Exploring Modernization Paths in China and Africa: Diversity and Commonality

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Abstract: *While Western modernization is often regarded as a dominant model of linear progress, existing theories frequently overlook the diversity of modernization paths and the underlying commonalities shared across them. The rise of alternative models, exemplified by Chinese path to modernization, underscores the potential for multiple trajectories of modernization and reveals three core elements that define these paths: building consensus on development, generating momentum for growth, and enhancing resilience to challenges. The success of Chinese path to modernization can be attributed to several key factors: the establishment of a national development consensus driven by the leadership of the Communist Party of China; the creation of development momentum through endogenous growth, optimal resource allocation, and a sustained commitment to reform and opening-up; and the strengthening of resilience via economic diversification, gradual reforms, and robust risk management strategies. In contrast, African nations present a distinct mix of traditional consensus governance and modern democratic practices, while actively engaging in development-security-governance nexus management and refining early warning and crisis management systems. These countries are exploring their own paths to modernization, informed by their unique socio-political contexts. Despite many differences in national conditions, exchanges of experiences between China and African countries—focused on development consensus, momentum, and resilience—can break the myth that "modernization equals Westernization". Such exchanges can empower developing nations to pursue their own, independent, and context-specific routes toward modernization.*

Keywords: *Chinese path to modernization; Africa; development consensus; development momentum; development resilience*

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China's pursuit of Chinese path to modernization has represented a transformative breakthrough, emerging as one of the most significant global developments of the 21st century and, arguably, since the inception of China's reform and opening-up in 1979. Economically, China's strength has surged dramatically. In 1979, China's gross domestic product (GDP) was just 80.30% of sub-Saharan Africa's total and 6.79% of the United States', but by 2022, these ratios had soared to 8.77 times sub-Saharan Africa's and 70.55% of the U.S.'s. Meanwhile, living standards for the Chinese people have seen a remarkable improvement. Per capita GDP in 1979 stood at 31.31% of sub-Saharan Africa's and a mere

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1.58% of the U.S.'s, yet by 2022, these figures had climbed to 7.52 times and 16.65%, respectively[1]. The Chinese path to modernization has dispelled the myth that "modernization equals Westernization", providing an alternative vision of progress, broadening pathways for developing nations, and presenting a Chinese approach to humanity's quest for better social systems. It stands as a model for developing countries to pursue modernization independently, providing a fresh option (Xi, 2023b). Crucially, it not only underscores the diversity of modernization trajectories but also uncovers shared foundations beneath them.

Traditional modernization theory posits a singular, linear path to progress—a model heavily contested by dependency and world-system theorists. Yet, the rarity of successful modernization among developing nations, coupled with frequent setbacks, has allowed neoliberalism and globalization advocates to subtly reinforce this uniform, linear narrative. While the rapid postwar rise of East Asia's "Four Asian Tigers" showcased an alternative, developmental state theorists argue that their model is hard to replicate (Johnson, 1999; Evans, 1989). Against this backdrop—where Western theories often amplify their own uniqueness—understanding the relevance of Chinese path to modernization for other developing countries requires identifying the universal elements it embodies. Only by recognizing these common threads can we fully grasp its broader significance, paving the way for other nations to pursue modernization independently and fostering mutual learning between China and the global community.

1. Identifying the Commonality in Diverse Modernization Paths

It must be acknowledged that, to date, the most sustained and successful modernization efforts in human society have predominantly occurred in today's Western developed nations. Consequently, Chinese path to modernization has indeed shattered the theoretical framework of Western theories that imply late-developing countries cannot achieve independent progress, offering a "Chinese solution" with universal significance for developing nations pursuing modernization on their own initiative (Lan, 2023). This significance manifests in two key ways: first, it demonstrates the existence of multiple viable modernization paths, dismantling the deterministic and linear progression embedded in Western theories; second, it highlights the shared foundations underlying diverse modernization trajectories, challenging the Western emphasis on a singular model that negates diversity and renders exploration of commonalities impossible. Given this, we must first uncover the logic in existing theories that denies the diversity of modernization, then identify the universal elements of modernization embedded within them. Doing so provides intellectual support for developing countries to integrate their unique characteristics with these universal principles, enabling them to pursue modernization independently. This lays a theoretical foundation for China and other nations to share modernization experiences and promote common development.

1.1 The Erosion of Diversity in Modernization Paths by Existing Theories

Since the end of World War II, enhancing or sustaining "quality of life" has increasingly surpassed the mere provision of "survival necessities" as a strategic priority for nations worldwide (Pan & Zhang, 2002). Driving economic growth to achieve holistic development has emerged as a shared objective across countries. However, this common pursuit does not inherently imply uniform development trajectories. Existing theories have largely failed to embrace the diversity of modernization paths. In particular, Modernization Theory, Neoliberalism, and Globalization Theory—rooted predominantly in the experiences of Western developed nations—tend to prioritize a singular development model. In contrast, Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Developmental State Theory, which draw from

[1] Calculated by author based on data from the World Bank database (https://data.worldbank.org).

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the modernization challenges of developing countries, encounter limitations: they either lack widespread validation due to limited practical success or are deemed difficult to replicate owing to insufficient universality in their practical foundations.

Collectively, these theories diminish the recognition of diverse modernization paths. Chronologically, based on their maturation, the principal frameworks include Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, Neoliberalism, Globalization Theory, and Developmental State Theory. Each seeks to provide overarching blueprints for national development—particularly economic growth—encompassing dimensions such as economy, politics, and society. In terms of scope, Neoliberalism and Globalization Theory operate at the broadest macro level, Developmental State Theory focuses at the most micro level, and Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, and World-system Theory occupy an intermediate position. Based on their prescriptions and practical applications, these theories can be classified into three distinct categories.

First, Modernization Theory, Neoliberalism, and Globalization Theory emphasize a singular model and linear progression in development plans, effectively negating the possibility of diverse modernization paths. Emerging in the 1950s, Modernization Theory was the first framework to systematically address economic and social development. Its prominence stemmed from three pivotal post-World War II phenomena: the rise of American hegemony, the great ascent of socialist ideals across the globe, and the triumph of decolonization movements (So, 1990). The quest for political independence and economic advancement by newly sovereign nations, coupled with the ideological rivalry between East and West, underscored the demand for innovative development paradigms (Haque, 1999). Within this milieu, Modernization Theory, as articulated by Western scholars, extended beyond mere economic growth to propose a holistic model encompassing political and social transformation, implicitly aiming to preclude alternatives to Western-style modernization (Wiarda, 2005).

For instance, W. W. Rostow delineated modernization as a five-stage trajectory—traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off phase, maturity, and mass consumption—underscoring his ideological stance by subtitling his work *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Rostow, 1960). Similarly, Seymour M. Lipset advanced an endogenous transformation framework to explain national social and political evolution, though he stopped short of formulating a comprehensive socioeconomic model (Lipset, 1959). Other Western scholars, such as Simon Kuznets and Daniel Lerner, often depicted social evolution as a uniform macro-social process driven by microeconomic dynamics (Kuznets, 1955; Lerner, 1958). Modernization Theory thus assumes a deterministic, linear progression: European nations exemplified the pinnacle of modernity, while others occupied “lower” stages, with Africa frequently dismissed as “underdeveloped“ or “primitive” (Mabogunje, 2000). In this view, modernization entails a shift from a retrograde traditional society to an advanced modern one, leaving no room for alternative trajectories.

Neoliberalism represents a resurgence of classical liberal economic thought from Britain and the United States prior to the Great Depression, yet its reemergence is closely tied to the shortcomings of dependency theory and world-system theory’s development prescriptions. It champions a largely unregulated free-market economy, asserting that development stems not from deliberate national strategies but from market forces—positing, in essence, that developmental setbacks arise directly from excessive government intervention and market oversight (Harvey, 2005; Steger and Roy, 2010). Consequently, Neoliberalism posits that the “correct” modernization path entails emancipating markets from state control, prioritizing free markets, open economies, and privatization, and ensuring unfettered movement of capital, goods, and services. In many respects, Neoliberalism revives the determinism and linearity of modernization theory, with its ideological underpinnings equally evident, as its ascent aligns closely with the global extension of American economic, political, and military influence (Brohman, 2005).

Drawing on the globalization process that emerged in the 1970s, development theory within the

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globalization framework posits that globalization mechanisms—particularly economic integration—serve as essential preconditions for advancing toward modernization. Closely aligned with neoliberalism, Globalization Theory shares its foundation in the development models of the United States and Europe. It views trade and investment globalization as integral to the worldwide spread of capitalism. In contrast to Neoliberalism, however, Globalization Theory highlights the capacity of interdependence effects to transcend political, cultural, and geographical divides between nations, emphasizing that new technologies enable developing countries to integrate more effectively into the global system and achieve development (Everett, 2003). Consequently, this perspective suggests that the globalization process, particularly through technological advancements, may diminish the relevance of nation-states in modernization, attributing variations in national development primarily to economic and cultural factors (Reyes, 2001). To a degree, this approach echoes the singular, linear trajectory of Modernization Theory.

Second, Dependency Theory and World-system Theory stand as direct critiques of the singular, linear conception of modernization paths, yet the persistent setbacks faced by Latin American countries in their modernization efforts significantly undermined these theories' attempts to chart diverse alternatives. Originating in the late 1960s, Dependency Theory contends that Modernization Theory misrepresents the dynamics between developed and developing nations. It argues that the modernization of developed countries hinges precisely on the underdevelopment or stunted progress of developing ones. Far from Modernization Theory's focus on an internal failure to transition from traditional to modern society, Dependency Theory attributes the challenges of developing countries to the "center-periphery" structure of the global economic system. In this framework, developed nations occupy the core, exploiting peripheral developing countries in a dynamic of domination and subordination (Frank, 1967; Prebisch, 1968; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Kvangraven, 2021). Thus, "underdevelopment" is not an inherent condition but a consequence of economic exploitation by advanced nations (Frank, 1967). In contrast to Modernization Theory's emphasis on temporal progression and convergence, Dependency Theory—grounded in international political economy—systematically examines structural impediments to modernization, particularly the "center-periphery" relationship. It proposes two approaches: radical programs advocating systemic overhaul for entirely new modernization paths, and moderate strategies pursuing dependent development within the Western framework (Chen, 2023).

In contrast to Dependency Theory, which retains a focus on the national or unit level, World-system Theory interprets the capitalist world economy as an integrated social system from a macrosociological perspective. Immanuel Wallerstein, a leading figure in World-system Theory, posits that this system constitutes a culturally diverse yet economically and socially unified capitalist world economy, shaped by a singular international division of labor. This division is both functional and spatial: through unequal exchange, surplus value from peripheral and semi-peripheral developing countries flows to the core—namely, developed nations (Wallerstein, 1974, 2000). Consequently, while peripheral and semi-peripheral countries may experience quantitative growth, qualitative leaps in development remain elusive, rendering their progress a mere perpetuation of dependency (Chase-Dunn and Grimes, 1995). Though it echoes the "center-periphery" structure of Dependency Theory, World-system Theory places greater emphasis on global class dynamics. The dual dependency—periphery on both semi-periphery and core, and semi-periphery on the core—complicates comprehensive modernization for developing nations, even as revolutionary strategies in individual countries may still succeed.

Third, Developmental State Theory draws support from the economic miracles of the East Asian region, yet its perceived specificity and limited replicability curtail its contribution to diversifying modernization paths. Emerging from analyses of Japan's postwar economic resurgence, Developmental State Theory gained robust backing from the collective success of East Asia. Chalmers Johnson identified four defining features of developmental states: a compact, elite bureaucracy with minimal governance costs; sufficient autonomy for the bureaucracy within an effective political framework; a state-guided market economy; and a potent agency akin to Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)

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(Johnson, 1982, 1999). Central to this model is the pivotal role of the state in steering modernization. Peter Evans further delineated this role, identifying the state as playing the parts of custodian, demiurge, midwifery, and husbandry—roles necessitating a balance of embedded autonomy with society and markets (Evans, 1995). Notably, the theory's focus on state capacity, particularly bureaucratic efficacy, stands in opposition to neoliberalism. Rooted in inductive reasoning and tied closely to East Asian political-economic contexts, it struggles to transcend specific cases into broader theoretical knowledge, rendering its replicability limited (Zhang, 2022; Niu, 2018). Consequently, while Developmental State Theory illuminates potential diversity in modernization trajectories, its applicability remains heavily constrained.

1.2 The Commonality of Modernization Paths Implicit in Existing Theories

While Western theories—emphasizing a singular model and linear progression of modernization paths—have gained prominence due to the widespread success of their modernization practices, Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Developmental State Theory underscore the potential for diverse trajectories. Despite the evident differences in the normative orientations of these theories, their constructions, rooted in specific empirical cases, reveal numerous shared elements. Put differently, the contention between the singularity and diversity of modernization paths also illuminates their underlying commonalities. With the remarkable advancements of Chinese path to modernization, this interplay of diversity and commonality is more vividly showcased globally, lending itself to a tentative analytical framework of "development consensus, development momentum, and development resilience".

First, the notion of development consensus—namely, forging a shared societal understanding of the collective pursuit of modernization—constitutes a foundational political prerequisite for nations advancing toward modernization. Virtually all theories underscore the pivotal role of the political superstructure in this process. Modernization Theory, Neoliberalism, and Developmental State Theory highlight the significance of domestic political dynamics, particularly the efficacy of political systems, whereas Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Globalization Theory stress the constraints imposed by international politics and global systemic structures. More precisely, the political superstructure's critical influence on modernization manifests in three key dimensions.

(1) The leadership of political elites is paramount. For instance, research drawing on Western modernization experiences posits that the presence of a "developmental class coalition" is vital for progress (Bresser-Pereira & Ianoni, 2017).

(2) The formulation of development strategies is essential. Studies of Nordic modernization practices argue that achieving political, economic, and social modernization hinges on fostering a symbiotic relationship between politics and the economy, yet this study ultimately reaffirms the role of a credible polity in crafting reasonable national strategies (North, 1981, 1993; Weingast, 1993; Ruge-Murcia, 1995; Leblang, 1996).

(3) The construction of a cohesive societal perception is crucial. Developmental State Theory contends that a "common project" understanding of development must emerge among political elites, state officials, the domestic bourgeoisie, and the working class to propel modernization (Chibber, 2005). South Korean scholar Lee Cheol-ju, reflecting on the South Korean developmental state, emphasized that a robust societal consensus on development and growth underpins the sustained efficacy of strategies and industrial policies (Li, 2020). Similarly, Chinese scholar Zhang Zhenhua, after analyzing the 40-year trajectory of Developmental State Theory research, identified three essential requisites of a developmental state—development will, development capability, and industrial policy (Zhang, 2022). Although he did not employ the term "development consensus", he defined "development will" as the shared intent of the entire populace, indicating that its connotation aligns with "development consensus" in essence.

Second, development momentum constitutes the material foundation for advancing toward

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modernization, with its essence lying in the acquisition and effective utilization of critically scarce development resources in developing countries. All theoretical frameworks aim to ignite and ultimately sustain the modernization process, centering on three core questions. First, how can the modernization process be initiated—or, as articulated in Rostow's Modernization Theory, how can "economic take-off" be achieved? Modernization Theory, Neoliberalism, and Globalization Theory offer convergent responses: the adoption of modern technology and scientific methods, the prioritization of trade development to generate savings and investment, and the strategic leveraging of foreign investment and aid to propel economic growth in developing nations. These Western perspectives collectively underscore a top-down, externally driven impetus as the catalyst for modernization (Shrum, 2000; Herkenrath & Bornschier, 2003). In contrast, Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Developmental State Theory advocate strategies to prevent a nation's development from succumbing to exploitative cycles or overreliance on foreign capital and assistance.

This divergence leads to a second question: given the constrained resources available to developing countries, how can these be allocated rationally to maximize their impact and advance modernization? This challenge underpins the emphasis in Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Developmental State Theory on approaches such as import substitution, export orientation, or strategic industrial policies. A third question emerges: how can developing countries balance the integration of foreign investment and aid with the avoidance of external dependency? Alternatively, how can they reconcile the need to cultivate endogenous self-sustaining capacities with the demands of enhancing the external development environment? In essence, how can a nation sustain a long-term commitment to development, rooted in a development consensus (Johnson, 1999)?

Third, development resilience serves as both a cornerstone of sustainable development and a vital pillar for the theoretical robustness of diverse modernization paths. When assessing the competitive dynamics among existing development theories, Modernization Theory, Neoliberalism, and Globalization Theory—grounded in the experiences of Western developed nations—evidently hold a dominant position. This primacy stems from a fundamental reality: modernization is a protracted process, and its success hinges significantly on the capacity to navigate changes and disruptions, known as development resilience (Giddens, 1971). This resilience not only shapes the outcome of modernization efforts but also sustains the vigor of associated theories. Three key factors determine its strength. First, economic diversity plays a pivotal role; it is widely acknowledged that a monolithic economic structure is harder to withstand internal and external shocks. Second, resilience depends on harmonizing development objectives with the external environment, ensuring the stability and sustainability of reforms. Such consistency signals a credible commitment to modernization, fostering a virtuous interplay between political reform and economic growth for both domestic and foreign investors. Conversely, unsustainable reforms can breed distorted incentives, triggering capital flight, short-term investments, or other actions that obstruct progress, resulting in a detrimental cycle of political and economic stagnation (Rodrik, 1989, 1992; Dornbusch, 1990). Third, resilience manifests in robust risk anticipation and crisis management capacities. Consequently, cultivating development resilience—centered on stable reforms and effective risk foresight—emerges as a critical imperative.

Although Western theories obscure the potential diversity of modernization paths, thereby overshadowing their underlying commonalities, the presence of competing theories and practices—most notably the remarkable advancements of Chinese path to modernization—enables both this diversity and commonality to be illuminated. Specifically, the shared attributes of diverse modernization paths encompass three key dimensions: forging development consensus, cultivating development momentum, and bolstering development resilience. These constitute universal elements that all nations must address when pursuing independent modernization. The recognition of these three commonalities emerges from an analysis of competing theories and divergent practices, thus rooted in diversity yet extending beyond it. By emphasizing these shared aspects, this approach preserves ample scope for countries to chart their

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own modernization courses, fostering not only the exploration of varied paths but also the exchange and mutual learning of experiences across diverse modernization endeavors.

2. Building Development Consensus

Modernization constitutes a historical process attainable only through collective endeavor. Consequently, any nation advancing toward modernization must persistently work to establish and sustain a national development consensus. To achieve this, political elites are tasked with assuming a leadership role, crafting strategic blueprints for national modernization, and securing widespread societal endorsement, thereby elevating these plans into a national consensus. The exchange of experiences in forging development consensus offers considerable scope for collaboration between China and Africa. A key lesson from Chinese path to modernization is the vanguard role of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in cultivating this consensus. In contrast, African continents and countries frequently devise comprehensive development strategies, yet only a subset successfully integrates traditional consensus-based governance with modern democratic practices. Many still grapple with the challenge of garnering sufficient societal support.

2.1 Strengthening Elite Leadership Capacity

The forces steering and constructing national development consensus typically manifest as political parties. Western discourse often highlights the CPC's distinctiveness, framing it as unique to China and challenging for African nations to replicate (Guan, 2017; Yagci, 2016). However, this perspective errs fundamentally by fixating on the CPC's organizational structure and operational mechanisms, while overlooking its primary function of forging national consensus. Similarly, the misguided counsel from the United States and Europe on African party politics stems from an inverted emphasis on legal compliance, internal party organization, and electoral performance, at the expense of recognizing political parties' critical role in consensus-building (Olaiya, 2016). Africa boasts a rich legacy of consensus governance, and blending this tradition with modern democratic frameworks can enhance the leadership capacity of political elites.

The CPC serves as the vanguard of both the Chinese working class and the broader Chinese populace and nation, steadfastly committed to uniting elites across diverse societal sectors through the framework of multi-party cooperation and political consultation. China is a multi-ethnic, super-large developing country, which requires its political party system to possess a strong capacity for social integration. The country has consistently been committed to upholding and improving its system of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the CPC's leadership. Central to this system is the CPC's role as the linchpin of social integration, complemented by the collaboration of various democratic parties, which broadens the scope and resilience of this integrative framework, thereby exemplifying its strength. As President Xi Jinping articulated during a symposium with non-Party members on January 6, 2023, "Adhering to the leadership of the Communist Party of China and steadfastly maintaining unity and concerted efforts with the CPC is the fundamental political foundation of multi-party cooperation" (Xi, 2023a). The political mandate of these democratic parties entails "preserving the political legacy, reinforcing political consensus, and consistently upholding unity and resolve". They are tasked with amplifying their contributions to rallying collective strength and advancing national priorities, mobilizing and galvanizing their extensive membership and affiliated communities to work cohesively toward the realization of Chinese path to modernization (Xi, 2023a).

Africa possesses a longstanding tradition of consensus decision-making, historically guided by traditional political elites, such as elders, who have long held a leadership role. Operating through mechanisms like open community assemblies or tribal councils, this consensus governance exhibits key traits: transparent participatory processes, the diffusion of power to prevent its concentration in a single

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entity or individual, and representation via councils of elders, which vary regionally (Legesse, 1973, 2000). Within this framework, conflicts or disputes are typically resolved through negotiation rather than adversarial procedures that inevitably yield winners and losers. Notable examples include the Ibo village council in eastern Nigeria, the Baito village council in Eritrea, the Kikuyu elders' council (kiama) in Kenya, the Kaya elders of the Mijikenda along Kenya's coast, and the Berber council systems in North Africa—all emblematic of traditional consensus governance. While population growth, bureaucratic expansion, and other factors increasingly complicate its application at the national level, it remains a vital tool for grassroots governance. This approach not only mitigates conflicts and tensions arising from national diversity but also tempers disputes in party and electoral politics.

Since independence, most African nations have successfully integrated traditional consensus governance with modern democratic practices, markedly enhancing the leadership capacity of political elites. However, the introduction of Western-style democratic models has plunged some countries into a tension between tradition and modernity, posing significant challenges to the development of elite leadership capacity. In fully embracing modern democratic politics, many African states confront issues of incomplete political modernization, state-building, and nation-building, allowing a "winner-takes-all" dynamic to overshadow consensus governance and rendering traditional elders less effective (Onuoha, 2011). Historically, colonial powers sought to dismantle these consensus mechanisms—for instance, the British appointed independent "invented chiefs" and "state-paid elders" outside traditional hierarchies to supplant local leaders. Though largely unsuccessful, such interventions left a lasting negative imprint on governance in countries like Somalia (via the Aqils) and Kenya (via the chieftaincy system) (Gartrell, 1983). Compounding this, the fusion of Western adversarial politics with Africa's ethnic diversity has severely strained the nationalization of political parties. In Kenya, for example, despite its democratic status since independence in 1963, both the one-party era (1963-1991) and the subsequent multi-party system have been marked by significant ethnic divisions—a key factor in the national unrest following the 2007 general election (Relife, 2008).

The achievements and limitations of African nations in harmonizing traditional consensus governance with modern democratic practices offer valuable insights not only for Africa but also for China. Similarly, the CPC's vanguard role and expertise in forging national development consensus provide lessons worth sharing with African countries. Central to this exchange is the imperative that political elites not only spearhead the formulation of national development strategies but also guide society toward a unified vision of its ultimate interests, thereby collectively advancing modernization objectives (Wiredu, 1997).

2.2 Shaping National Development Strategies

Development strategies embody the tangible expression of development consensus while serving as a concrete mechanism for its cultivation. Despite variations in elite leadership capacity between China and Africa, both have achieved significant strides in crafting such strategies. Whether exemplified by China's vision of national rejuvenation and its second centenary goal, or by the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 and the medium- to long-term development plans articulated by most African nations, these efforts reflect the persistent commitment of Chinese and African political elites to shaping national development trajectories.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has progressively refined its modernization strategy. Broadly, China's strategic modernization objectives have evolved through two key phases: the "Four Modernizations" framework and the "Two Centenary Goals", bridged by Deng Xiaoping's "Three-Step" development strategy. Following the successful realization of the first centenary goal—establishing a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020—the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in 2022, articulated a new vision: "to build a great modern socialist country in all respects, achieve the second centenary goal, and advance

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the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese path to modernization". This vision unfolds in two steps, aiming by mid-century "to build China into a leading modern socialist country with preeminent national strength and international influence" (Xi, 2022).

Africa has achieved notable progress in crafting development strategies, with most nations possessing well-articulated medium- to long-term plans. At the national level, African countries have developed tailored modernization strategies; for those with limited capacity to devise such plans, the AU has deployed country teams to assist in their formulation. These strategies typically distill three core elements: national strategic priorities, alignment with the AU's Agenda 2063, and adherence to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). This convergence underscores Agenda 2063 as a pivotal framework for Africa to realize the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while individual national strategies serve as complementary mechanisms to advance both the SDGs and Agenda 2063.

For instance, South Africa unveiled its National Development Plan 2030 in 2012, a roadmap aimed at eradicating poverty and reducing inequality—objectives that align closely with the SDGs. This plan emphasizes a whole-of-society approach, requiring coordinated efforts from government and social actors to drive national progress (Republic of South Africa, 2012). Similarly, despite internal governance challenges, Ethiopia launched its Ten-Year Development Plan (2021–2030) in 2020. This strategy integrates global and regional development frameworks, aspiring to position Ethiopia as a "beacon of prosperity in Africa", while recognizing that transitioning from poverty to prosperity demands sustained, society-wide commitment (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2020). At the continental level, the AU introduced Agenda 2063 in 2013, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) founding. This blueprint outlines seven overarching visions—encompassing political, economic, security, social, cultural, and regional integration goals—to guide Africa's development by 2063 (African Union, 2015). To operationalize this consensus, the AU has disaggregated these visions into 20 specific goals and 38 priority areas, while segmenting the 50-year vision into five ten-year implementation plans[2].

China and African countries exhibit distinct approaches to crafting development strategies. China formulates its medium- and long-term plans primarily by drawing on its own developmental trajectory, while integrating considerations of global trends. In contrast, African nations—constrained by smaller economic scales and greater vulnerability to external disruptions—prioritize aligning their development objectives with global and regional agendas, adopting a "single framework, multiple agendas" model to shape their medium- and long-term strategies. These divergent approaches to development strategy formulation underscore the feasibility of varied modernization paths and offer substantial opportunities for the exchange and mutual learning of diverse modernization experiences between China and Africa.

2.3 Fostering a Shared Societal Vision

The national development strategy shaped under the guidance of political elites must gain full support from the entire society to truly transform into a national development consensus, and to be effectively implemented and persistently upheld in the long term. Chinese path to modernization—characterized by its vast population and commitment to common prosperity for all—owes much of its success to the pervasive shared vision and strong support across society. This societal backing is equally critical for African nations pursuing independent modernization, though cultivating such a collective understanding remains a formidable challenge in many African contexts.

The fundamental reason why Chinese path to modernization has become a national development consensus lies in the fact that, throughout the journey toward modernization, the Communist Party of

[2] Source: https://au.int/agenda2063.

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China has consistently prioritized uniting all ethnic groups across the nation. The CPC's Constitution explicitly underscores the Party's dedication to serving the people wholeheartedly, give top priority to their interests, sharing weal and woe with them, and maintaining the closest possible ties with them. This commitment demands that the CPC harmonize respect for the laws of social development with the recognition of the people's role as historical actors, align the pursuit of lofty ideals with the well-being of the broader population, and integrate the party's goals with the realization of public interests. It must never distance itself from the masses, sharing in their joys and hardships, and standing in solidarity with them through times of abundance and scarcity alike (Xi, 2021a). As President Xi Jinping declared during the centennial celebration of the CPC's founding on July 1, 2021: "The nation is its people, and the people are the nation. As the Communist Party of China has led the people in fighting to establish and develop the People's Republic, it has really been fighting for their support. The Party has in the people its roots, its lifeblood, and its source of strength. It steadfastly represents the fundamental interests of the vast majority, bound to them in shared destiny, free of any parochial interests, and never beholden to any interest group, power group, or privileged elite" (Xi, 2021b).

The late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi asserted that achieving independent modernization requires a resolute commitment to "pursue collective growth and leapfrog development single-mindedly" and to prioritize the "development agenda" by forging a nationwide consensus (Zenawi, 2006). Yet, African nations continue to encounter significant obstacles in cultivating a shared societal vision. One persistent challenge is the prevalence of "growth without development", a phenomenon more evident in Africa due to insufficient progress generating limited resources, which complicates equitable distribution (An, 2010). In Ethiopia, for instance, stark disparities in resource allocation have fueled ethnic tensions, contributing to their escalation. Data from 2019 reveal substantial inequities in fiscal resources and per capita expenditure across major Ethiopian states: Tigray received 41% of federal allocations, far exceeding Oromia (26%), Amhara (25%), and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) (17%). Per capita spending further highlighted this imbalance, with Tigray at 1,443 birr[3], compared to 733 birr in Oromia, 880 birr in Amhara, and 311 birr in the SNNPR (Meester, 2021). Consequently, despite rapid development under Meles's leadership, societal support for national strategies remained fragile, eroding sharply after his death in 2012. This instability undermined the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) vanguard role in modernization, precipitating a collapse of national consensus and jeopardizing Ethiopia's medium- to long-term development prospects (Zhou, 2019).

Compounding these internal challenges, Western ideologies command significant influence at the societal level in Africa, particularly through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These entities play multifaceted roles in African development, broadly classifiable into four types based on their focus and objectives: development facilitators, bridge builders, crisis mitigators, and troublemakers. However, most African NGOs rely heavily on external funding and theories, predominantly from Western sources. This external ideological sway often skews their priorities toward human rights, accountability, and education, at the expense of economic and livelihood concerns (Lawrence, 2019). As a result, such imported NGOs can exacerbate political instability and economic underdevelopment, further hindering the establishment of a cohesive national development consensus (Zhang, 2020).

Certainly, numerous African countries have formulated development strategies that, for specific periods, garnered substantial societal support, thereby fostering the advancement of these developmental states. The parallels and divergences in the process of cultivating development consensus between China and Africa hinge not only on the leadership capacity of political elites but also on factors such as a nation's commitment to an autonomous development trajectory and the degree of sustainability in

[3] In 2019, 1 US dollar could be exchanged for 29.11 birr.

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its developmental efforts. Put differently, forging a development consensus is not an isolated endeavor; rather, it is intricately linked to development momentum, resilience, and related dimensions.

3. Cultivating Development Momentum

Modernization entails progress and development, yet any nation embarking on this journey may encounter the challenge of scarce resources in its nascent stages. Consequently, the key to a nation independently advancing toward modernization lies in cultivating sustainable development momentum. This process encompasses three critical dimensions: first, securing an endogenous impetus by prioritizing self-reliant development momentum, thereby sidestepping the exploitative "center-periphery" dynamics of Dependency Theory or the "periphery-semi-periphery-core" hierarchy of World-system Theory; second, optimizing resource allocation to cultivate breakthrough momentum, maximizing the efficacy of limited resources; and third, steadfastly advancing reform and openness with development as the focal point, committing to sustainable momentum while ensuring the judicious distribution of scarce resources across sectors such as development, security, and governance.

3.1 Securing Endogenous Impetus

Dependency Theory and World-system Theory offer their most profound theoretical contribution by debunking the deterministic and linear fallacies of modernization theory, asserting that developing nations must chart an autonomous course toward modernization—a pursuit premised on securing endogenous impetus. The modernization trajectories of both China and African countries demonstrate that such self-generated momentum is essential for a nation to establish a development dynamic authentically its own, thereby providing a robust foundation for sustained modernization over the long term.

China's remarkable success in modernization is rooted in its unwavering commitment to charting an independent path and fostering endogenous drivers of growth. As early as 1979, Deng Xiaoping articulated this vision, stating, "In the past, just as our democratic revolution had to be tailored to China's realities in the past,our current efforts in construction must also be grounded in unique conditions, paving the way for a Chinese path to modernization path" (Deng, 1993). This marked the CPC's initial articulation of the "Chinese path to modernization path" as a guiding vision. President Xi Jinping has further underscored this approach, emphasizing that its essence lies in upholding independence while exploring the diversity of modernization trajectories. He has argued that modernization is neither the exclusive domain of a select few nations nor a binary choice; it defies a uniform, replicable template of "copy and paste". Instead, a nation's modernization must adhere to universal principles while being rooted in its unique national conditions and distinctive characteristics (People's Daily, 2023). A key factor in the triumph of Chinese path to modernization is its cultivation of a self-reliant development path through endogenous impetus, offering a novel framework for other developing countries to pursue independent and sustainable progress.

Since achieving political independence, African nations have pursued economic sovereignty, with the developmental state model emerging as a proven mechanism for fostering autonomy and endogenous development (Mulikita, 2015). For instance, Ghana, Tanzania, and Mauritius recorded notable economic gains in the 1970s and 1980s, while Ethiopia stood out as a post-Cold War exemplar of African developmental states, particularly in the early 21st century. Former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi argued that neoliberalism proves ineffective in Africa, asserting that without state intervention or a robust developmental state, underdeveloped economies cannot advance national progress (Gill, 2012). Despite experiencing at least two setbacks, the developmental state approach retained support from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), which, entering the 2010s, urged its adoption. UNECA contended that neoliberalism's free-market paradigm is not the sole pathway

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to development, advocating a pivotal state role in guiding developing nations toward modernization (UNECA, 2011).

Beyond this model, African countries have sought endogenous impetus from their traditional wisdom. Since the 1990s, a wave of "retraditionalization" has swept across the continent, blending bottom-up self-affirmation with top-down state integration of customary practices to bolster ideological foundations for independent development (Kyed & Buur, 2007). This trend persists today, as evidenced by Afrobarometer surveys initiated in 2008, which reveal the enduring influence of traditional authorities. African residents widely endorse their roles in community governance, development initiatives, and land allocation (Logan & Amakoh, 2022). Concurrently, given the smaller economic scales of most African nations, achieving collective endogenous development through unity and cooperation remains vital. The AU, succeeding the Organization of African Unity (OAU), has long championed regional and continental integration. By 2019, the African Regional Integration Index—jointly developed by the AU, the African Development Bank, and UNECA—indicated significant progress: 25 countries achieved medium integration (scores of 0.33–0.66), though 29 lagged at lower levels (0–0.33). Notably, Africa as a whole neared the medium threshold, registering a score of 0.327 in 2019, signaling a trajectory toward enhanced cohesion.[4]

While African nations have made strides in pursuing endogenous development paths, they remain hampered by constraints such as limited economic scale, historical legacies, and the dynamics of the international system. In some African countries, the conceptualization of how to secure endogenous impetus remains underdeveloped, leaving them vulnerable to Western misguidance. For instance, Africa's current debt risks largely stem from infrastructure projects characterized by prolonged investment and return cycles, necessitating a careful equilibrium between debt accumulation and infrastructure advancement. Yet, swayed by the Western narrative of the "debt trap", many African nations have seen their infrastructure development falter. Consequently, the need for China and Africa to exchange and mutually learn from their experiences in forging and sustaining independent development trajectories has grown increasingly pressing.

3.2 Optimizing Resource Allocation

For most developing nations, resources are severely constrained, rendering the effective utilization of these limited assets a critical priority. Consequently, any developing country striving for independent modernization must prioritize optimizing resource allocation, particularly by channeling resources into strategic sectors to secure significant breakthroughs in the near term, thereby catalyzing comprehensive national economic advancement.

China has consistently prioritized optimizing resource allocation, driving nationwide development by leveraging a "point-to-surface" strategy that focuses on key areas to stimulate broader progress. For instance, guided by a national consensus on poverty alleviation, China achieved its goal of establishing a moderately prosperous society by refining resource distribution methods. By the end of 2020, the country had lifted all 98.99 million rural residents living below the poverty line out of poverty in all 832 designated counties and 128,000 villages, and met the poverty reduction target of the 2030 Agenda a decade ahead of schedule (State Council Information Office [SCIO], 2021). Similarly, in the face of intensifying technological competition and suppression from the United States, President Xi Jinping underscored the imperative to harness market mechanisms, strategically allocate innovation resources to align with national priorities, bolster strategic scientific and technological capabilities, enhance the systemic capacity for research, and establish competitive edges to seize the initiative in key domains (People's Daily, 2022). Through such optimization, China has attained modernization achievements

[4] Source: https://www.integrate-africa.org/rankings/all-africa/.

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in a relatively brief span—achievements that took Western nations centuries to reach — signifying a transformative leap from "catching up with the times" to "leading the times" on the global stage (Hao & Huang, 2020).

African nations have persistently sought to enhance resource allocation, often by establishing special economic zones (SEZs) as growth poles, leveraging their catalytic effects to drive systemic economic expansion (Oqubay, 2022). Data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reveals a marked rise in SEZ adoption post-Cold War: the number of African countries with SEZs grew from 37 to 54 over two decades, while the total number of SEZs across the continent surged from 20 in 1990 to 237 by 2020. Kenya leads with 61 zones, followed by Nigeria (38), Ethiopia (18), and Egypt (10) (UNCTAD, 2021). At the continental level, to operationalize the AU's Agenda 2063 effectively, the AU has prioritized resource allocation across 15 flagship projects, including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the African Commodities Strategy, the African High-Speed Railway Network, and the Single African Air Transport Market, etc.

The AfCFTA exemplifies Africa's strategic resource optimization. Designed to amplify Africa's collective voice and policy influence in global trade negotiations, the AfCFTA seeks to boost intra-African trade, elevate Africa's global trade standing, and accelerate regional and continental integration. Upon completion, it will constitute the world's largest free trade area, encompassing 54 countries and 1.3 billion people, with a combined GDP of 3.4 trillion US dollars. The World Bank projects that full implementation of the AfCFTA will increase Africa's real income by 7% by 2035—equivalent to 445 billion US dollars (in 2014 prices)—while generating an additional 76 billion US dollars in global growth outside Africa, contributing an estimated 0.1 percentage point to world economic expansion. Specifically, by 2035, the AfCFTA is expected to enhance export growth by 29% and import growth by 7%, without adversely affecting non-member trade (World Bank Group, 2020). Its significance for intra-continental trade is profound, with projections suggesting a potential 34% increase by 2045 compared to a no-AfCFTA scenario (UNECA, 2023).

Regarding specific approaches to optimizing resource allocation, China and African nations share notable similarities. Neither has relied solely on selective strategic industrial policies; instead, both have embraced integrative strategies—either through industry consolidation or geographic clustering—to maximize the impact of scarce resources in the short term. This "point-to-surface" approach seeks to catalyze holistic development across political, economic, and social domains. In contrast, the multi-party systems prevalent in most African countries introduce complexities: divergent interests and ideological stances among political parties, coupled with ethnic and societal tensions within and across nations, frequently impede resource allocation from achieving its intended outcomes.

3.3 Sustaining Reform and Openness with Development as the Priority

For developing nations pursuing independent modernization, sustaining reform and openness is imperative. This entails overhauling domestic political and economic systems, enhancing market access and business environments to attract foreign capital, while guarding against external dependency. Notably, international organizations and donor countries often prioritize security and governance improvements when providing investment and aid, potentially diverting host nations' scarce development resources. Consequently, for countries with limited means, securing resources for endogenous momentum and shielding against external pressures that skew the development environment are pivotal to a successful modernization trajectory. In essence, the enduring vitality of a national economy hinges on the continuous empowerment derived from reform and openness, which demands a development-centric approach to rationally allocate finite resources across sectors such as development, security, and governance—an essential safeguard for overcoming deficits in development momentum.

China's modernization owes much of its success to this strategy of reform and openness. President Xi Jinping has noted: "Reform and opening-up is the pivotal move that determined the fate

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of contemporary China, as well as the decisive step toward achieving the 'Two Centenary Goals' and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xi, 2012). He further emphasized, "We must persist in reform and opening-up as the pivotal strategy to address development challenges and navigate risks and obstacles on the path forward." (People's Daily, 2024). How, then, should this be pursued? He clarified, "We must take development as our first priority… steadfastly centering economic construction and adhering unwaveringly to the principle that development is the hard principle" (Xi, 2018d). This principle reflects a cornerstone of China's over four decades of reform and opening-up. Since 1979, China has prioritized refining its business environment to draw foreign investment. World Bank data reveal that between 2005 and 2019, global economies implemented 3,847 reform measures; China ranked second with 42, trailing only India's 48 (World Bank, 2020)[5]. These market-oriented reforms markedly boosted China's appeal to foreign capital post-1992, with foreign investment averaging 3.87% of GDP from 1992 to 2016[6]. This influx of funds, technology, and market access has fueled rapid economic growth, enabling China to cultivate self-sustaining capacities. Consequently, the axiom that "development unlocks solutions to all challenges" has been fully realized, with a balanced interplay of reform, development, and stability reinforcing China's focus on development primacy and momentum

In contrast to China, African nations face an acute need for foreign investment and aid to bolster economic development, constrained by severely limited domestic resources. Western perspectives often attribute Africa's underdevelopment to inadequate security and weak governance, advocating substantial resource allocation to these sectors as a prerequisite for development. Influenced by what may be termed the "priority of development conditions" theory, a significant share of Western funding to Africa is directed toward security and governance rather than economic development. This redirection compresses resources available for productive sectors—those capable of generating self-sustaining growth—hindering African countries from cultivating authentic endogenous momentum. Since the 1980s, many African nations have pursued market-oriented reforms, progressively easing restrictions on market access to attract foreign capital through greater openness. Yet, under pressure from Western investors and donors to prioritize governance and security improvements, these countries frequently see their development focus waver, ultimately stunting productivity gains.

Consider the experiences of Botswana, Mauritius, and Tanzania, which stand out for attracting foreign investment exceeding 2% of GDP over sustained periods since 1979. Botswana, widely regarded as an exemplar of the African developmental state, drew significant inflows during 1979–1987 and 2002–2009, averaging 6.56% and 4.77% of GDP annually in those spans, respectively. Mauritius maintained an average of 3.14% from 2007 to 2022, dipping below 2% in only three years, with a low of 1.8%. Tanzania averaged 3.30% from 1995 to 2015, falling below 2% in just one year over that 21-year period[7]. These nations achieved notable development during peak investment phases; however, their progress faltered when inflows declined, underscoring a persistent challenge: foreign investment, while impactful, has yet to substantially enhance the sustainability of their development momentum.

It merits emphasis that both China and African nations recognize the pivotal role of reform and openness in fostering economic growth. Throughout this process, China's focus on harmonizing reform, development, and stability aligns closely—indeed, often converges—with the development–security–governance nexus underscored by Western and African perspectives. This convergence establishes a foundation for mutual learning in modernization between China and Africa. Here, "development" denotes comprehensive progress anchored in economic growth; "stability" and "security" are near-synonyms, though "stability" implies a lower threshold of order. "Reform" functions as the active

[5] https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/doingbusiness
[6] Calculated by author based on data from the World Bank database https://data.worldbank.org.
[7] Calculated by author based on data from the World Bank database https://data.worldbank.org.

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mechanism of "governance", aimed at enhancing governance efficiency—essentially, advancing the modernization of national governance systems and capacities (Xi, 2021c). Consequently, China's approach to prioritizing development within its reform and openness framework, thereby sustaining development momentum, offers valuable insights not only for exchange with African developing nations but also as a model for other developing countries pursuing modernization.

4. Strengthening Development Resilience

There has never been a smooth path to modernization. Both external shocks and internal risks can lead to setbacks or even interruptions in the development process. On the journey towards modernization, all countries must overcome various internal and external crises and continuously enhance development resilience, which specifically covers three elements: first, to diversify risks through an economic diversification strategy and enhance risk resistance; second, to ensure stability through gradual and incremental reforms and create a virtuous cycle of reform; third, to strengthen prevention with a bottom-line mindset that anticipates dangers in times of safety, fostering capabilities in crisis early warning and risk management.

4.1 Economic Diversification Strategy

To bolster development resilience, nations must avoid entrapment in dependency or inequitable structures, encompassing both internal monolithic economic frameworks and external reliance on investment and aid. An economic diversification strategy is thus paramount, serving dual purposes: fostering a robust, multifaceted domestic industrial and national economic system, and cultivating a broad array of international partners and resource channels in foreign cooperation.

Despite starting from a position of poverty and an agrarian economy at the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China evolved into a nation with a comprehensive industrial system within just over seven decades, encompassing all categories in the United Nations' industrial classification. After 1949, China not only achieved economic diversification but also swiftly established an independent and relatively complete industrial and economic system, laying a critical material foundation for modernization. In 1952, China's total industrial output stood at a mere 34.9 billion yuan; by 1979, the start of reform and opening-up, it had risen to 423.7 billion yuan. This figure surged to nearly 2.4 trillion yuan by 1990, 8.5 trillion yuan by 2000, nearly 70 trillion yuan by 2010, and reached 110 trillion yuan by 2020[8]. As its domestic economic system matured, China's roster of international economic partners grew increasingly diverse. Today, China serves as the primary trading partner for over 140 countries and regions and a key investment source for a growing number. Since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013, China has signed cooperation agreements with over 150 countries and 30 international organizations, hosted three Belt and Road International Cooperation Summits, and established more than 20 multilateral platforms in specialized fields. From 2013 to 2022, trade with BRI partner countries totaled 19.1 trillion US dollars (reflecting an average annual growth of 6.4%), cumulative two-way investment surpassed 380 billion US dollars, and newly signed contracts and completed project turnovers amounted to 2 trillion US dollars and 1.3 trillion US dollars, respectively (State Council Information Office [SCIO], 2023).

Likewise, economic diversification represents a persistent, long-term ambition for the African continent and its nations, as evidenced by the AU's advocacy for regional integration and the economic strategies of countries like Ethiopia, which embedded diversification objectives in its 2020–2030 development plan (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2020). Yet, historical legacies have

[8] See: China Statistical Yearbook by National Bureau of Statistics, http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj.

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left many African economies with significant structural rigidity, manifesting in three primary forms. First, resource-abundant nations predominantly depend on commodity exports, rendering them highly susceptible to the "resource curse". Second, certain countries, shaped by colonial legacies, remain tethered to single-industry economies. Third, resource-scarce nations lacking viable economic crops often fall into patterns of "aid dependency".

This structural homogeneity is most starkly reflected in Africa's reliance on commodity exports. The UNCTAD classifies a country as commodity-dependent if a single commodity constitutes over 60% of its total export value; by this measure, 83% of African nations qualify, comprising 45% of such countries globally. Predominantly, these exports consist of agricultural products, minerals, and oil and natural gas, with 45 of Africa's 54 countries deriving over 70% of their export value from a single primary product (UNCTAD, 2022). Such dependence has entrenched economic vulnerabilities: over 80% of Africa's workforce is employed in the informal sector, where labor productivity has declined—from 11.9% in 1960 to 7.7% in 2017 (Usman and Landry, 2021). Moreover, this homogeneous economic structure has deepened reliance on foreign investment and aid, further complicating efforts to cultivate sustainable development momentum.

Despite stark disparities in economic scale between China and African nations, the African continent as a whole retains significant potential for developing a comprehensive industrial framework and a robust national economic system. Consequently, the exchange of sectoral expertise and mutual learning between China and African countries—coupled with broader continental collaboration—hold critical importance for bolstering the development resilience of Africa and its constituent states.

4.2 Pursuing Gradual Reform

Modernization unfolds as a protracted process, invariably intertwined with reform, wherein a virtuous reform cycle serves as a vital linchpin for sustaining development resilience. While not an absolute necessity, the gradual pace of reform strongly correlates with this virtuous cycle; excessively abrupt reforms frequently provoke sharp setbacks, triggering a detrimental spiral of reform failure. Though shaped by distinct national contexts, China and African countries share a common commitment to calibrating the tempo of reform to foster such a constructive cycle.

Chinese path to modernization steadfastly employs a systemic approach, epitomized by the gradual reform strategy of "crossing the river by feeling for stones". President Xi Jinping has repeatedly underscored that China, as a vast developing nation in the initial phase of socialism, is navigating profound and pervasive social transformations. Advancing reform, fostering development, and recalibrating interest dynamics require a delicate equilibrium, where a single adjustment can ripple across multiple domains (Xi, 2022). Reform and openness, as a trailblazing endeavor without precedent, demand adherence to a rigorous methodology, progressing through iterative practice and exploration. The "crossing the river by feeling for stones" approach—uniquely tailored to China's national context—entails discerning developmental patterns through cautious, incremental steps. This method mitigates social upheaval stemming from uncertainty or ill-conceived measures, ensuring a stable foundation for reform and the steady realization of objectives.

Far from being an outdated tactic, "crossing the river by feeling for stones" reflects an understanding of objective developmental laws and aligns with the dialectical principle of quantitative shifts culminating in qualitative change. President Xi Jinping has clarified, "It is a misconception to suggest that this approach was necessary only in the early stages of reform and opening-up and is now obsolete… We must continue employing strategies like pilot explorations and initial trials, accruing experience, forging consensus, and, once clarity and confidence are secured, advancing methodically—amassing incremental gains into major victories" (Xi, 2018a). Complementing this gradualism, China balances incremental and structural reforms with a prudent strategy, prioritizing "shared development" as a core developmental ethos. The "invisible hand" of the market, he asserts, must not only expand the

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economic "pie" but also ensure its equitable distribution (People's Daily, 2016).

African nations exhibit diverse developmental contexts, resulting in varied approaches and outcomes in advancing reform. Governments of African developmental states often wield stable political authority, unburdened by fears of reform discontinuation, enabling them to enact measured and consistent reform policies. For instance, the progress of Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania owes much to such steadfast governance expectations. Since 1995, Rwanda's government has pursued national economic advancement with unwavering commitment, unveiling "Vision 2020" in 2000 and "Vision 2050" in 2016. These strategies aim to elevate Rwanda into the ranks of low-middle-income status by 2020, upper-middle-income by 2035, and high-income by 2050. Bolstered by a stabilizing political landscape and incremental reform measures, Rwanda's developmental state model has yielded tangible results (Jiang & Zhu, 2022). Conversely, some African leaders have distorted party competition, transforming it from a consensus-building mechanism into a vehicle for personal gain. Such rulers often push reforms recklessly, prioritizing short-term gains over sustainability, which frequently precipitates a detrimental cycle of reform failure.

Beyond party politics, the virtuous cycle of reform in African nations can be disrupted by what may be termed "ambition politics". Over six decades since independence, Africa has crafted numerous strategic plans at continental and national levels, yet many have faltered due to overly ambitious objectives. The AU's Agenda 2063, for example, set an audacious target of "Silencing the Guns by 2020", which proved unattainable, necessitating an extension to 2030. Similarly, to address lagging development momentum, the AU proposed establishing four major financial institutions: the African Investment Bank and Pan-African Stock Exchange by 2016, the African Monetary Fund by 2018, and the African Central Bank by 2028 or 2034 (African Union, 2015). This vision, equally ambitious, saw initial optimism—its *First Continental Report on The Implementation of Agenda 2063* in 2020 rated progress at 92%—yet by 2021, the *Second Continental Report on The Implementation of Agenda 2063* in 2022 deemed it "unassessable", signaling significant implementation hurdles (African Union, 2020, 2022). Given the disparity in economic scale between China and African countries, their sensitivity to gradual reform diverges naturally. Africa's smaller economies often enable a swifter reform tempo. Thus, the exchange and mutual learning of reform experiences not only fortify each other's reform consensus but also illuminate the potential for diverse modernization trajectories.

4.3 Strengthening Early Warning and Crisis Management Capacities

The enduring relevance of theories hinges on their grounding in reality. Dependency Theory, World-system Theory, and Developmental State Theory all grapple with the stability and sustainability of empirical support, a challenge that significantly undermines their theoretical vigor. Consequently, proactive risk anticipation and mitigation during the modernization process emerge as critical mechanisms for averting developmental volatility and bolstering resilience.

A pivotal factor in the success of Chinese path to modernization is the Chinese government's steadfast emphasis on anticipating and addressing risks throughout the development trajectory. On one hand, China recognizes that advancing modernization demands unwavering strategic resolve and focus. As President Xi Jinping puts it, this systematic endeavor necessitates holistic planning and coordinated execution: "We must enhance strategic foresight, accurately discern the inevitable trajectories of progress, keenly identify emerging opportunities and challenges, and deploy scientific strategies to anticipate and shape the future" (Xi, 2023b). On the other hand, China's leadership maintains a sober awareness, consistently stressing the need for vigilance amid prosperity. This approach unfolds across four key dimensions. First, the path ahead will not be without turbulence. Greater achievements demand heightened caution and a sense of vigilance in times of calm; strategic or drastic mistake must be avoided. Second, confronting a volatile global landscape, intricate regional dynamics, and the formidable tasks of reform, development, and stability, the Chinese leadership must balance proactive

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risk prevention with sophisticated strategies to neutralize threats—preparing not only to counter risks but also to seize opportunities, transforming challenges into advantages (Xi, 2018b). Third, it is essential to integrate development and security, fostering robust opportunity-and-risk awareness, "bottom-line thinking", thorough risk assessment, and preemptive measures to address vulnerabilities, thereby ensuring steady modernization progress through adept management of diverse challenges (Xi, 2020). Fourth, it is important to vigilantly monitor and contain risk spillovers across domains, thus preventing non-public risks from escalating into public risks and non-political risks from evolving into political risks (Xi, 2018c). Guided by these principles, China has navigated profound shifts in the global development environment—particularly in trade patterns—by implementing economic measures to forge a new dual-circulation framework, wherein domestic and international economic circulations mutually reinforce each other.

Given the acute security challenges encountered in their development trajectories, African nations prioritize early warning and crisis management as integral components of capacity building, often pursuing these aims collectively. Drawing on the sub-regional model of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which established an Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), the AU launched the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) in 2009. Distinctively, CEWS focuses on preempting and addressing security risks—particularly grassroots social conflicts—rather than engaging deeply with conventional military or armed confrontations. This system has generally bolstered the development resilience of African sub-regions (Gnanguenon, 2021; Zhang, 2016). Nevertheless, Africa's capacities for early warning and crisis management remain comparatively limited, posing challenges to ensuring sustainable development.

At the national level, many African countries exhibit insufficient sensitivity to latent risks. Ethiopia, for instance, emerged as a flagship of "Africa Rising" in the 21st century, yet its ethnic federalism and inequitable distribution of developmental gains were never systematically mitigated. This structural oversight constitutes a root cause of the profound setbacks Ethiopia faced following Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's death in 2012. Similarly, escalating debt risks in countries like Zambia, Nigeria, and South Africa stem from expansionary fiscal policies paired with inadequate risk foresight. From 2011 to 2021, their debt growth rates frequently outpaced export growth, with substantial borrowing persisting even during years of negative export performance, amplifying their vulnerability[9]. On a continental scale, Africa's economic trajectory since independence has been marked by significant volatility: capable of swift transitions from stagnation to rapid growth, or precipitous declines. In the first two decades post-independence (1961–1980), Africa's average annual economic growth rate reached 4.19%, yet fluctuations were stark—surging from -1.23% in 1967 to a record 10.24% in 1970, then plummeting from 7.92% in 1974 to -0.12% in 1975. Over the broader period of 1960–2021, Africa's growth rate oscillated by as much as 5,500%, dwarfing the global average amplitude of 1,100% (UNECA, 2023)[10].

There is significant potential for experience sharing and mutual learning between China, which is building independent risk early warning and management capabilities, and the African continent, which is developing collective risk early warning and control capacities. In an era of globalization, where complex risks in the modernization process necessitate multi-nation collaboration, there is a compelling need for China and Africa to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation and share experiences in risk anticipation and management.

5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout world history, Eastern nations have led global development for a far longer period,

[9] Calculated by author based on data from the World Bank database, https://data.worldbank.org.
[10] Calculated by author based on data from the World Bank database, https://data.worldbank.org.

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while the dominance of Western nations on the path to modernization has been a phenomenon of only the past 400 years. Viewed in this light, Westernization is far from the sole effective route to modernization. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communists, the Chinese people have achieved the success of Chinese path to modernization in a relatively short period, providing a new reference for developing countries to independently pursue their own paths to modernization.

The paramount value of exchanging and mutually learning from modernization experiences between China and Africa lies in its dual impact: it not only fosters the concurrent advancement of Chinese and African paths to modernization, enriching the tapestry of modernization pathways, but also underscores the shared framework of "development consensus, momentum, and resilience" underlying these diverse trajectories. This exchange offers a compelling model for other developing nations pursuing autonomous modernization. The virtuous cycle of cultivating development consensus, sustaining momentum, and fortifying resilience serves as a foundational pillar for numerous developing countries—including China and African states—to independently navigate their modernization journeys.

The consolidation of development consensus not only empowers these nations to counter the "lecturing" approach of the United States and Europe while fostering internal solidarity of the "Global South". Such solidarity helps bolster national identity, mitigates tensions between national and ethnic affiliations, and enhance governance capabilities holistically. Development momentum, in turn, enables countries to assert agency over external funding, addressing internal challenges—most notably by enabling the self-sustaining generation of development resources. This shift toward non-zero-sum, incremental reforms alleviates the friction and instability often triggered by zero-sum structural changes, thereby strengthening the security and governance conditions essential for sustainable progress. Finally, development resilience equips nations to adeptly manage both exogenous crises—natural or human-induced—and internal risks, reinforcing predictive and mitigative capacities. Such resilience not only consolidates national consensus but also minimizes resource wastage, optimizing the efficacy of developmental momentum.

Through this reciprocal engagement, China and Africa can amplify the virtuous interplay of consensus, momentum, and resilience, paving the way for a broader array of developing nations to chart independent modernization paths.

It merits noting that commonality and diversity are mutually constitutive: commonality underpins diversity, yet it is diversity that illuminates commonality. Consequently, the exchange and mutual learning of global modernization experiences—exemplified by China and Africa—must honor both dimensions, resisting any conflation of the two. This balanced approach enables nations to pursue independent modernization trajectories while enriching the multifaceted tapestry of human development pathways.

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