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Protectionism Versus Liberalism in International Trade: Navigating Policy Choices for Africa's Sustainable Economic Development

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Abstract:

This study examines the ongoing debate between protectionism and liberalism in international trade, focusing on their implications for Africa's economic development. African nations face the dual challenge of fostering domestic industries while integrating into the global economy, making the choice between protectionist and liberal trade policies crucial for sustainable growth. Protectionism, often employed to safeguard nascent industries, can foster short-term industrial development but risks inefficiency and market isolation if overextended. Conversely, trade liberalism promotes competition, foreign direct investment (FDI), and integration into global value chains, yet it may expose vulnerable industries to overwhelming foreign competition. Countries can choose to implement more liberal or protectionist policies. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a hybrid approach, offering trade liberalization within Africa while allowing flexibility to protect strategic sectors. Using a blend of recent literature and case studies, this study explores how a balanced trade policy—combining selective protectionism with elements of liberalism—can enhance industrial growth, innovation, and competitiveness across in African economies. The study underscores that no single approach; protectionism or liberalism is universally applicable or inherently bad; rather, trade policies should be tailored to each country's unique economic context and development stage. Furthermore, African nations should adopt a protectionist stance initially to safeguard emerging industries and develop their competitiveness before pursuing a liberal approach to world trade. Alternatively, they could adopt a protectionist stance in certain economic sectors while maintaining a liberal stance in others to maintain competitiveness in those vital sectors that are crucial to Africa's development. Ultimately, AfCFTA presents a viable framework for advancing Africa's economic integration and positioning the continent more strategically in global trade.

Keywords:

Protectionism, Liberalism, AfCFTA, Africa, Trade Policy, Economic Development, Global Trade, Industrialization.

1. Introduction

International trade has established itself as a dependable and essential source of national wealth since the establishment of nation states. The expansion of every country's economy is greatly aided by the important economic activity of international trade. An increasing amount of goods and services are moving over national borders in international trade, which has increased exponentially since the mercantile capitalist system was established in the sixteenth century(Orinya, 2023).It is a mistake to approach international commerce exclusively as an economic issue that can and should be separated from politics, as trade not only influences our economy but also the type of world, we live in. Trade's far-reaching effects force each and every one of us to make important decisions. Before passing judgment on the decidedly contentious matters surrounding trade policy, the public has to be aware of these ramifications. Furthermore, until we thoroughly consider the effects of our own actions, we are unable to even make wise purchasing decisions. The individual driving forces behind international trade are well-known: consumers want to purchase goods from abroad that are superior to or less expensive than those made domestically in order to raise their level of living materially; exporting their goods helps producers make more money and profit. The majority of policymakers think that since trade benefits both the person and the country as well as the global economy, governments should support it. Similarly, Corporations make earnings, create jobs for workers, and receive revenue from exports that may be utilized to buy imports, because consumers can get goods that are unavailable from domestic sources and more for their money, imports are perceived to improve the welfare (well-being) of the populace. International trade is seen to have the capacity to engender better economy and may contribute to the state's rising stature and influence in international affairs. Furthermore, the mutual wealth and interdependence that result among nations may promote international collaboration and uphold peace.

Africa's economic landscape is characterized by a diverse mix of challenges and opportunities. Despite significant strides in economic development, the continent remains largely reliant on the export of raw materials and is often vulnerable to external shocks such as fluctuating commodity prices and global economic downturns. In this context, trade policy plays a critical role in determining the pace and trajectory of Africa's development. The debate between **protectionism**and**liberalism**in international trade is central to discussions on how Africa can best harness its resources and engage with the global economy to promote sustainable growth. **Protectionism**, which involves the use of tariffs, import quotas, and other trade barriers to protect domestic industries from foreign competition, has historically been adopted by many African countries. It is seen as a means to nurture nascent industries, safeguard jobs, and reduce dependency on imports. Proponents argue that, without protection, domestic industries may be unable to compete with established foreign firms, leading to deindustrialization and unemployment (Rodrik, 2018). On the other hand, **trade liberalism**, which advocates for minimal restrictions on international trade, has been promoted as a pathway to economic integration, innovation, and access to global markets. It encourages competition, drives efficiency, and attracts foreign direct investment (FDI), which is crucial for infrastructure and industrial development in many African nations (UNCTAD, 2023). The choice between protectionism and liberalism is not clear-cut, particularly for African economies, which are at different stages of development and face unique challenges. While protectionist policies may be beneficial in the short term to develop local industries, over-reliance on such measures can stifle competition, increase costs for consumers, and hinder technological advancement. Conversely, embracing full liberalism without adequate safeguards may expose domestic industries to overwhelming competition, potentially leading to job losses and reduced economic sovereignty (Ossa, 2021).

Liberals and protectionists have been engaged in a protracted discussion about international trade. Since the publication of "The Wealth of Nations," in 1776 by Adam Smith, industrialized nations have championed a campaign that centers on rejecting protectionism and enthroning liberalism. The ensuing divide between the two dominant trade regimes reflects the different viewpoints of developing and industrialized countries. Industrialized Western capitalist nations prefer the liberal practice of free trade, while less developed nations frequently support trade restrictions. When the Cold War ended, the majority of people believed that liberalism's triumph had resolved the debate between open and closed economies.As a result of central planning's collapse, market-directed capitalism emerged as the prevailing paradigm (Greenspan, 2001). However, according to Orinya (2023), the US-China trade war has rekindled the debate on free and restricted trade policies, challenging the canonization of liberalism. The US and China's unilateral actions undermine the WTO's powers and highlight the influence of politics and power on demand and supply forces.

The establishment of trade regulatory bodies such as the General Agreement onTariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947 which metamorphosed into the World Trade Organization (WTO)in 1994 underscores the need to regulate the conduct of internationaltrade regardless of its identified positive impacts and enumerated above on individuals, corporates and economies and it goes to show that the effect or influence of international trade goes beyond its economic impact but has huge political undertone. Unfortunately, the two international trade regulatory bodies have mainly promoted the enthronement of free market order in international trade without regards to other factors that bothers on the political economy of nations. The premise that there is a connection between national economic growth and the free market has helped the WTO to elevate the liberal doctrineto becoming accepted as the global best practice. As a prerequisite for growth and development, countries are encouraged to open uptheir borders to the unrestricted flow of commodities and services. This advice contradicts the fact that, in order to safeguard domestic industries, developing nations must place particular limitations on the flow of products and services.

In recent years, the creation of the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** has shifted the discourse on trade policy across the continent. AfCFTA, which aims to create a single market for goods and services across Africa, represents a significant step toward regional integration. It has the potential to increase intra-African trade by over 50%, reduce tariffs, and create a market of over 1.3 billion people with a combined GDP of $3.4 trillion (African Union, 2022). The agreement offers a middle ground between protectionism and liberalism by promoting trade liberalization within the continent while allowing countries to protect strategic sectors (World Bank, 2020). By harmonizing trade policies, AfCFTA seeks to boost industrialization, foster innovation, and enhance Africa's global competitiveness. Furthermore, recent literature highlights the need for a balanced approach to trade policy in Africa. According to **Baldwin and Evenett (2020),** developing economies that adopt a mix of selective protectionism and liberalism—often referred to as **strategicliberalization**—tend to experience sustained economic growth. This approach allows countries to open up specific sectors to global competition while protecting emerging industries that need time to grow and become competitive.

Given the diverse economic conditions across Africa, it is essential to carefully consider which trade policies are most appropriate for each country's unique context. This study explores the imperatives of protectionism and liberalism in Africa's economic development through international trade, focusing on how these approaches can contribute to sustainable growth and competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world. This paper is a contribution to the continuing discussion over the role of developing nations—particularly those in Africa—in international trade. It does this by challenging the fundamental ideas of liberalism and protectionism in order to get at its goal. Furthermore, this paper tried to conceptualize international trade and provide the supporting theoretical background to the two dominant trade policies; protectionism and liberalism in the second section. In section three, it looked at how liberalism and protectionism have affected international commerce. In section four, it discussed the policy implications of liberalism and protectionism for Africa. In section five, proposals and conclusions are provided.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Structure

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1 Protectionism

Protectionism refers to economic policies and measures taken by governments to shield their domestic industries from foreign competition. These policies are often implemented through tariffs, import quotas, subsidies, and non-tariff barriers (NTBs), such as regulations or standards that make importing goods more difficult or expensive. Protectionism is aimed at safeguarding local businesses, jobs, and industries, but it also has broader implications for trade relations, economic efficiency, and consumer welfare. Protectionism is a double-edged sword. While it can provide temporary relief for domestic industries and protect jobs, its long-term effects often include higher consumer prices, inefficiencies, and retaliatory trade actions. The global economy, built on interconnectedness and free trade, generally benefits more from open markets than from protectionist policies. The challenge for governments is to strike a balance between protecting national interests and promoting economic growth through free and fair trade.
The rise of globalization in recent decades has led to a significant reduction in trade barriers and the growth of free trade agreements. However, the resurgence of protectionism, particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and amid rising populist movements, poses a threat to global trade. Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have adopted more protectionist stances, leading to concerns about the future of international trade cooperation.Protectionism tends to reduce global trade volumes, which can slow economic growth, particularly for developing countries that rely heavily on exports. Trade restrictions can also disrupt global supply chains, increase production costs, and reduce the efficiency of international markets. According to the World Trade Organization (2021), protectionist measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these challenges by limiting the flow of essential goods, such as medical supplies and vaccines.Despite these concerns, proponents of protectionism argue that it can be used strategically to promote national interests, such as preserving jobs or protecting key industries. However, many economists advocate for free trade, arguing that the long-term benefits of open markets—such as increased efficiency, innovation, and lower prices—outweigh the short-term gains of protectionism (Autor et al., 2013).

The tools of protectionism include tariffs, import quotas, subsidies, non-tariff barriers etc. Tariffs are taxes imposed on imported goods. By making foreign products more expensive, tariffs are intended to encourage consumers to buy domestically produced goods. For example, a country might impose tariffs on steel imports to protect its domestic steel industry from cheaper foreign competition (Krugman, Obstfeld, & Melitz, 2018).Import quotas set a physical limit on the quantity of a particular good that can be imported during a specified time period. This restriction helps protect local industries by preventing an oversupply of cheaper foreign goods in the domestic market.Governments may provide financial support to domestic industries in the form of subsidies. These subsidies reduce production costs for domestic producers, allowing them to compete more effectively against foreign competitors. For instance, agricultural subsidies in the European Union and the United States have been used to protect local farmers from global competition (World Trade Organization, 2021).NTBs include regulatory measures such as stringent safety or environmental standards, customs procedures, and licensing requirements. While NTBs may serve legitimate purposes, they can also be used as protectionist tools by making it difficult for foreign companies to comply with the rules, thereby limiting imports (Baldwin, 2016).

Protectionism has some advantages as well as disadvantages; Protectionist policies provide a shield for fledgling or struggling industries that may not be able to compete with well-established international firms. This is particularly important in developing economies where infant industries need time to grow and achieve economies of scale. Without protection, these industries might be driven out of the market by more efficient foreign competitors (Krugman et al., 2018).By limiting imports, protectionism can help preserve jobs in domestic industries that might otherwise be threatened by cheaper foreign labor. For example, protectionist measures in the U.S. automobile industry have been credited with saving jobs in the face of competition from Japanese and European car manufacturers (Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2013).Some industries, such as defense, energy, and technology, are considered vital to national security. Protectionism can ensure that these critical industries are not dependent on foreign imports, reducing the risk of supply disruptions in times of crisis (Baldwin, 2016).Protectionism can help developing countries diversify their economies by fostering industrialization. By shielding domestic industries from foreign competition, governments can nurture sectors like manufacturing and technology, which are essential for long-term economic growth (World Bank, 2018).

On the other hand, one of the main drawbacks of protectionism is that it raises the cost of imported goods, leading to higher prices for consumers. In a protected market, consumers may have fewer choices and pay more for lower-quality products compared to those available in global markets (Krugman et al., 2018).Protectionism can trigger retaliation from trading partners, leading to trade wars. For example, when the U.S. imposed tariffs on steel imports in 2018, the European Union, China, and other countries responded with tariffs on U.S. goods. This kind of retaliatory cycle can escalate tensions and reduce global trade, harming all involved economies (World Trade Organization, 2021).Protectionist policies can lead to inefficient resource allocation by encouraging the production of goods that a country does not produce efficiently. In the long run, this can reduce overall economic productivity. For instance, protecting uncompetitive industries through tariffs may encourage businesses to rely on government support rather than investing in innovation and efficiency (Baldwin, 2016).Over time, industries that are shielded from competition may become complacent and less innovative. Without the pressure to improve efficiency, quality, and cost-effectiveness, protected industries may fall behind global competitors, making it harder for them to compete when protectionist measures are eventually removed (Krugman et al., 2018).

2.1.2 Case Studies of African Nations Using Protectionist Policies

Several African nations have used protectionist policies at different times to promote economic growth, protect local industries, and build self-reliant economies. Few notable examples of these countries are discussed as follows;

1. **Nigeria's Automotive Policy:** Nigeria has a long history of using protectionist policies to promote its local industries, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing.One of the notable examples of protectionism in Africa is Nigeria's **automotive policy**, introduced in 2013 to

encourage local car assembly plants and reduce reliance on imports.. The Nigerian government implemented high tariffs on imported vehicles, with rates as high as 70% on fully built-up units (FBUs), to encourage local vehicle production and assembly (Ogbonnaya, 2018). The policy aimed to develop Nigeria's automotive sector by attracting foreign car manufacturers to establish local assembly plants. Companies like **Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing**, Nigeria's first indigenous carmaker, have benefited from these protectionist measures.In the short term, the policy helped create jobs and attracted investment from international car manufacturers such as Nissan and Peugeot, who established assembly plants in Nigeria. However, the high cost of imported components and the absence of robust local supply chains limited the competitiveness of Nigerian-assembled vehicles. Critics argue that while protectionism protected local manufacturers, it also led to higher vehicle prices for consumers, reduced market access to affordable cars, and encouraged smuggling of cheaper used vehicles from neighboring countries (Adenikinju, 2019).Alade (023) reported that "The Nigerian government recently approved a new 10-year National Automotive Industry Development Plan (NAIDP) that would span 2023 and 2033 aimed at providing a legal framework for the development of a competitive and sustainable automotive industry in Nigeria".

Nigeria's Agricultural Policy: In 2015, the government implemented a ban on the importation of certain food items like rice and poultry to boost local production. This was part of a broader policy aimed at achieving food security and promoting local agriculture. Although the policy led to increased local production of rice, it also faced criticism due to rising food prices and smuggling.

2. **South Africa's Industrial Development Zones (IDZs):**South Africa has used protectionism strategically to promote its manufacturing sector, particularly through the establishment of **Industrial Development Zones (IDZs)**. These zones offer incentives such as tax breaks, subsidies, and tariff reductions on imported inputs for manufacturers. In sectors like automotive, steel, and textiles, the government implemented protective tariffs to shield local industries from foreign competition while also encouraging export-oriented production. In the automotive sector, protectionist policies like the **Automotive Production and Development Programme (APDP)**have helped South Africa become a major vehicle exporter. Companies like BMW and Toyota have benefitted from these policies, creating jobs and fostering local value chains. However, the long-term challenge remains ensuring that South African manufacturers can compete globally without reliance on government protection (Black &Bhanisi, 2020).
3. **Ethiopia**: Ethiopia is one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa, and the government has actively used protectionist policies to foster industrialization.Ethiopia has used high tariffs and import restrictions to protect its infant industries, especially in textiles, apparel, and manufacturing. This has allowed local industries to grow and reduce reliance on imports. However, critics argue that the lack of competition may slow down innovation and efficiency over time. More so, until recently, Ethiopia maintained a state monopoly on its telecommunications industry, barring foreign companies from entering the market. This was part of a broader policy to maintain control over critical sectors and ensure revenues stayed within the country. In 2020, the government started liberalizing the sector, but protectionism has allowed the state to invest heavily in infrastructure without competition.
4. **Kenya**:Kenya has also employed protectionist policies, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing.The government has protected the local sugar industry by imposing tariffs on

imported sugar, which is a key part of its agriculture sector. This was intended to support local farmers and sugar producers who struggled to compete with cheaper imported sugar. However, these policies have led to inefficiencies in the sector and higher sugar prices for consumers.Kenya has also imposed restrictions on imports to promote its local manufacturing industries. For instance, it has introduced local content requirements in various sectors like construction and infrastructure, ensuring that a portion of goods used in projects must be sourced locally.

2.1.3 Liberalism in International Trade

Liberalism, in the context of international trade, refers to an economic philosophy that advocates for free markets, open borders and minimal government intervention in the exchange of goods and services between countries which can lead to economic growth, efficiency, and global cooperation. Rooted in classical economic theories developed by thinkers like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, liberalism promotes the idea that when countries engage in trade freely, without significant barriers such as tariffs or quotas, both sides benefit from increased efficiency, innovation, and prosperity. While the concept has evolved over centuries, it remains central to modern trade policies.

The principles of free trade, comparative advantage, and multilateralism have shaped the modern global economy, fostering unprecedented levels of trade and development. However, liberalism is not without its critics. Concerns about inequality, environmental degradation, and the decline of domestic industries have sparked debates about the limits of free trade and the need for more balanced approaches. Despite these challenges, liberalism remains a dominant force in shaping international trade policies today.Liberalism, while facing challenges, continues to shape the future of global trade. The rise of regional trade agreements like the AfCFTA and CPTPP suggests that countries are still committed to reducing barriers and promoting cooperation, albeit on a more regional scale. Additionally, the WTO, despite its difficulties in reaching consensus among its members, remains an important institution for resolving trade disputes and setting global standards.However, liberalism's future will likely involve a more nuanced approach. As issues like environmental sustainability, digital trade, and supply chain resilience come to the fore, trade policies may evolve to incorporate a broader set of goals beyond mere economic efficiency. This includes aligning trade with climate action, labor rights, and fair competition in the digital economy.

The key principles of liberalism in global trade include free trade, comparative advantage, minimal government intervention, **multilateralism and trade agreements**, etc. The cornerstone of liberalism in international trade is the belief that unrestricted trade between nations allows for the most efficient allocation of resources. Each country can specialize in producing the goods and services for which it has a comparative advantage—the ability to produce at a lower opportunity cost than others. This specialization leads to increased global output and economic growth. As Adam Smith famously stated in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), "It is the maxim of every prudent master of a family never to attempt to make at home what it will cost him more to make than to buy."David Ricardo expanded on Smith's ideas by introducing the concept of comparative advantage. Ricardo argued that even if a country can produce everything more efficiently than another, it should still specialize in the goods it produces most efficiently. By doing so, and trading with other countries, all parties can gain from trade. This concept underscores liberalism's emphasis on specialization and trade as engines for economic progress (Ricardo, 1817).

Liberalism calls for minimal interference by governments in trade, advocating against tariffs, import quotas, and subsidies that distort market dynamics. Instead, it promotes free markets, where prices are determined by supply and demand. According to liberal economists, when governments impose protectionist measures, they artificially alter market outcomes, leading to inefficiencies and a misallocation of resources (Krugman, Obstfeld, & Melitz, 2018).Liberalism also encourages the establishment of international institutions and agreements to promote free trade. Institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and agreements like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) are rooted in liberal principles, aiming to reduce trade barriers and create a level playing field for all nations. These agreements foster cooperation and resolve trade disputes peacefully, contributing to global stability.

Liberalism also offers some benefits ininternational trade such as increased economic efficiency, lower consumer prices, economic growth and development, peace and cooperation etc. By allowing countries to specialize in what they produce best, liberal trade policies increase overall economic efficiency. Resources—such as labor, capital, and technology—are allocated where they can be used most effectively, boosting productivity and growth.Free trade allows consumers to access a wider variety of goods and services at lower prices. By reducing trade barriers, liberalism opens up markets to global competition, which drives innovation and reduces production costs. For example, globalization has made electronics, clothing, and other consumer goods more affordable for people around the world (Krugman et al., 2018).Countries that embrace liberal trade policies often experience faster economic growth. By integrating into the global economy, developing countries can attract foreign investment, access new technologies, and create jobs. This, in turn, helps lift people out of poverty and fosters economic development. East Asian countries, like South Korea and China, provide examples of how trade liberalization can drive rapid industrialization and development (World Bank, 2018).Liberalism argues that free trade fosters peace by creating economic interdependence between nations. Countries that trade with each other are less likely to engage in conflict because they have a mutual interest in maintaining stable and prosperous relations. This idea, sometimes called "commercial peace theory," suggests that economic ties can promote political cooperation and reduce the likelihood of war (Keohane & Nye, 1989).

2.1.4 Case Studies of Successful Trade Liberalization Efforts in Africa

Trade liberalization in Africa has been a crucial strategy for enhancing economic growth, encouraging regional integration, and improving global competitiveness. A few prominent case studies illustrate the impact of successful trade liberalization efforts on the continent.

1. Mauritius: **Mauritius is often highlighted as a prime example of successful trade liberalization. In the 1970s and 1980s, the country transitioned from a sugar-based monoculture to a diversified economy that included textiles, tourism, and financial services. The government implemented policies to open up the economy, including reducing trade barriers, establishing export processing zones (EPZs), and encouraging foreign direct investment. The result was rapid economic growth, rising incomes, and poverty reduction. Today, Mauritius has one of the highest per capita incomes in Africa.**
2. Ghana: **In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ghana undertook significant trade liberalization reforms as part of its Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) supported by the World Bank and IMF. The government reduced tariffs, removed import licensing requirements, and allowed the exchange rate to float. While the reforms were initially painful, with high inflation and unemployment, over time, Ghana's economy stabilized and started to grow. By the 2000s, it was seen as a relatively successful example of liberalization in West Africa, particularly with its growing exports of cocoa, gold, and oil.**
3. Rwanda: **Rwanda's post-genocide economic transformation is another example of how trade liberalization can contribute to growth. The government has worked to open the economy, encourage investment, and reduce barriers to trade. Rwanda is now one of the easiest places to do business in Africa, according to the World Bank's Doing Business rankings. It has diversified its exports to include coffee, tea, and increasingly, tourism and tech services. Trade liberalization, combined with strong governance and investment in infrastructure, has helped Rwanda achieve high rates of growth in recent years.**
4. South Africa: **Post-apartheid South Africa implemented a range of trade liberalization policies in the 1990s and early 2000s, including lowering tariffs, removing quotas, and signing trade agreements with major global partners. The country became part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and pursued stronger ties with the European Union, China, and other emerging markets. Trade liberalization helped integrate South Africa more fully into the global economy, with key sectors like manufacturing and mining benefiting from improved export opportunities.**
5. Kenya: **Kenya's trade liberalization has been more gradual but has produced some success, particularly in agricultural exports like tea, coffee, and flowers. Since the 1990s, Kenya has been reducing tariffs, simplifying its trade policies, and investing in trade infrastructure like the Port of Mombasa. It is also a key player in the East African Community (EAC), which has worked to reduce trade barriers between member countries. As a result, Kenya has become a regional trading hub, attracting investment and growing its export sector.**

2.1.5 The Case for Protectionism in International Trade

The characteristics of international trade have traditionally been determined by liberalism and protectionism. Protectionism is characterized by trade restriction which refers to the use of barriers (tariff and non-tariff) by states to limit trade flows between them and other nations. The core tenet of the mercantile theory of trade is that maintaining a trade surplus is more advantageous for a country (Girma, 2017). This is accomplished by increasing exports and decreasing imports in order to safeguard domestic industry. In severe situations where nations engage in a trade war, these procedures are also used, they include quota which means physical restriction in the number of products and services that can enter a country, tariffs which are direct levies imposed on imports. The employment of these restraints, rules, regulations, and strict standards or specifications are some examples of non-tariff obstacles and they are all instruments of a Protectionist trade policy.

Countries impose various forms of trade restrictions for strategic reasons. Usually, this may be required to correct trade imbalances, safeguard local industries, preserve domestic jobs, exert political pressure, preserve culture, and stop dumping. It's also crucial to mention that in a trade war situation, countries would inevitably turn to protectionism tools as a weapon. The most common tactic used in trade wars is the open application of restrictive measures, particularly tariffs and quotas. A classic illustration of how countries utilize tariffs and quotas to their advantage in international trade is the trade war between the USA and China. The US's placement of high tariffs on imports from China led to the trade war. Protectionist trade philosophy has resurfaced in the last two years such with FDI restrictions and export controls in international trade. According to Sally (2008), leading developing nations like Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and India each has had genuine spurts of FDI and trade liberalization behind them. The process of liberalization has stalled in Russia. This has also occurred in other resource-rich nations like Bolivia and Venezuela that are seeing a boom in income. In general, the liberalization slowdown outside of the West has been strengthened by protectionist outbursts and a lack of transformation impetus on the part of the West.

2.1.6 The Arguments for Liberalism in International Trade

The concepts of Liberalism are directly opposed to protectionism, its goal is to remove obstacles to global trade. Liberalists core beliefs are based on the ideas of specialization and comparative advantage. Liberalism promotes the free flow of trade across national borders, it gives nations access to markets, and believes that market forces should control the flow of commodities and services in international trade. It is worthy of note that the denial of market access to developing economies has been the root of the conflict between them and the more developed, industrialized nations. The establishment of GATTin 1947 was to address this issue, though several discussions about global trade concerns, mostly as relates to the unrestricted flow of commodities and services have taken place, leading to the founding of WTOin 1994 but these institutions have only evolved mostly into anvenue for negotiating the enforcement of liberal market principles.

Critics point to a number of issues, including the shaky correlations between liberalization, openness, growth, and the reduction of poverty; the increased disparities that arise from globalization within and between nations; the negative impacts of abrupt and drastic trade liberalization in developing nations; the need for developed nations to liberalize trade while maintaining protectionism as a requirement for more flexible international regulations so that governments in developing nations can pursue specific industrial policies, particularly to support emerging industries.

Pro-liberalism policy advocates have put forward a couple of arguments in support of their liberal view of trade policy mostly for Africa development.

1. Studies indicate that countries with more open economy (liberal trade policies) experience faster growth compared to those that follow protectionist ideology.
2. Globalisation does not exclude certain developing countries, buthave provided an avenue and enabling environment which some have benefited from, arguing that what has hindered Africa nations was issues such as political disorder, macroeconomic instability, property right issues, and government interference. According to Wolf (2004); Henderson (2004), most of these

countries are cursed with dysfunctional or failed states none of which is caused by globalisation.

3. That developing-country governments are advocating for one-sided liberalisationrequesting that developed countries should liberalize areas protected against labor-intensive exports but hold on to their protectionist disposition. Critics argue that the pursuit of protectionism by developing countries tend to harm them the more than the barriers imposed by the developed world.

Notwithstanding the foregoing justifications for liberalism, the conflict between protectionism and liberalism which emerged from traditional views of international commerce between 1500 and 1800 has generated disagreements over international trade. Originating in mercantilist doctrine, protectionism promotes government control over commerce to maintain trade surpluses and aggregate national wealth. Mercantilism still exists today despite centuries of criticism, which has forced many countries to use restrictions for their own benefit. A new kind of neo-mercantilism has emerged from the interventionist aspects of mercantilism.

2.1.7 Historical Context of Protectionism and Liberalism in Africa

The history of **protectionism** and **liberalism** in Africa is deeply intertwined with the continent's colonial past, post-colonial economic strategies, and the global economic environment. African nations have experienced shifts between these two trade policies as they navigated their way through colonial exploitation, independence, globalization, and regional integration. These transitions reflect the changing priorities of African governments as they sought to balance economic independence, industrialization, and integration into the global market.

a. Colonial Era: Exploitation and Forced Liberalism

During the colonial period, African economies were shaped to serve the interests of European colonial powers. Colonies were primarily viewed as sources of **raw materials** and markets for European finished goods. As a result, colonial powers imposed **liberal trade policies** on African economies, ensuring that they remained **export-oriented** producers of raw materials such as **cotton**, **cocoa**, **coffee**, and **minerals** (Rodney, 1972). At the same time, imports of manufactured goods from Europe into Africa were encouraged, creating a dependency on foreign products.This forced liberalism restricted the development of indigenous African industries, as local production was suppressed in favor of maintaining colonial dominance over trade. Consequently, African economies became highly dependent on a few primary commodities, a legacy that persists today in many countries. **Walter Rodney** emphasized how this economic structure kept Africa from developing its own industries and left the continent vulnerable to the price fluctuations of primary commodities in global markets (Rodney, 1972).

b. Post-Independence Protectionism: Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI)

Following independence in the 1950s and 1960s, many African countries adopted **protectionist** trade policies as part of their broader economic development strategies. The desire for **economic self-sufficiency**and a move away from the colonial economic structure led to the implementation of **Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI)** policies. This strategy was based on the belief that newly independent nations needed to **protect their infant industries** from international competition to foster domestic manufacturing and reduce reliance on imported goods (Mkandawire, 2015).Under ISI, countries like **Nigeria**,**Kenya**, and **Ghana** implemented high tariffs, import quotas, and subsidies to encourage the growth of domestic industries. Governments invested in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to lead industrialization efforts, with the hope of transforming their economies from agrarian and extractive bases to more industrialized ones (Aryeetey&Moyo, 2012). These protectionist policies were largely inspired by the **infant industry theory**, which posits that nascent industries require protection until they can compete in global markets (List, 1841).However, the ISI model faced several challenges. The lack of **domestic markets**, inefficiencies in state-owned enterprises, and a shortage of skilled labor led to slow growth in many industries. Moreover, the over-reliance on imports for machinery, technology, and capital goods undermined the sustainability of these industries. By the late 1970s, many African economies were experiencing economic stagnation and **balance of payments crises**, which led to a reconsideration of protectionist policies (Mkandawire, 2015).

c. 1980s-1990s: The Shift Toward Liberalization

In the 1980s and 1990s, Africa experienced a significant shift towards **trade liberalization** as a result of **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)** imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These programs were introduced in response to the mounting debt crises and economic challenges many African nations faced after years of protectionist policies. SAPs required African countries to adopt **market-oriented reforms**, which included reducing tariffs, deregulating markets, privatizing state-owned enterprises, and liberalizing trade (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999).The move toward liberalization was based on the premise that opening up African economies to global trade would lead to **efficiency gains**, increased **foreign direct investment (FDI)**, and integration into the global economy. Proponents of trade liberalization argued that reducing barriers to trade would foster competition, lower consumer prices, and encourage export diversification (Rodrik, 2007).However, the impact of SAPs and trade liberalization was mixed. While some countries, such as **Uganda** and **Ghana**, saw improvements in macroeconomic stability and increased exports, many others experienced **deindustrialization** and rising poverty. Local industries, which had been shielded by protectionist policies, struggled to compete with cheaper imported goods, leading to the collapse of manufacturing sectors in several countries (Stiglitz, 2002). Furthermore, the removal of subsidies in critical sectors like agriculture left small-scale farmers vulnerable to global price fluctuations.

d. The 21st Century: Toward a Balanced Approach

In the 21st century, African trade policy has evolved toward a more **balanced approach** that seeks to combine elements of both **protectionism** and **liberalism**. Recognizing the need for industrialization and economic diversification, many African nations have adopted **selective protectionism** in key industries while pursuing **regional integration** and liberalizing trade within the continent. This approach aims to protect domestic industries in strategic sectors while facilitating greater trade and investment flows.One of the most significant developments in recent African trade policy is the establishment of the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**in 2021. AfCFTA aims to create a single continental market for goods and services, with free movement of businesspersons and investments across African countries (African Union, 2022). While the agreement promotes **trade liberalization** by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers, it also encourages African countries to develop **regional value chains** and protect emerging industries through **rules of origin** and other mechanisms.This hybrid model, combining both protectionist and liberal policies, reflects a growing recognition that African countries need to build **competitive domestic industries** while also integrating more deeply into global markets. Moreover, the growing focus on **intra-African trade** offers new opportunities for industrialization and economic growth, as it reduces dependency on external markets and allows African countries to trade more with each other (World Bank, 2020).

2.1.8 Protectionism vs. Liberalism: Finding the Balance

For African countries, the choice between protectionism and liberalism is not a simple binary. Both approaches have potential benefits and drawbacks, depending on how they are implemented. Many economists argue that a **strategic combination of both policies** is essential for Africa's sustainable economic development. A key lesson from successful developing economies is that **temporary protectionism**, combined with efforts to increase competitiveness and productivity, can be an effective tool for nurturing industries in their early stages (Chang, 2003).At the same time, excessive protectionism can lead to inefficiencies and stunt growth. Hence, neither full protectionism nor unfettered liberalism can serve as a panacea for Africa's economic development. Theoretical frameworks such as **strategic liberalism** argue for a balanced approach, where countries open certain sectors to global trade while protecting others crucial for national development. Therefore, African policymakers need to adopt a **pragmatic approach** that allows for the gradual liberalization of key sectors while protecting those that require time to mature. This hybrid model, sometimes referred to as **managed trade**, allows governments to selectively engage in global markets while fostering domestic industries through temporary protectionist measures.Scholars like **Rodrik (2018)** advocate for a pragmatic trade policy that considers each country's unique development needs. Trade policy must also be aligned with broader **development strategies** that address infrastructure bottlenecks, improve governance, and promote investment in human capital.For Africa, these two theories present distinct paths: **protectionism** offers a means to nurture domestic industries, while **liberalism** promotes integration into global markets. However, a hybrid approach, combining elements of both, may be necessary to achieve sustainable development.

2.1.9The Role of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

In recent years, Africa has sought to strike a balance between protectionism and liberalism through regional integration initiatives. The **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**, launched in 2021, represents a landmark shift in Africa's trade policy. The agreement aims to create a **single African market** for goods and services by reducing intra-African tariffs and non-tariff barriers. This liberal framework is expected to boost intra-African trade, which historically has been low (accounting for less than 20% of the continent's total trade) compared to other regions like Europe or Asia (World Bank, 2020).The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a fascinating blend of protectionist and liberal economic principles, creating what could be seen as a hybrid model. By fostering trade within Africa, AfCFTA aims to allow African firms to achieve **economies of scale** and become more competitive globally. The agreement also promotes **industrialization**, encouraging African countries to add value to their raw materials before exporting them, thus helping them move beyond being primary commodity exporters. For instance, the agreement encourages the development of value chains in sectors such as **agriculture**, **automotive manufacturing**, and **textiles** (African Union, 2022).

AfCFTA represents a sophisticated approach to economic integration, combining the strengths of free trade with pragmatic protectionist safeguards. In other words, AfCFTA's hybrid nature reflects a careful balance between the ideals of economic liberalism and the realities of protecting national interests. This designed to support economic growth while recognizing the challenges that come with trade liberalization. By allowing African nations to open their markets gradually, while protecting key sectors, AfCFTA aims to create a sustainable and inclusive path toward economic development and continental integration.While the agreement champions open trade, it provides enough flexibility for countries to protect their domestic industries where necessary. This is crucial for ensuring that smaller or less developed nations are not disadvantaged in the face of stronger, more competitive economies.The protectionist elements help mitigate the risks that come with rapid trade liberalization. For instance, the sudden influx of cheaper goods from more industrialized nations could harm local businesses in less developed countries. By allowing for a phased approach to liberalization, AfCFTA offers a pathway that encourages growth while safeguarding domestic industries.AfCFTA's success, however, depends on addressing some significant challenges. These include improving infrastructure, harmonizing regulations, and tackling **non-tariff barriers** such as customs delays and poor logistics networks, which continue to hinder intra-African trade. Moreover, countries will need to manage the transition carefully to avoid undermining local industries, ensuring that protectionist measures are gradually lifted to allow businesses time to adjust to the new competitive environment.This model may serve as a blueprint for other regions seeking to balance the benefits of free trade with the need for economic resilience.

2.2 Theoretical Background Supporting the Two Dominant Trade Policies

In the words of Orinya (2023, 216) 'International trade,has incrementally assumeda complex character, which is governed by theories, strategies and nationalpolicy formulation. This complexity finds expression not only in the conflictingexplanations of international trade practice but also in the different strategiesadopted by nations to serve their interest'. This evolution has led to diverse theories, ranging from classical to modern theories; country-based tofirm-based theories that have been developed over time to explain the nature andcharacter of international trade.International trade policies are broadly categorized into **protectionism** and **liberalism**, two dominant and contrasting approaches. These policies have deep theoretical underpinnings that explain their benefits and drawbacks for economic development. The debate between **protectionism** and **liberalism** in international trade is anchored in contrasting economic theories that shape policy decisions. In the context of Africa's economic ambitions, understanding these theories provides a foundation for evaluating which approach, or combination thereof, is most suitable for fostering growth and competitiveness.Theories of international trade, mercantilism, infant industry theory, the global strategic rivalry theory,theory of absolute advantage, theory of comparative advantage, and are essential to understanding protectionism and liberalism which are the focus of this paper.

A. Protectionism: **Protectionism refers to the use of trade barriers such as tariffs, quotas, and subsidies to protect domestic industries from foreign competition. Its theoretical support can be traced to mercantilismandinfant industry theory, both of which advocate for shielding local industries during their early stages of development.Protectionism is rooted in the infant industry theory, first proposed by Alexander Hamilton and later formalized by Friedrich List. Tariffs, quotas, and subsidies are tools used to shield domestic industries, allowing them to scale up and develop a comparative advantage over time (Chang, 2003).**

i. Mercantilism: Mercantilism, a dominant economic theory in the 16th and 17th centuries, has greatly contributed to the theory of international trade and defense of protectionism ideaand asserts that national prosperity is best achieved by accumulating monetary reserves through a positive balance of trade. Mercantilists believed that nations should restrict imports and maximize exports, thereby increasing wealth. Basically, it supports government involvement in trade by encouraging the accumulation of national wealth through export promotion and discouragement of import through protectionism. According to this theory, a nation's wealth depends on how much gold and silver it has in its treasury. Hence a country must always strive for trade surplus by increasing its export revenue and decreasing its imports. Mercantilists believe that it is foolish to let the whims of supply and demand govern a veritable source of national wealth like cross-border trade. While the global economy has moved beyond mercantilist practices, elements of this theory still resonate in protectionist arguments. Protectionism, in this view, is a tool for national economic sovereignty and a means to control resources and reduce dependence on external powers.The theory of Mercantilism still enjoys the interest of developing countries till today owing to the need to protect local industries and other national interests.

ii. Infant Industry Theory: A more contemporary rationale for protectionism is the **infant industry theory**, first articulated by **Alexander Hamilton** and later refined by **Friedrich List** in the 19th century. This theory suggests that emerging industries in developing countries require temporary protection from global competition to grow and become competitive. According to this theory, emerging industries in developing countries may not initially be able to compete with well-established industries from advanced economies. Therefore, governments should protect these industries through tariffs or subsidies until they become mature and internationally competitive (Chang, 2003).African economies, which are often characterized by weak manufacturing bases and a reliance on primary exports, can use protectionist policies to foster industrialization and diversify their economies. For instance, many East Asian countries employed protectionism effectively in their early industrial phases, shielding local industries before opening them to international competition. **Structuralist economists** argue that without such protections, industries in developing countries would struggle to compete against established firms from advanced economies (Rodrik, 2007).

B. Liberalism: Trade liberalism is supported by **classical** and **neoclassical economic theories**, particularly those of **Adam Smith** and **David Ricardo**, who laid the foundation for free trade principles.

i. Theory of Absolute Advantage - Adam Smith: Adam Smith, in his seminal work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), introduced the concept of **absolute advantage**, which posits that if a country can produce a good more efficiently than another country, it should specialize in the production of that good and engage in free trade. Specialization and open trade increase efficiency and wealth for all countries involved.Adam Smith's theory of absolute advantage was the first attempt to criticize the mercantilist position in support of government interference. The theory promotes laissez-faire or free markets as alternatives to the mercantilist tenets. He contends that the only function of government should be to facilitate the production and exchange of commodities and services, while the forces of supply and demand should determine the movement of goods across national borders. Adams Smith believes that countries gain from the free market system (Liberalism) because it enables them to trade with other nations and specialize in commodities in which they have absolute advantage. According to him, this absolute advantage would boost worker productivity and skill development, which is advantageous for cross-border trade. For Africa, the principle of absolute advantage suggests that countries should capitalize on their natural resources and other comparative strengths to trade more effectively with the rest of the world (Smith, 1776).

ii. Theory of Comparative Advantage – David Ricardo:David Ricardo expanded on Smith's work by developing the theory of **comparative advantage**, which argues that even if one country has an absolute advantage in producing all goods, it should still specialize in producing the goods where it has the greatest efficiency relative to others (Ricardo, 1817). Trade liberalization allows countries to benefit from their comparative advantages by opening their economies to global markets, which can result in higher economic growth and efficiency. David Ricardo's comparative advantage theory aligns with Smith's liberal trade ideology, advocating for countries to specialize in producing goods they enjoy comparative advantage in terms of opportunity cost. This approach aims to increase productivity and reduce restrictions on international trade. For African countries, which often possess comparative advantages in sectors like agriculture, mining, and energy, liberal trade policies could enhance their integration into global supply chains and increase export revenues.

iii. **Heckscher-Ohlin Model (H-O Model):** The **Heckscher-Ohlin model**, developed by **Eli Heckscher**and **Bertil Ohlin**, extends the concept of comparative advantage by considering the relative abundance of factors of production (land, labor, and capital). According to this model, countries should export goods that intensively use their abundant factors of production and import goods that use their scarce factors. African countries, rich in natural resources but often lacking capital-intensive industries, could benefit from liberalized trade policies that allow them to export raw materials while importing machinery and technology necessary for industrial growth (Heckscher & Ohlin, 1933).

iv. **New Trade Theory:** Building on classical trade theories, **new trade theory**, led by **Paul Krugman** in the late 20th century, emphasizes the role of increasing returns to scale and network effects in trade. This theory posits that countries producing similar products or services end up trading together. It argues that liberalizing trade allows industries to grow larger, achieve economies of scale, and become more efficient. For Africa, this implies that removing trade barriers within regional blocs like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could foster larger markets, encouraging the growth of domestic industries and attracting foreign investment (Krugman, 1979).

Note that all the theories examined, except mercantilism and infant industry theory promote free trade and reject trade restrictions. Mercantilism and infant industry theoryrecommends state intervention to protect local industries, while other theories believe in free trade and the invisible hand of demand and supply.Two outcomes result from this jumble of ideas: the canonization of liberalism and a return to protectionism. Therefore, the question at hand is whether African nations at their current stage of development should support protectionism or let supply and demand dictate how trade flows?

3. Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

To build a thriving nation, international trade has shown to be very essential. In the last thirty years, globalization has greatly influenced international trade development, although the benefits have not been properly shared. This paper looks at how liberalism and protectionism have influenced African political economy both theoretically and practically, as well as their roles in international exchanges. These two ideas laysa strong foundation for understanding the fundamental politics of global trade as well as the crucial problems of African exclusion and access to the global market.

The choice between protectionism and liberalism for Africa's economic development depends on the specific goals, industries, and stages of development within each country. Both approaches offer distinct advantages and challenges.**Protectionism** can be beneficial in the short term for emerging industries by shielding them from international competition, allowing domestic sectors to develop and become competitive. African countries that want to build local industries, safeguard jobs, or reduce dependency on imports may find this approach useful. However, long-term protectionism risks inefficiency, higher consumer prices, and reduced innovation due to lack of competition.**Liberalism**, or free trade, encourages openness to international markets, boosting export opportunities, foreign investment, and technology transfer. It can lead to more competitive industries and economic integration within global supply chains. However, liberal policies may expose weaker industries to competition, risking job losses and stunted industrial growth if not managed carefully.

A balanced approach—combining selective protectionism in strategic sectors with liberalism in others—may be most suitable for Africa. Many economists suggest that African countries should pursue **"strategic liberalism",**opening up to international markets while safeguarding critical industries like agriculture, technology, and manufacturing, where they can build competitive advantages. Additionally, integrating into regional trade blocs (e.g., AfCFTA) can provide a middle ground between protectionism and liberalism, allowing African economies to benefit from intra-continental trade before fully embracing global competition.

Consequently, this paper concludes as follows;

1) Adopting liberalism or protectionism in isolation of each other will not be sufficient to solve the problems that global trade presents to African political economies. The benefits of liberalism are disproportionately distributed in favor of developed economies, even while protectionism impedes the free flow of goods across international borders.
2) The notion that trade liberalization is a win-win situation for all countries has been undermined by Africa's diminishing success in global trade.
3) The stringent conditions instituted by Multilateral trade organizations such as the WTO in form tough specifications and quality standards against African countries have constituted unequal access to international trade for African countries. This in itself constitutes trade barriers which is against the basic tenets of the liberal trade system which these institutions are set up to uphold – double standards.
4) The failure of WTOto give all nations, particularly developing nations, the opportunity in December 1999 to review the structure, regulations, and outcomes of the multilateral trading system from the perspectives of development and developing nations' interests was a huge challenge.

In view of the above, this paper recommends that the only option available to African political economy in this era of globalization is to fortify intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement(AfCFTA) platform. In this arrangement neither liberalism nor protectionism are advocated. It is a trade area agreement that covers services in addition to the customary exchange of goods. Members of the AfCFTA are obligated by the agreement, which was signed in March 2018, to gradually liberalize trade in services and remove tariffs on 90% of goods.The continental accord has the power to end the issue of global exclusion and provide African nations greater access to trade's benefits. The full implementation of the AfCFTA have the potential to increase economic activity and volume while also improving member countries' access to global trade.

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