

Review of researches on African integration in the two decades since the establishment of the African Union (2002–2025)

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Abstract. Over the two decades following the founding of the African Union (AU) and against the backdrop of profound global shifts, the process of African integration has evolved into a sophisticated, diversified and resilient developmental landscape. Centered on the core research themes of developmental logic, practical outcomes and international interactions of African integration under the AU framework, this paper systematically sorts out Chinese and international academic publications issued between 2002 and 2025, and analyzes consensus and divergences among existing studies from four dimensions: theoretical foundations, institutional evolution, practical predicaments and international cooperation. Relevant research indicates that scholars both in China and overseas universally recognize the ideological guidance of Pan-Africanism and the institutional advances of the AU compared with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), yet disagreements remain regarding the prospect of integration development and impacts stemming from external environments. Distinct disparities exist between Chinese and foreign research perspectives: domestic scholarship prioritizes interactions between China-Africa cooperation and African integration, whereas international studies lay more emphasis on correlations between Africa's internal governance and the global order. Current academic research is hampered by insufficient theoretical construction and inadequate analyses of regional disparities. Future scholarship needs to advance interdisciplinary integration and empirical studies to provide targeted theoretical support for African integration.

Keywords: African Union, African integration, Pan-Africanism, China-Africa relations, international interactions

1. Introduction

Ranking second only to Asia in territorial size, Africa is the world's second-largest continent and home to the largest number of sovereign countries globally. However, buried in historical vicissitudes, the continent endured centuries of colonial domination. Even after breaking free from colonial shackles and securing national independence, African nations remained marginalized within the framework of international politics for a long period. At that stage, most African countries were trapped in political unrest and economic stagnation, heavily reliant on foreign aid and lacking meaningful discourse power in global affairs. After

decades of arduous exploration starting from the 1990s, African nations began independently exploring development pathways suited to their national realities to pursue economic prosperity and elevate international standing. Entering the 21st century, Africa stepped into a new developmental era marked by accelerated regional integration and one of the world's fastest-growing economic expansion rates across the globe [1]. Driven by such progress, African states have registered notable improvements in political and economic strength alongside rising international influence, evolving into an indispensable pole on the global political stage.

Founded on 25 May 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) represented Africa's first continent-wide intergovernmental international organization. Its core missions centered on consolidating solidarity and cooperation among African nations, safeguarding regional peace and stability, and fostering autonomous African development. In September 1999, the Fourth Ordinary Session of the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government adopted the *Sirte Declaration*, formally proposing the establishment of the African Union (AU). The OAU was officially replaced by the AU in July 2002. Grounded in democracy, human rights and sustainable development across Africa, the AU commits to advancing continental unity, self-reliance and revitalization by establishing an efficient and unified regional market and mitigating cross-border conflict risks. Over its twenty years of existence, the AU has guided African countries onto an innovative path of integrative development and contributed valuable African input to joint COVID-19 responses, multilateralism implementation, protection of common interests of developing nations and global peace maintenance.

China and Africa have long maintained trusted friendly partnership with time-honored traditional friendship. Recent years have witnessed continuous expansion and deepening of China-Africa cooperation amid shifting international landscapes, which consolidates bilateral friendship and solidarity while bearing far-reaching strategic implications. Currently, China and Africa maintain ever-deepening cooperation across political, economic and cultural spheres. China plays a pivotal role in supporting African development, improving people's livelihoods, boosting economic growth and social advancement on the continent, thereby making positive contributions to global peace and development initiatives.

Existing academic research concerning the AU and African integration has accumulated substantial achievements, with Chinese and international scholars launching multi-dimensional explorations. Nevertheless, systematic collation and consolidation of relevant literature are yet to be completed. Focused on developmental logic and international interactions of African integration during the two decades of the AU's existence, this paper systematically reviews pertinent research documents, sorts out evolving academic trajectories, summarizes core academic viewpoints, distinguishes controversial focal points and research gaps, aiming to deliver solid theoretical references for follow-up related studies.

2. Review of domestic research in China

China's academic research on African integration dates back to the rise of Pan-Africanism. The official inauguration of the AU has greatly boosted research enthusiasm and gradually formed four primary research frameworks centered on theoretical foundations, institutional evolution, practical effects and international cooperation, with academic discussions predominantly focusing on the core role of the AU in facilitating African integration.

2.1. Theoretical correlation between Pan-Africanism and African integration

As the ideological core of African integration, Pan-Africanism constitutes a vital theoretical starting point for domestic Chinese academic inquiries into continental integration. Shu Yunguo explicitly argues that the core

connotation of "African continental unity" embedded within Pan-Africanism aligns closely with the inherent essence of African integration, serving not only as its theoretical underpinning and guiding ideology but also as a crucial entry point for deeper theoretical cognition of African integration [2]. Xiao Hongyu further notes that Pan-Africanism functions as a corrective force for Africa's modernization drive, acting as an ideological pillar amid developmental setbacks and enabling African integration to transcend geographical and national boundaries via its intrinsic spiritual tenets [3]. From the perspective of African nationalism, Liu Weicai posits that centered on anti-colonialism and pursuit of political independence, African nationalism absorbs liberal and egalitarian concepts from Western civilizations while incorporating core Pan-Africanist doctrines, thus forming moderate humanistic characteristics and supplying critical ideological impetus for African integration [4]. Lu Zhengyuan and Lei Fang supplement Pan-Africanism's practical value by emphasizing its foundational role in the birth and sustained operation of the AU alongside indispensable legitimate support for the institutional transition from the OAU to the AU [5].

Collectively, extant domestic studies have defined the theoretical linkage between Pan-Africanism and African integration, yet most research adopts qualitative elaboration without systematic differentiated analyses of Pan-Africanism's evolution across diverse regions and historical periods.

2.2. Research on institutional transition from the OAU to the AU

Chinese academic circles have reached consistent conclusions regarding the inevitability and institutional progressiveness of the AU's substitution for the OAU. In *From OAU to AU: An Inevitable Outcome of Pan-Africanism's Development*, Lu Zhengyuan and Lei Fang state that despite fulfilling the historical mission of facilitating African national independence, the loosely structured OAU operated primarily as a consultative organization lacking mechanisms for economic integration and enforceable regulatory power, rendering it incapable of coping with economic competition pressures amid globalization. In contrast, the AU functions as an integrated continental institution spanning politics, economy and military affairs. Its superior institutional design and capacity-building dilute absolute national sovereignty prioritization in favor of holistic African development, matching Africa's strategic shift from political independence to economic advancement [5]. In *Towards Revival: Research on the African Union and African Integration*, Luo Jianbo further analyzes institutional innovations of the AU, highlighting its establishment of economic cooperation frameworks, upgraded regional economic governance and cross-border infrastructure development initiatives that provide institutional safeguards for economic integration, with the "African Renaissance" philosophy injecting fresh spiritual momentum into continental unification [6]. From the perspective of challenge mitigation, Yang Lihua's work *The African Union: Ideals and Realities* justifies the historical necessity of the AU's founding by demonstrating that its institutional architecture better equips Africa to tackle compound crises including political unrest, economic backwardness and transnational security threats [7].

2.3. Research on practical outcomes and developmental challenges of African integration

Regarding practical achievements, domestic scholars universally acknowledge substantial positive progress delivered by the AU over the past two decades. Liu Youmin confirms that the AU has successfully helped Africa emerge among the world's fastest-growing economic regions and significantly uplifted the continent's international standing. Holding 54 seats accounting for one quarter of total UN member states, African nations have gradually forged coordinated collective international discourse power under AU coordination [8]. Zhang Zhongxiang supplements that African integration has secured landmark breakthroughs in cross-continental infrastructure connectivity and regional trade facilitation, with infrastructure construction backed by China-Africa cooperation laying a solid material foundation for continental integration [9].

On research concerning developmental obstacles, scholars identify varied drawbacks constraining African integration from distinct analytical angles. Based on Africa's COVID-19 containment practices, Wu Ka and Jin Liqin point out prominent deficiencies including inefficient cross-border coordination and insufficient epidemic prevention resources within the AU's public health governance system, which expose systemic weaknesses in Africa's overall regional governance capacity [10]. Pioneering the academic concept of "informal African integration", Liu Weicai observes numerous unregulated transnational informal integration mechanisms operating across Africa beyond official institutional frameworks. Rather than conflicting with formal integration agendas, certain informal integration formats can evolve into complementary components of formal institutional construction, enriching scholarly understanding of African integration's complexity. Nevertheless, in-depth empirical investigations and systematic interpretations targeting operational mechanisms, evolutionary paths and concrete impacts of informal integration upon formal integration remain absent in existing literature [4].

2.4. Research on interactive relations between China-Africa cooperation and African integration

Domestic Chinese academia has fostered multi-angle and multi-layered research exploring correlations between China-Africa cooperation and African integration, with core viewpoints focusing on positive external empowerment and bilateral reciprocal interactions driven by Chinese-African collaborative projects. In *The African Union, African Integration and China's Constructive Engagement*, Luo Jianbo articulates that China's constructive participation constitutes a pivotal external catalyst advancing African integration: China-Africa partnerships strengthen pan-African collective identity and accelerate regional economic convergence by dismantling cross-border institutional barriers and consolidating continental developmental synergy [11]. In *China-Africa Cooperation against the Background of African Integration*, Zhai Fengjie and Wang Yuhua et al. expand research dimensions through China-AU diplomatic interactions and shared value consensus to elaborate bidirectional promotional dynamics. African integration creates broader regional platforms expanding the depth and breadth of China-Africa cooperation; reciprocally, Chinese investment, technological assistance and market access support continuously resolve bottlenecks hindering African integration progress. Focusing on synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and African continental integration, Huang Tingting and Yuan Yuxuan note that the BRI's high-standard opening-up framework expands bilateral economic and trade ties into infrastructure development, industrial capacity cooperation and people-to-people exchanges, injecting fresh momentum for coordinated regional advancement across Africa [12]. Zhou Xiao et al. concentrate on pragmatic bilateral cooperation, affirming consistent alignment between tangible China-Africa collaborative programs and fundamental interests of peoples on both sides. The longstanding trustworthy and equal partnership between China and the AU has cultivated a stable and favorable external environment enabling African countries to build consensus and coordinate integrated development [13].

3. Review of international research

Compared with domestic Chinese scholarship, international research on African integration originated earlier and has matured into well-established academic systems prioritizing ideological origins and evolution of Pan-Africanism, AU governance mechanisms and practical pathways alongside Africa's developmental predicaments amid shifting global order. Differing from China's research priorities, overseas academic discourse emphasizes interactions between Africa's endogenous developmental drivers and global structural shifts, interpreting continental integration from dual contextual perspectives of indigenous African realities and worldwide geopolitical configurations.

3.1. Ideological origins and practical pathways of Pan-Africanism

As the ideological fountainhead of African integration, the historical genesis and core pursuits of Pan-Africanism stand as a central research focus among international scholars who propose divergent interpretative frameworks. In *A History of Africa*, Kevin Shillington outlines the complete evolutionary trajectory of Pan-Africanism from its late-19th-century emergence through the post-colonial era, affirming its decisive role in facilitating African decolonization and national independence while supplying core ideological guidelines and actionable blueprints for continental unification and highlighting African peoples' subjective agency throughout integration campaigns. As the iconic representative of Pan-African movements, Kwame Nkrumah's theories serve as primary academic references for interpreting Pan-African practical pathways. Nkrumah advocates comprehensive political and economic unification across Africa relying entirely on indigenous continental strength to consolidate independence outcomes and lay groundwork for autonomous African advancement, defining the core practical orientation of Pan-Africanism. Departing from historical and practical analytical frameworks, American scholar Emerson interprets Pan-Africanism as a "spiritual affinity" rooted in shared historical suffering and collective memories of African peoples; such emotional cohesion motivates African states to set aside internal disputes, build consensus and establish robust regional blocs to fulfill ultimate Pan-African ideals [14].

Overall, existing international literature has clarified core connotations, historical evolution and fundamental demands of traditional Pan-Africanism, yet prominent research gaps persist: most publications focus exclusively on classical Pan-African doctrines with insufficient attention to emerging 21st-century manifestations and renovated ideological implications, lacking integrated analyses linking modern Pan-Africanism with globalization and green development concepts.

3.2. AU governance capacity and security-related challenges

Beyond Pan-Africanism studies, AU institutional governance and continental security governance constitute another core international research domain, where scholars conduct empirical and theoretical analyses incorporating governance dilemmas, external foreign interference and major-power geopolitical competition. In *African Union Security Culture in Practice: African Problems and African Solutions*, Ali Glass centers research on AU normative security frameworks and inherent contradictions emerging within indigenous African contextual settings, identifying persistent frictions between the AU's pursuit of Africa-led homegrown security solutions and disruptive external intervention which impairs overall AU governance efficiency. In *Persistent Problems in African Integration and Peace-keeping*, Keith Gottschalk targets AU peacekeeping missions to analyze multifaceted obstacles: rampant transnational terrorism and recurrent intrastate conflicts seriously hamper continental integration progress, compounded by structural AU limitations including deficient cross-country coordination and resource shortages that obstruct crisis resolution and undermine regional stability [15].

3.3. External developmental environment of African integration amid restructured global order

International academia attaches substantial importance to impacts of global geopolitical restructuring upon African integration, generating diversified academic assessments. In *"Africa in a Shifting Global Order: Operating from the Margins?"*, Malte Brosig puts forward the core argument that Africa remains positioned on the periphery of contemporary global governance with limited short-term potential to reverse such marginalization; meanwhile, increasingly diversified global geopolitics grants expanded diplomatic maneuver space and autonomous development alternatives enabling Africa to carve out irreplaceable strategic roles within niche global sectors. Authors of *Piecing the Puzzle of African Integration: The Successes and*

Exponential Potential adopt an optimistic stance, arguing that tangible achievements in regional trade consolidation and cross-border infrastructure connectivity embody Africa's robust developmental resilience and vast untapped potential, with global economic restructuring delivering historic opportunities for Africa to escape long-term peripheralization and accelerate integration agendas [16]. Vlad Daniela Geogiana et al. adopt a global power-distribution analytical lens in *The role of economic and political power in preservation of status-quo and markets integration*, contending that inequitable power allocation embedded within prevailing international institutional order constitutes critical external barriers constraining the pace and effectiveness of African regional market unification [17].

4. Consensuses and controversies within existing academic research

4.1. Cross-academic consensus

First, Pan-Africanism functions as the core ideological bedrock of African integration. Its foundational precepts of "African unity" and "African Renaissance" permeate the entire institutional transition from the OAU to the AU, delivering critical legitimate justification and spiritual cohesion to consolidate inter-state consensus and promote continental unification.

Second, the AU outperforms the OAU across institutional design, regional governance capacity and integrated development orientation, better accommodating Africa's strategic shift from post-colonial political independence to economic-driven development and evolving into the dominant institutional engine propelling continental integration.

Third, external environments exert decisive influence on African integration: positive empowering effects derived from mutually beneficial China-Africa cooperation as well as adverse interferences including Western great-power meddling and rising global conservatism jointly shape integration's developmental rhythm, pathways and tangible outcomes from divergent dimensions.

Fourth, African integration is encumbered by intertwined compound challenges: proliferating terrorist threats, recurring domestic armed conflicts, lopsided economic structures and inadequate cross-border governance capacity interact synergistically to form core bottlenecks hindering sustained integrative advancement.

4.2. Major academic divisions

First, disputes over future developmental prospects: Most Chinese scholars hold optimistic forecasts regarding African integration, arguing deepening China-Africa collaboration, continuous AU institutional refinement and growing continental cohesion will sustain steady integration progress; conversely, partial international researchers such as Malte Brosig adopt pessimistic viewpoints, predicting persistent African peripheralization within global governance with formidable internal and external barriers precluding transformative breakthroughs for integration in the short run.

Second, conflicting evaluations of external intervention impacts: Certain overseas literature proposes dual-sided judgments on Western foreign interference: despite eroding African sovereign autonomy, Western participation delivers indispensable financial and material resources supporting AU institutional construction and continental integration. In contrast, domestic Chinese academics emphasize the detrimental sovereignty-impairing repercussions of unilateral external intervention, affirming China's equal-footing, win-win collaborative framework as a more indigenous-friendly external development model catering to authentic African integration demands.

Third, divergent positioning of "informal integration": Liu Weicai's informal integration framework gains recognition among part of China's academic community and expands interpretative dimensions for African integration's complexity, yet international scholarship has paid minimal attention with scarce associated research outputs. Furthermore, Chinese domestic academics remain split over conversion pathways between formal and informal integration, their reciprocal functional mechanisms and practical developmental value of informal integration without forming unified academic consensus.

5. Deficiencies of current research and prospects for future academic development

5.1. Primary shortcomings of existing studies

First, insufficient in-depth theoretical construction: Prevailing research predominantly focuses on historical narration and practical case analyses of African integration lacking systematic theoretical framework development. Scholars rarely incorporate core international relations theories such as institutionalism and constructivism to interpret endogenous developmental dynamics, regional governance logics and evolutionary trajectories of African integration.

Second, inadequate attention to cross-regional disparities: Most extant literature adopts a continent-wide holistic research perspective overlooking divergent integration practices of sub-regional blocs including the East African Community, Southern African Development Community and Economic Community of West African States, with insufficient targeted analyses of distinctive regional developmental characteristics, inter-bloc coordination modalities and cross-regional frictions.

Third, underdeveloped quantitative research support: Current scholarship relies overwhelmingly on qualitative descriptive analysis with scarce quantitative assessment and empirical verification of African integration progress. Research conclusions lack robust statistical evidence sourced from concrete indicators including regional trade growth rates, transnational infrastructure connectivity levels, AU policy implementation efficiency and continental cohesion indexes, undermining research objectivity and persuasive power.

Fourth, lagging research on emerging thematic frontiers: Existing academic outputs concentrate on conventional subjects such as economic cooperation and regional security governance, leaving insufficient research exploring interactive mechanisms and integrated pathways linking emerging sectors including digital economy, green transition and clean energy cooperation with African integration, failing to respond to contemporary developmental trends and fresh demands of continental unification.

Fifth, biased domestic research perspective in Chinese academia: Chinese scholarship excessively prioritizes external empowering effects generated by China-Africa cooperation while neglecting African integration's endogenous drivers including inter-state interest coordination mechanisms, domestic popular integration identity cultivation and indigenous civil society participation, resulting in unbalanced analytical frameworks lacking equal emphasis on internal and external influencing factors.

5.2. Prospects for future research directions

First, promote theoretical integration and original theoretical construction. Facilitate interdisciplinary convergence between international relations theory, regional governance studies and African integration practice: apply institutionalism to analyze AU institutional design, policy implementation efficiency and institutional evolution trajectories; utilize constructivism to explore how Pan-Africanism shapes popular pan-

African identity and identify relevant influencing factors; develop localized African integration theoretical frameworks rooted in continental realities to elevate overall research theoretical depth and academic value.

Second, launch targeted comparative sub-regional research. Focus on differentiated integration pathways across East, Southern and West African sub-regions, explore how geographical conditions, economic structures, historical culture and political landscapes shape regional integration progress, and reveal internal logics behind inter-bloc coordination and conflicts to supply targeted theoretical references for distinct sub-regional integration initiatives.

Third, expand quantitative and empirical analytical applications. Systematically compile statistical data covering African national economies, cross-border trade, regional security and infrastructure construction; adopt econometric modeling and case-study methodologies to scientifically quantify implementation outcomes of AU policies, concrete contributions of China-Africa cooperation to continental integration and overall regional integration development levels for enhanced research scientificity and persuasiveness.

Fourth, deepen emerging frontier research. Keep pace with global developmental trends and updated African integration agendas to explore interactive linkages between emerging industries (digital economy, green transition, clean energy collaboration and cross-border infrastructure connectivity) and continental integration; prioritize research on alignment pathways between the Belt and Road Initiative and the AU's *Agenda 2063* across emerging sectors to fill existing academic research gaps.

Fifth, balance internal and external analytical perspectives. While continuing to examine external empowering functions of China-Africa cooperation, intensify research on African integration's endogenous driving forces including inter-state interest games and coordination mechanisms, regional institutional governance performance, domestic popular pan-African identity building and indigenous civil society engagement to establish comprehensive, balanced research frameworks integrating both internal and external dimensions.

5. Conclusion

Two decades after the AU's founding, academic research on African integration has accumulated abundant scholarly findings. Chinese and international scholars have conducted multi-dimensional explorations spanning theoretical origins, institutional shifts, practical achievements and international interactions, reaching unified academic consensus regarding Pan-Africanism's foundational ideological role, institutional superiority of the AU against the OAU, decisive external environmental influences and compound challenges hindering continental integration. Meanwhile, conspicuous academic divergences persist concerning integration's developmental prospects, impacts of external foreign intervention and the definitional positioning of informal integration.

Despite fruitful preliminary outcomes laying foundations for subsequent research, existing literature is plagued by systemic drawbacks including inadequate theoretical construction, neglected cross-regional variations, insufficient quantitative data support, delayed emerging-theme research and biased domestic Chinese research perspectives, failing to comprehensively capture the intricate practical realities and evolving contemporary demands of African integration. Future relevant academic research must advance interdisciplinary theoretical integration, prioritize sub-regional disparities and emerging frontier subjects, expand quantitative empirical analysis and reconcile internal-external research viewpoints to upgrade theoretical depth and practical pertinence of relevant scholarship. Optimized academic outputs will deliver targeted theoretical guidance for African integration advancement, provide decision-making references for

deepening China-Africa community with a shared future, advancing the Global Development Initiative's African implementation and boosting global South-South cooperation.

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