverse Nations:** The diversity of Africa's 54 nations, spanning linguistic, cultural, economic, and political contexts, complicates the harmonized implementation of Agenda 2063. Regional integration initiatives, such as the AfCFTA and the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), require coordinated policies and infrastructure, yet differences in national priorities and capacities create bottlenecks (Mlambo, 2020). For example, while the AfCFTA aims to create a single market, varying levels of economic development and trade readiness among member states have slowed progress, with only 47 countries ratifying the agreement by 2023 (African Union, 2023). Regional economic communities (RECs), such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), are critical to implementation, but overlapping mandates and resource constraints hinder synergy (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). China's experience in coordinating large-scale projects across diverse provinces, as seen in its high-speed rail network, offers insights for streamlining regional cooperation, though Africa's decentralized political structures require tailored approaches (Gummi et al., 2020). Effective coordination is

essential for realizing Agenda 2063's vision of an integrated continent.

**Risks of External Dependency:** Agenda 2063's reliance on external partnerships, particularly for financing and technical expertise, raises concerns about debt sustainability and loss of policy autonomy. China's BRI has funded significant infrastructure projects, such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway and the Ethiopian-Djibouti Railway, aligning with Agenda 2063's connectivity goals (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). However, these projects have increased debt burdens in some countries, with Kenya's debt to China reaching \$7.9 billion by 2023, raising fears of "debt-trap diplomacy" (Custer et al., 2023). Additionally, external partnerships can skew development priorities away from local needs, undermining Agenda 2063's emphasis on African agency (Oliveira & Otavio, 2021). The AU's push for domestic resource mobilization, such as the 0.2% levy on imports to fund AU activities, has faced resistance, with only 17 countries complying by 2022 (African Union, 2020). China's experience in balancing foreign investment with national priorities offers lessons, but Africa must strengthen intra-continental partnerships to reduce dependency (DeGhetto et al., 2020). Mitigating this challenge is critical to ensuring Agenda 2063 remains African-led.

## CHINA'S MODERNIZATION EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS FOR AFRICA

China's transformation from a developing economy into a global powerhouse since the late 20th century provides a compelling reference point for African countries pursuing the modernization objectives outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. Through strategic reforms, China implemented economic liberalization, scaled infrastructure investment, strengthened governance, and expanded human capital development, yielding wide-ranging socio-economic gains (Chen, 2021). Understanding China's modernization trajectory—its origins, strategies, and outcomes—provides actionable lessons for Africa's pursuit of inclusive growth, regional integration, and sustainable development under Agenda 2063.

### Overview of China's Modernization

China's modernization accelerated with the reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, shifting the country from a centrally planned system to a hybrid market-oriented model (Wang & Zhang, 2019). Prior to reform, China struggled with pervasive poverty, low industrial capacity, and limited global economic integration, with over 80% of its population living below the international poverty line in the early 1970s (World Bank, 2020). The reform era prioritized opening to foreign investment, economic decentralization, and integration into global supply chains, catalyzing rapid GDP growth and structural change. By 2019, China had become the world's second-largest economy, with a GDP of \$14.3 trillion, under a system that continued to combine centralized state control with market-driven incentives (Chen, 2021). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, extended China's development model globally, deepening its reach in Africa through trade corridors, transport infrastructure, and industrial development (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). Africa's own developmental challenges—including fragmented markets, historical underinvestment, and uneven governance—mirror aspects of China's pre-reform context, suggesting that pragmatic adaptation of selected Chinese strategies could accelerate Agenda

2063 outcomes. However, Africa's socio-political diversity means such models must be aligned with local governance systems and sustainability imperatives (Gummi et al., 2020).

### Key Strategies of China's Modernization

- a. **Economic Reforms:** China's economic reforms centered on market liberalization, export-oriented industrialization, and the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI). The establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), starting with Shenzhen in the 1980s, offered tax incentives, regulatory flexibility, and logistics infrastructure, transforming these zones into growth poles (Wang & Zhang, 2019). By 2020, China attracted \$163 billion in FDI annually, supporting technological upgrading and industrial expansion (World Bank, 2020).

Rural reforms, including the Household Responsibility System, increased agricultural productivity and released surplus labor for manufacturing and services (Chen, 2021). These combined interventions reduced poverty from 88% in 1981 to below 2% by 2019. For Africa, SEZ-based industrialization aligns with Agenda 2063's objectives, as demonstrated by Ethiopia's Hawassa Industrial Park. However, African nations must adapt SEZ designs to ensure local capacity building, technology transfer, and equitable distribution of benefits (Custer et al., 2023). AfCFTA provides an enabling framework for Africa to apply China-style reforms to boost intra-continental trade and diversify economies.

- b. **Infrastructure Development:** China's infrastructure-driven development strategy has been central to its modernization. Investments in transport, energy, water systems, and modern urban centers reduced transaction costs and enhanced national connectivity. By 2023, China's high-speed rail network extended over 40,000 kilometers, linking major cities and supporting domestic integration (Li & Xu, 2023). Through the BRI, China exported this expertise globally, including in Africa's flagship rail projects such as Kenya's Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway and Ethiopia's Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway. These investments align with Agenda 2063's connectivity and trade facilitation goals (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). China's state-led financing, supported by entities like the China Development Bank, mobilized an estimated \$4.3 trillion for infrastructure between 2000 and 2020 (Li & Xu, 2023). Africa faces an infrastructure financing gap of \$68–108 billion annually (African Development Bank, 2023). China's blended financing model, combining state credit, PPPs, and sovereign loans, offers valuable insights. However, African countries must manage debt prudently, ensure transparent contracting, and prioritize projects that generate economic returns and local employment. Aligning infrastructure planning with local needs and regional integration priorities is essential to avoid debt stress and underperforming assets.
- c. **Governance and Policy:** China's governance system blends centralized planning with

decentralized flexibility, enabling consistent policy direction while allowing local governments room to experiment. Successive Five-Year Plans have provided national development roadmaps, with the 14th Plan (2021–2025) emphasizing innovation, green development, and high-quality growth (Zhang & Chen, 2022). This model facilitated coordination across agencies and regions, contributing to China's capacity for large-scale delivery. China's anti-corruption campaigns since 2012 further strengthened institutional credibility, reducing bureaucratic leakages and restoring investor confidence (Transparency International, 2022). For Africa, strategic coordination mechanisms, similar to China's, can support implementation of continental projects like the African High-Speed Railway Network and AfCFTA rollout. However, African governance systems are more democratic and pluralistic; policy implementation must therefore prioritize accountability, transparency, civic participation, and institutional strengthening (Nwebo, 2019). China's model offers useful techniques for coordination, but not a political structure to be replicated.

- d. **Human Capital Development:** China's rapid modernization was reinforced by investment in education, innovation, and workforce training. By 2020, literacy rates reached 97%, and tertiary enrollment expanded to 58 million students (UNESCO, 2021). Vocational training supported industrial upgrading, while targeted poverty-alleviation initiatives raised rural incomes and improved labor mobility (Chen, 2021). Africa's demographic profile, where 60% of the population is under 25, aligns with Agenda 2063's vision for people-driven development (African Development Bank, 2023). China's scalable training and educational models can help address Africa's skills gaps and reduce youth unemployment, which stood at 13% in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). However, Africa must tailor human capital strategies to local contexts, ensuring equitable access, gender inclusion, and quality assurance.

#### Outcomes of China's Modernization

China's modernization yielded substantial economic and social transformations. By 2023, its GDP reached \$17.7 trillion, and per capita income rose from \$200 in 1978 to \$12,500 (World Bank, 2023). Urbanization surged from 18% in 1978 to 64% by 2022, enabling economies of scale and productivity gains but also producing challenges like inequality and environmental degradation (Li & Xu, 2023). China's poverty reduction achievements, bringing extreme poverty to near zero—remain among the most significant in modern history. Internationally, China mobilized over \$1 trillion in global BRI investments, including \$60 billion in Africa (Custer et al., 2023). These projects enhanced Africa's transport, energy, and industrial capacity but also highlighted risks, including debt pressures and environmental concerns (AUDA-NEPAD, 2024). China's mixed results underscore that strategic reforms can accelerate progress toward Agenda 2063, but without strong governance, infrastructure and industrial investments may underperform or create vulnerabilities.

#### Lessons from China for Agenda 2063

China's rise offers four broad lessons for Africa's modernization efforts. Firstly, China's export-led reforms and SEZ strategy provide a replicable framework for industrialization. Africa can adapt these tools through SEZs linked to AfCFTA value chains, targeted rural modernization, and FDI attraction. Adaptation must ensure local ownership, technology transfer, and robust regulation to prevent enclaving or external dependency (Custer et al., 2023). Secondly, China's infrastructure model illustrates how coordinated planning and long-term financing can unlock economic potential. Africa should emulate corridor-based planning, prioritize high-impact projects, and diversify financing, with PPPs, multilateral banks, and domestic capital, while rigorously managing debt (African Development Bank, 2023). Additionally, China's coherent planning and execution highlight the importance of institutional capacity. Africa can adopt elements such as national development plans, delivery units, and performance management systems. However, governance must remain inclusive, transparent, and consistent with democratic principles. Lastly, China's later pivot to renewable energy and environmental regulation provides early warning: rapid industrialization without environmental safeguards leads to long-term costs. Africa can leapfrog to cleaner technologies, integrating renewable energy, green infrastructure, and climate-resilient urban planning into Agenda 2063 strategies (Li & Xu, 2023; African Development Bank, 2023).

#### CONCLUSION

The African Union's Agenda 2063 outlines a long-term vision for a prosperous, integrated, and sustainable Africa by 2063, aiming to overcome historical barriers and utilize the continent's resources to strengthen its global influence. China's modernization, driven by rapid economic expansion, large-scale infrastructure development, and strategic governance, provides useful lessons for Africa, as reflected in experiences from Ethiopia and Kenya. However, the transferability of China's model requires careful adaptation to Africa's diverse political, cultural, and economic conditions to ensure sustainability, inclusivity, and the preservation of African agency. This study showed how China's development strategies can inform Agenda 2063's aspirations around economic transformation, integration, and environmental resilience. China's economic reforms, including SEZs, export-led growth, and rural restructuring, significantly reduced poverty and boosted industrial capacity, offering a foundation for Africa's AfCFTA-driven industrialization. Massive infrastructure investments, such as China's high-speed rail network, mirror the connectivity ambitions of Agenda 2063 and are already reflected in projects like Ethiopia's Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, which have enhanced trade and employment. China's governance structure, combining centralized planning with local flexibility, provides insights for improving coherence in Africa's regional initiatives, while its turn toward renewable energy underscores the importance of embedding sustainability early. The case studies highlight both opportunities and risks. While Ethiopia and Kenya benefited from industrial growth and improved logistics, they faced debt sustainability concerns and limited local participation, emphasizing the need for tailored and fiscally responsible strategies. Therefore, achieving Agenda 2063's transformative goals requires African-led innovation, stronger domestic resource mobilization, including adoption of the AU's import levy, enhanced REC coordination, and increased investment in human capital, especially education and vocational training for youth. Partnerships such as FOCAC should prioritize

technology transfer and local content to ensure equitable development outcomes. By 2063, Africa can achieve a modern, integrated, and influential future—marked by diversified economies, interconnected infrastructure, transparent governance, cultural vitality, and empowered youth, if global lessons, including those from China, are adapted to reflect Africa’s unique strengths and aspirations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges to implementation of the AU Agenda 2063 implementation, the following recommendations are made:

- a. **Strengthen Domestic Resource Mobilization Mechanism:** To address the challenge of financial limitations, it is recommended that African governments and the AU should strengthen domestic resource mobilization mechanisms, diversify infrastructure financing through blended finance and PPPs, and institutionalize transparent debt-sustainability frameworks to reduce overreliance on external borrowing.
- b. **Strengthen Peace and Security Mechanisms:** To address the challenge of political instability and conflict, it is recommended that the AU and member states strengthen peace and security mechanisms, such as the African Standby Force and early-warning systems—while integrating peacebuilding with inclusive development initiatives that reduce fragility and safeguard development resources.
- c. **Enhance Harmonization of Policies and Implementation Frameworks:** To address the challenge of weak coordination among 54 diverse nations, it is recommended that the AU enhance harmonization of policies and implementation frameworks by clarifying REC mandates, empowering AUDA-NEPAD to coordinate cross-border projects, and adopting continent-wide regulatory and technical standards that support integration,
- d. **Prioritizing African-led Development Planning:** To address the challenge of external dependency, it is recommended that African governments prioritize African-led development planning, increase intra-African investment under AfCFTA, and enforce local-content, technology-transfer, and transparency requirements in all foreign-funded projects to safeguard sovereignty and ensure sustainable partnerships.

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