Research Article

Central Asian Studies of Social Science and History
e-ISSN 2660-6836 | Volume 7 | Issue 4 (2026) | Page 75-89

Westphalian State System, European Capitalist Expansion, and the Historical Foundations of Africa's Incorporation into the Global Political Economy: Implications for State Autonomy in the Twenty-First Century

UROM, Charles Egwu
Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
charles.urom@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

This study focused on the interaction of the Westphalian State System, European capitalist expansion, and the integration of Africa in the global political economy, and its impact on state autonomy in the 21st century. The study employed three research questions to guide the study on how the Westphalian state system and European capitalist expansion enabled the incorporation of Africa into the global political economy, how this incorporation continues to affect state autonomy in the present-day international system and what strategies can enhance Africa's autonomy in the contemporary international system. A qualitative historical research design was used, where only secondary data gathered from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, official reports, policy documents and publications of reputable international organizations were used. Thematic content analysis and historical content analysis were engaged to analyse the data, and the analytical framework of World-Systems Theory and Dependency Theory were used to interpret the data. The research revealed that the process of Africa's integration in the global political economy has been shaped by European imperialism and capitalist accumulation, influencing its policy autonomy, and that these relations of economic dependence have persisted over time despite political sovereignty. The results also showed that the main commodity production and external financing and market access continue to restrict independent development planning, with differential access to global markets. The study shows that strategic approach to the global economy, instead of isolationist, is needed to enhance state autonomy. It thus urges continued investments in industrialisation and economic diversification, with a view to improving the bargaining power of Africa and encouraging more autonomous and sustainable development, as well as strengthening the state institutions and advancing regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Keywords: Westphalian State System, European Capitalist Expansion, Global Political Economy, State Autonomy, Africa, Dependency Theory.

*Corresponding author : UROM, Charles Egwu
Article history : submitted; 2026/05/15 revised; 2026/06/03 accepted; 2026/07/10 published; 2026/08/28

1. Introduction

The present-day structure of the global political economy has been the result of a long history which has seen political power, economic power and the dynamics of international relations increasingly linked together. The key to this change was the Westphalian State System that was established after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and that codified the concepts of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and juridical equality. The Westphalian settlement, which took the place of the medieval fragmentation, transformed the structure of international politics by placing the sovereign states as the main players in the international system [1]. It was conceived in the European political context, but over time the Westphalian model spread beyond Europe by conquest, colonization, diplomacy, and international law and eventually became the most prevalent model of international politics. However, throughout its development, the doctrine was accompanied by huge disparities in economic and military strength, which allowed the European states to assert their sovereignty throughout the world. Thus, the diffusion of the Westphalian order must be seen against the backdrop of the growing European capitalist system, which saw the spread of sovereignty from a political concept to an institutional device for territorial control, commercial development and imperial rule [2]. These political and economic developments have changed the international system on a basic level and laid the historical groundwork for the integration of Africa into the global political economy.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, European capitalist expansion had a significant impact on production, trade, and accumulation processes all over the world. The shift from mercantilism to industrial capitalism brought about a newfound need for raw materials, labor, market, and investment opportunities outside of Europe, which in turn stimulated explorations overseas, commercial monopolies, and colonial expansion [3]. The growing accumulation of capital was increasingly tied to the incorporation of non-European societies into an emerging capitalist world economy in unequal trade and imperial relationships. In this growing system, Africa had a unique role as a source of slave labor in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and as a provider of agricultural commodities and mineral resources when it was colonized [4]. The process of African societies' incorporation into European capitalism was thus an imposed and non-voluntary process of dispossession and structural subordination that forced indigenous economies to be subsumed by the needs of European industrialization. Extractive political and economic institutions were also firmly entrenched in the colonial administrative systems, which served the interests of the metropolitan more than its local populations [5]. These historical processes created patterns of dependency, which persisted in the political economy of Africa well after the end of colonialism.

This should be seen as a historically negotiated process, linked to the interaction between the Westphalian state system and European capitalist expansion in the process of incorporating Africa into a global political economy. The colonial division of Africa was a result of the Berlin Conference; it was the first occasion on which European powers officially established their political control over Africa, and it also ushered the modern territorial state as the leading form of political organization in Africa. But these colonial states were as different as they can be from their European counterparts. In contrast, the state was an exogenous administrative imposition, created to serve imperial interests, through a process of political bargaining, institutional consolidation and domestic capital formation in Africa [6]. Colonial borders often ignored political, cultural, and economic realities and colonial institutions focused more on resource extraction, labour control, and fiscal centralization than on participatory governance and productive change. As a result, a number of postcolonial African countries inherited institutions that lacked a domestic orientation and were economically insecure, and were structurally weak. Despite this political return to independence, juridical sovereignty was not achieved, as economic dependency was strong, manifested in inequitable trade relations, foreign investment, external debt, technological dependency and continued integration into the world market on largely precarious terms [7]. The formal recognition of sovereignty did not necessarily imply any greater substantive autonomy within the changing global political economy, given that this history of continuity existed. Given this history of continuity, it would be hard to claim that the formal recognition of sovereignty implied any greater substantive autonomy in the changing global political economy.

The post-Cold War period has also renewed debates on the autonomy of African states because of changes in the nature of state power brought about by globalization, neoliberal reform, financial liberalization, and the increasing power of international financial institutions. African governments today are working in an increasingly globalised economy, with transnational production networks, multinational corporations, international trade regimes and complex financial governance structures which limit the room for policy autonomy [8]. Despite the opportunities offered by globalization, such as economic integration, investment and technological diffusion, globalization has also had the effect of strengthening the structural asymmetries between developed and developing economies. Many African countries have experienced a contraction of policy options due to the implementation of programmes that demanded fiscal austerity, market liberalisation, privatisation and regulatory reforms by institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund [9]. Meanwhile, the emergence of new powers, especially China, has added a fresh twist to Africa's relations with the outside world, sparking fresh debates about the nature of these relations, which are viewed as either a new mode of dependency or new forms of development in the global capitalist system [10]. These changes highlight the ongoing relevance of an investigation of the historical dynamics of incorporation and its implications in present sovereignty, development and state capacity questions.

In this historical and contemporary context, the issue of State autonomy has become more relevant in the study of international political economy and African politics. African States, although formally sovereign in international law, have limited ability to develop and enact autonomous political and economic policy, due to the effects of colonial legacies, reliance on external capital, fluctuating commodity prices, geopolitical dynamics and global governance structures. Juridical sovereignty versus substantive autonomy thus poses many questions about how far can African states go in their development paths in an order historically constructed by the European state system and capitalist expansion? It is in this context that this study looks at the relationship between the Westphalian State System, the European capitalist expansion and the historical incorporation of Africa into the global political economy, to the implications of these historical processes for state autonomy in the twenty first century. The study places the contemporary issues of governance in the context of their historical roots, thereby adding to on-going debates within the fields of international political economy, historical sociology and African political development on the legacies of colonialism, global capitalism, and the changing nature of sovereignty in a globalizing world.

Statement of the Problem

Although much scholarship has been devoted to the general issue of the emergence of the Westphalian State System, European imperialism, colonialism, and global capitalism, there are significant disagreements about the historical processes by which these collectively constituted Africa's incorporation into the global political economy and continue to affect the autonomy of African states in the twenty-first century. So far, existing work has focused on the Westphalian state system as a political and legal transformation as it relates to the development of European sovereignty [11], and on other strands of literature the development of European capitalist expansion has mainly been studied through the prism of colonialism, dependency, and global economic exploitation [12]. While these have produced valuable understandings, they tend to consider such developments in isolation as opposed to as reinforcing processes which collectively redefined Africa's role in the changing international political economy. There has been a lack of attention paid, then, to the interaction between the institutional logic of sovereign Westphalian statehood and the expansionist dynamics of European capitalism that created the structural conditions that remain influential in the political and economic autonomy of African states today.

This analytical gap has grown more and more salient in the modern international order. Despite formal political independence, more than 60 years ago, majority of African states still have substantial limitations in their ability to exercise sovereign authority over their economic and developmental path as recognized under international law. The entrenched reliance on primary commodity export, external financing, foreign direct investment, multilateral development institutions, and externally-created development frameworks puts African states in a situation where there are fundamental questions about the autonomous nature of substantive development within the global political economy [13]. Meanwhile, the current geopolitical dynamics of power between the established Western powers and the rising actors, including China, has reignited discussions on whether the external relations of African countries constitute a real chance for autonomous development or a reconfiguration of the historical patterns of dependency in new global circumstances [14]. They indicate that formal statehood does not always carry with it an actual level of policy autonomy, pointing to a continuing gap between legal and actual statehood.

The issue of this study is therefore the inadequate interaction of historical and contemporary analysis of why Africa can be seen as part of the global political economy. Many studies have recognized the legacies of colonialism and capitalist expansion but fewer have examined the complex history of the linkages between the formation of the Westphalian state system, the development of European capitalism, Africa's own history of incorporation and the ongoing problems of state autonomy in the twenty-first century. Such a holistic historical political economy approach is absent from most explanations of governance and development issues on the continent today, leaving them incomplete and fragmented. Against this background this study aims to explore the effects of the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion on the history of Africa's incorporation into the global political economy and the implications of this history for the independence of African states in the international system today.

Research Questions

The study raised the following research questions:

I. How did the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion facilitate Africa's historical incorporation into the global political economy?

II. How has Africa's historical incorporation into the global political economy affected the autonomy of African states in the twenty-first century?

III. What strategies can strengthen state autonomy within the contemporary global political economy without undermining Africa's integration into the international system?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the historical relationship between the Westphalian State System, European capitalist expansion, and Africa's incorporation into the global political economy, with particular emphasis on their implications for state autonomy in the twenty-first century.

The specific objectives are to:

I. Examine how the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion facilitated Africa's historical incorporation into the global political economy.

II. Assess the implications of Africa's historical incorporation into the global political economy for the autonomy of African states in the twenty-first century.

III. Identify strategies capable of strengthening state autonomy while sustaining Africa's constructive engagement within the contemporary global political economy.

Westphalian State System

The term Westphalian State System is used to describe the contemporary international political system that came after the Peace of Westphalia (). It is based on the concepts of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in domestic affairs and the legal equality of states in the international system [15]. This Westphalian model was a fundamental change in the nature of international relations, and placed the sovereign territorial state as the key player in world politics. The system was important not just politically, but also because it was the institutional structure through which European states unified, went overseas and extended their power beyond their territories. In this study the Westphalian State System is seen as the political system that enabled the expansion of Europe and after that impact Africa's integration into the global political economy.

European capitalist expansion

European capitalist expansion is the historical process whereby European capitalist economies spread capitalist activities of production, trade, finance and investment outside of Europe from the 15th century onward. This expansion was primarily motivated by mercantilism but also by industrial capitalism, and led to growing demand for markets, raw materials, labour and investment opportunities abroad. It provoked the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonization and the global incorporation of non-European societies into an international capitalist system. European capitalist expansion in Africa restructured indigenous economies of the continent around resource extraction and export based production, thereby creating the structural impediment of economic dependence and unequal participation in the international economy.

Global political economy

Global political economy is the process of interplay between political power and economic processes in the international system. It explores the intergovernmental, market, international institutional, multinational corporate and global financial system aspects of wealth creation, distribution and exchange beyond state boundaries. The idea goes beyond the separation of politics and economics to recognize that global economic relations are determined by political power, institutional arrangements and historical processes. In this study, the global political economy serves as the analytical framework for exploring the ways in which Africa was incorporated into the international capitalist system and the ramifications of this historical incorporation for patterns of governance, trade and development in the present.

State autonomy

State autonomy is a government's ability to design, execute and maintain public policies without excessive outside or internal pressures. This includes the ability of the state to make political, economic and developmental choices while also effectively controlling national institutions and resources. While the African states are formally sovereign under international law, their de facto autonomy can be limited by their external economic dependence, their integration into the international financial institutions, the presence of multinational corporations and unequal integration into the international financial markets. The present study focuses on the state autonomy in the sense of the ability of African governments to pursue national development goals in the current global political economy independently.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on world-systems theory and complemented by dependency theory. The World-Systems Theory describes the development of the global political economy as a hierarchical structure with core states, semi-peripheral and peripheral states, where the economic growth of core states is maintained through unequal incorporation and exploitation of the peripheral states. This view is supported by Dependency Theory, which suggests that underdevelopment in the societies of the former colonies is not at the transitory phase of development but rather a product of history, as a result of their integration into the international capitalist exchange system, where the exchange is unequal, and they are dependent on others.

These theories are relevant to this study because they help to explain the ability for the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion to intertwine and help integrate Africa into the international political economy, and for their impact on the autonomy of African states in the twenty-first century. The analytical framework behind the World-Systems theory is useful in analyzing Africa's structural position in the international economic order while Dependency theory accounts for the failure of political independence to bring about substantive economic and policy autonomy. Both theories make sense of the historical processes that brought Africa into the international system of capitalism, and the residual limitations they have placed on state autonomy today.

2. Methodology

The qualitative historical study used in this research focuses on the historical link between the Westphalian State System and the expansion of European capitalism and how Africa has been drawn into the global political economy, and the impact of these historical processes on state autonomy in the twenty first century. The qualitative historical approach is applicable as it enables a systematic analysis of the historical events, institutional changes and political-economic changes over time, and will give a comprehensive picture of the ways in which past structures continue to impact on the present. The secondary data collection was done using peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government official publications, policy documents, reports from international organizations and reputable newspapers, among others, that are considered documentary sources. They offered historical and contemporary examples of the process of state formation, of capitalist expansion, of colonial political economy and of the changing character of African state autonomy in the global political economy.

Thematic and historical content analysis were used in analysing the data. Relevant data were systematically compiled and analysed based on the central themes that arose from the research questions, leading to a coherent analysis of the historical processes which connected the Westphalian State System, European capitalist expansion and the integration of Africa into the global political economy. The analysis was informed by the World Systems Theory and Dependency Theory which were used to analyse the historical roots of Africa's incorporation into the international capitalist system and the ongoing consequences of this historical incorporation for the autonomy of the state in the twenty-first century.

3. Results and Discussion

Historical Foundations of Africa's Incorporation into the Global Political Economy: The Role of the Westphalian State System and European Capitalist Expansion

Rather than being a random product of globalization or globalization itself, Africa's phase of incorporation into the global political economy is a product of a historically patterned relationship between the development of the Westphalian state system and the spread of European capitalism. The Peace of Westphalia () created stable political units that could mobilize resources for commerce and expansion, consolidated state power, and centralised power after the end of the Thirty Years' War. European states were consolidating their administrative, military and fiscal strength while capitalist production was growing, looking to find new sources of labour, raw materials and export markets. These developments laid foundations for mutually reinforcing political and economic systems that allowed European powers to exercise control outside Europe, and to incorporate societies outside Europe into an emerging capitalist world economy in highly unequal terms. The process of the aggregation of sovereign states and of capitalist expansion did not constitute independent developments, but complementary processes which together changed the international system and laid the institutional bases for Africa's gradual inclusion in capitalism.

Early integration in Africa came in the form of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that made millions of Africans into forced workers in order to promote capital accumulation in Europe and the Americas. There is extensive historical evidence that over twelve million Africans were forcibly moved across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries and that millions of others were captured and transported or resisted and died in the process. The history of the slave trade consistently reveals that the trade did create a lot of commercial wealth, which played a significant role in the industrialization of Europe, and that it did affect the indigenous political systems, demography and economy of Africa. Slavery did not simply act as a humanitarian tragedy; it was a fundamental mechanism where by Africa was brought into the expanding capitalist economy as a source of labour which was vital to the capitalist accumulation of capital in Europe. Empirical evidence also shows that areas most heavily involved in the slave trade have weaker institutions and lower economic performance than more lightly affected areas, suggesting that the effects of slave trade are long-lasting.

The end of the slave trade did not end Africa's incorporation into European capitalism but rather changed the way in which it was achieved. Industrialization created a growing European demand for agricultural commodities, minerals and strategic resources, which led to a greater expansion of colonies in the 1800s. This transformation was institutionalized at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) which legitimized the partition of Africa between European powers without the presence of Africans and their consent. Later, colonial governments restructured African economies to focus on extractives, export farming, taxation, and the labor mobilization to meet the demand of the metropolitan industry, rather than development goals. Official colonial records, along with economic histories and comparative studies of political economics, all show that the railways, roads, ports and administrative institutions were deliberately created to support resource extraction and international trade, not national integration and development. As a result, colonial administration institutionalised economic systems that remained dependent, with economic diversification limited to a few industries, and economic exchange relations unequal, persisting after 'formal' independence.

The African's involvement in the world political economy also had an impact on the political institutions, as the Westphalian system of territorial sovereignty was transplanted onto the African soil. Colonial governance was characterized by centralized forms of administration, by territorial boundaries, and by European laws, institutions and judicial procedures. Independence re-established the states' juridical autonomy but the inherited institutions had maintained their external administrative logic, and remained part of an international economic system dominated by industrial economies. The post-independence governments thus joined the international system as "formally sovereign" states but whose economies were totally dominated by commodity export, foreign capital, external technology and international financial institutions. The disproportionate share of primary commodity earnings in exports for many African economies remains a concern, as evidenced by the latest UNCTAD () data. Likewise, data from the World Bank () show that many African states still depend on external finance, including development assistance, to fund public investment, which shows that the structures of dependence on external finance, including on development assistance were established during the colonial integration of the states.

These historical roots remain relevant today, as evidenced by some contemporary developments. While globalization has spread the nature of Africa's foreign relations, the continent has largely integrated into global value chains, with most of its external relations and activities being oriented towards raw material exports and manufacturing goods and advanced technologies imports. Leaders of the African Union, the African Export-Import Bank and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development have made high-profile remarks over the past several years regarding Africa's continued lack of engagement in higher value production, and how it continues to limit industrial transformation and economic sovereignty. The Economist (), Financial times (), and Reuters () also reported that there are still concerns about external debt, resources dependence, and geopolitical rivalry between western countries and China in the continent. These new realities only serve to strengthen the view of the world-systems theorists that the integration of Africa into the global political economy is still governed by historical structures that developed as a result of the interaction of the Westphalian political system and European capitalist expansion. These processes are not just a series of historical occurrences but ongoing, which create patterns of production, trade, governance and international economic relations that define Africa's current situation in the global political economy.

State Autonomy in the Twenty-First Century: Implications of Africa's Historical Incorporation into the Global Political Economy

The question of Africa's role in the global political economy remains to be a powerful determinant of the autonomy of African states in the twenty-first century. Politically independent, African countries still have many inherited features of colonial political economy which affect production, trade, finance, and decision-making processes and limit their ability to make independent decisions. The modern African state functions in an international economic system which has been designed to support external accumulation, not internal industrialization. The substantive autonomy of African governments in the choice of economic priorities, the management of development strategies and the control of national resources is therefore significantly affected by external economic factors, given that these governments have juridical sovereignty under international law. This dualism of formal sovereignty and practical autonomy is a testament to the long shadow of the unequal incorporation of Africa's own people into global capitalism.

A key symptom of restricted states' autonomy is the reliance on primary commodity exports in many African economies. Although Africa is in a stage of political independence, it still heavily trades with crude oil, minerals, agricultural products and other raw materials, and imports a significant share of manufactured products and advanced technologies. Commodity dependent economies are more exposed to price variations in international markets, which hampers governments' ability to make stable economic decisions and formulate long-term industrial policies, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reports. The World Bank () also notes that external commodity shocks persist to negatively impact macroeconomic stability in a number of African countries. Such structural factors limit the flexibility of policy, leading the governments to focus on domestic economic priorities based on external market-driven rather than development-based goals. The same pattern is still recognized today as a hallmark of dependent integration into the world economy.

The policy autonomy of African states has been further restricted by financial dependence on the outside. In the era of debt crises of the 1980s, many governments have depended on the multilateral lending institutions and international financial markets as a source of funding for their development programmes and for stabilising their economies. Though the external funding sources have been vital, they have often come with policy strings attached such as fiscal austerity, privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization and restructuring the public sector of the economy. SAPs deployed in many African countries fundamentally transformed the process of economic governance at the national level by limiting the discretionary power of governments over expenditures and social welfare programmes, industrial policy and public sector spending. Recently, sovereign debt concerns have also made a comeback, as the International Monetary Fund () and the World Bank () have reported that debt service requirements remain a limitation on fiscal space in several economies in Africa. African Development Bank executive speeches have also highlighted that high debts constrain government budgets to invest in infrastructure, industrialization, health care and education and impact on its economic sovereignty and development power.

The rise of multinationals is another example of the lack of autonomy of the state in the present-day global political economy. Multinational corporations typically have more financial capacity, technological skills, and bargaining power than do many host governments in some sectors, like petroleum, mining, telecommunications, and agribusiness. In African countries with ample resources, tax negotiations, production sharing agreements, environmental laws, and local content policies often exhibit a high degree of asymmetrical relations between the state and global corporations. The governance issues around wrongful financial flows, tax avoidance, lack of transparency in contracts and resource governance continue to appear in the reports of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative () and the African Natural Resources Centre (). It's not as though there hasn't been continued debate over foreign corporate influence in strategic industries in Africa as highlighted in investigative reports from Reuters (), Financial Times (), and The Economist (). These facts indicate that the role of the state is not completely superseded by economic globalization, although it has changed the situation under which the state functions, and governments are forced to face more complex relations with powerful economic transnational actors.

The new realities of geopolitical competition have also created old and new opportunities and limits for African state autonomy. Africa has not only expanded its external partners, but it has diversified its partnerships beyond a reliance on Western economies in a move towards China as a major stakeholder in its future development with involvement through infrastructure financing, trade and investment. At the same time, the United States, the European Union, Russia, India, Turkey and the Gulf States are all renewing their strategic engagement with the continent, making for a renewed geopolitical competition. The multipolar nature of this environment may give African governments more choice in their foreign policy and economic ties, but some scholars have questioned the significance of this environment as a genuine diversification of diplomatic and economic relations, while others claim it is merely a reshaping of historical dependency relations. African Union and the Secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) consistently state that the strengthening of the intra-African Trade, the regional industrialisation and continental value chains are critical to alleviate excessive reliance on external markets. The implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which is a crucial step in integrating the continent more closely, is an effort to boost the continent's collective bargaining power and increase the level of economic autonomy.

Nevertheless, evidence does not indicate that there is total absence of agency on the part of African States. Comparative experiences from countries like Botswana, Rwanda, Mauritius and now, more than ever, Ethiopia show that state capacity can be extended despite globalization, even by implementing effective institutions, strategic industrial policies, prudent resource governance, and regional economic cooperation. But these achievements are the exception to the rule on the continent. While the findings suggest that African states remain highly dependent on the global political economy and that the continent's economic, monetary, and geopolitical integration are unevenly distributed, the study also shows that historical engagement with the global political economy continues to have an impact on the autonomy of African states in ways that involve the replication of economic and financial dependency, unequal market integration, and external policy influence. While globalization of the present has created new actors and opportunities, the structures which were laid down through the relationship between the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion continue to shape the boundaries and scope of state autonomy in the 21st century.

Strengthening State Autonomy within the Contemporary Global Political Economy: Pathways for Africa in the Twenty-First Century

There is no need for Africa to detach itself from globalization to strengthen state autonomy within the global political economy but, instead, strategic restructuring of its engagement with the international political and economic institutions of the global political economy. In recent years, much research has challenged the absolute economic self-sufficiency as an achievable and desirable goal in a globalized world with deep global production networks, global flows of capital and goods, and global trade regimes. Rather, the key to achieving a meaningful level of state autonomy lies in the ability of government to design and execute national development strategies and policies, and to interact in constructive ways with international markets and institutions. This is in contrast to the earlier dependency arguments calling for disengagement from the capitalist world economy and more in line with the developmental state literature which tried to shift the focus of attention towards strategic intervention by the state, institutional capacity and selective integration into the global economy. Thus, it is essential to transform the institutions in order to increase the autonomy of African states while improving their policy capacity, while simultaneously not excluding them from international economic opportunities.

Economic diversification and industrial transformation is a key route to autonomy. The reliance on primary commodity exports has left Africa's economies vulnerable to external price fluctuations, global demand and supply dynamics, and insufficient value addition. The recent evidence shows that countries with diversified productive structures are more resilient to shocks, and have more policy flexibility in addressing national development goals. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in its various reports have repeatedly emphasised industrialisation, growth of manufacturing, technological innovation and value chain development as important measures to address structural dependence. Likewise, the African Development Bank's statements by its executives keep focusing on industrialization as the key way for achieving economic sovereignty, job creation and sustainable development. African economies are no longer just raw materials exporters, but must undergo structural transformation that can increase domestic production, technological capabilities, and manufacturing networks in the region.

Another crucial avenue of increasing the autonomy of states in the global political economy is regional integration. Many African economies have relatively weak negotiating power in the areas of international trade and investment. Overall, the economic integration of the continent significantly improves Africa's ability to obtain better commercial terms of trade and minimize over-dependency on external markets. AfCFTA is one of the most ambitious institutional responses to these challenges in the history of Africa which aims to expand intra-African trade, promote industrial cooperation, regional value chains and market integration. According to World Bank () estimates, four key outcomes of the AfCFTA—a significant boost in intra-African trade, lower transaction costs, industrial development and better regional competitiveness—could substantially strengthen the economies of the region. The AfCFTA Secretariat's public statements also highlight that the integration process should not just be about trade but also about the capacity of Africa as a whole to become more assertive as an economic player in the world's increasingly competitive economic landscape.

Good governance and institutional quality continue to be vital to the attainment of meaningful autonomy by the states. History reveals that sovereignty is not enough for development success, but how well states' institutions function determines how well they can make coherent policy decisions, control markets, mobilize domestic resources, and negotiate economic relationships with others from a position of relative strength. Corruption, weak regulatory institutions, inadequate bureaucratic capacity, illicit financial flows and governance failures remain significant challenges in several African countries, with their impact on national goals of development ongoing. The need for institutional development, improving public sector efficiency, effective regulation and accountability has been repeatedly highlighted by the United Nations Development Programme () and World Bank () as the necessary pre-conditions for sustainable economic transformation. Hence the strengthening of governance institutions continues to be the building block of the operational space of the African states in today's international system.

Also, external partnerships need to be strategically recalibrated. The rise of China, India, Turkey, the Gulf States and the rest of the non-Western world has made Africa's economic relations with the traditional Western partners more interesting and complicated. However, academics note that dependency cannot be completely eradicated through diversification unless the relationship is negotiated by governments of Africa with national development priorities in mind. Principles of coordinated diplomacy, better investment governance, technology transfer and open resource management are all key themes in recent policy statements from the African Union, African Export-Import Bank, and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development that call for increased Africa's bargaining power. The Economist (), Financial Times () & Reuters () also report that countries that have been able to negotiate fair investment agreements and enforce local content regulations have had more positive developmental outcomes of foreign investment than countries that have based their investment regimes on externally drawn blueprints.

Taken together, the results indicate a need for a multi-faceted approach that focuses on institutional sustainability, productive change, regional integration, and foreign policy engagement in a new and strategic way, instead of economic isolation, if state autonomy is to be strengthened in the twenty-first-century global political economy. The historical structures created by the Westphalian State System and European capitalist expansion still influence the place of Africa in the global economy, but do not completely dictate current results. The experience of countries like Botswana, Mauritius, Rwanda, and Ethiopia shows that good institutions, a clear industrial policy, effective resource management, and regional cooperation are important factors in increasing the policy space in an interdependent global system. The future of Africa's autonomy will thus be less about detaching itself from globalization but more about its ability to alter the terms by which it engages in the global political economy in order to slide from structural dependency to strategic engagement and negotiated interdependence.

Discussion of Findings

Historical Foundations of Africa's Incorporation into the Global Political Economy

The results show that the linkage of the Westphalian State System with the European capitalist expansion is the determining factor of the incorporation of Africa into the global political economy. The Westphalian system of nation-states and the right to territorial sovereignty and imperial expansion was rooted in European political and legal systems, whereas European capitalism was able to offer the economic motivations that incentivised the exploitation of African labour, resources and markets. As a result, the process of integrating Africa in the global economy took place in an unequal manner, creating dependency, externalization of production and extractive forms of government, which are still present today, post-colonialism.

Learner's outcomes for State Autonomy in the 21st Century

The study concludes that while African states have formal sovereignty with respect to international law, their substantive autonomy is limited due to historical trends of economic dependence, commodity export orientation, external financial obligations and unequal integration into the global markets. These structural conditions persist and are continuing to constrain the ability of many states to make independent policy decisions, and to have the capacity to implement autonomous development strategies in the current global political economy.

Strategies for Strengthening State Autonomy

The findings also suggest that state autonomy can be achieved not by going against, but by going with the flow of the global economy. The strengthening of domestic institutions, industrialization and economic diversification, deepening regional integration, and negotiation of external partnerships from a strengthened position of institutional capacity are foundational paths for building Africa's policy space and boosting its institutional capacity to secure sustainable and self-determined development in the twenty-first century.

4. Conclusion

This study has focussed on the historical interdependencies of the Westphalian State System, the European capitalist expansion and the integration of Africa into the global political economy, whilst demonstrating the implications of these historical processes for the autonomous role of the State in the 21st century. The results show that integration into the global political economy process in Africa is not a process of voluntary involvement in international relations, but the product of a historical process of formation of European states, capitalist expansion in Africa, imperial conquest and colonial rule. These processes built into global capitalist institutions colonial and extractive political and economic systems which linked African economies to the global capitalist world on unequal terms. The study argues that the structures of the colonial political economy have left a lasting imprint on the dependency patterns of today's African states, even though they have regained their juridical sovereignty as a result of decolonization. This has limited the policy space of many African countries, reducing their ability to define their own national development agenda, and has limited the sovereign control of their economies, with the aid from international economic institutions, multinational capital and external finance being controlled by external actors. Persistent dependency on primary commodity exports, external finance, multinational capital and international economic institutions has reduced the policy space of many African countries, limiting their ability to set their own policy priorities and their capacity to control their economies with external actors controlling the aid from international economic institutions, the external finance and the multinational capital. As a result, structural barriers still limit the exercise of sovereignty in many parts of Africa, these forces being inherent in the current global political economy. The study also finds that to strengthen state autonomy, there is no need for disengagement from the global economy, but rather a strategic reconfiguration of the way in which Africa engages the global economy. Increased institutional capacity, more economic diversification, increased regional integration, and improved Africa's voice in the global economic governance are all critical for substantive state autonomy and sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

References

[1] D. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. New York, NY, USA: Crown Publishers, 2012.

[2] African Development Bank, *African Economic Outlook 2024*. Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: African Development Bank, 2024.

[3] African Export-Import Bank, *African Trade Report 2024*. Cairo, Egypt: Afreximbank, 2024.

[4] African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union, 2023.

[5] C. Ake, *A Political Economy of Africa*. London, U.K.: Longman, 1981.

[6] C. Alden, *China in Africa*. London, U.K.: Zed Books, 2007.

[7] S. Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*. New York, NY, USA: Monthly Review Press, 1976.

[8] S. Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. London, U.K.: Zed Books, 1990.

[9] G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London, U.K.: Verso, 1994.

[10] D. Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[11] P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688–2015*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2014.

[12] F. H. Cardoso and E. Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press, 1979.

[13] C. Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[14] P. Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1995.

[15] Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, *EITI Progress Report 2023*. Oslo, Norway: Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 2023.