

African Free Trade Area Launched in Niger

55-nation bloc seeks to fuel economies around the continent

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On July 4 the 12th Extraordinary Summit of the African Union (AU) was held in Niamey, Niger to officially proclaim a project that is inherent within the notions of sovereignty and unity on the continent.

This African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) gathering took place in a nation in the western region which is endowed with uranium, one of the most strategic minerals in the world utilized for industrial, scientific and military purposes.

These contradictions within Niger related to its mineral wealth and the abject impoverishment of the masses of working class and rural people illustrates clearly the tremendous hurdles in which Africa must overcome to harness the economic and social potential of the AU member-states. The AfCFTA was announced at a previous AU Summit in Kigali, Rwanda on March 21, 2018.

Over the past 16 months some 27 governments have ratified the agreement while a total of 54 have signed the document mandating its establishment. The West African state of Ghana, once the fountainhead of Pan-Africanism during the 1950s and early to mid-1960s under the leadership of President Kwame Nkrumah, the foremost proponent of continental unification and socialism, was designated to host the secretariat for the AfCFTA.



Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie I in Ethiopia at the founding of the Organization of African Unity,
May 1963

In a statement [released by the AU](#) on July 7, it says of the structure for the new continental

body that:

“The AfCFTA will be governed by five operational instruments, i.e. the Rules of Origin; the online negotiating forum; the monitoring and elimination of non-tariff barriers; a digital payments system and the African Trade Observatory. Each one was launched by different Heads of State and Government that included President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi of Egypt who is current Chairperson of the AU; Mr. Moussa Faki Makamat, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission; and President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger, who is the Champion of the AfCFTA.”

Nevertheless, analysts have pointed to prospective barriers for the implementation of the AfCFTA emanating from the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Africa remains divided into 55 separate states where intra-regional and class differences are a source of the conflicts which exists inside many countries.

These impediments are also related to the lack of adequate transportation and telecommunications infrastructure. In addition, the reliance upon western foreign exchange currency in the arena of trade provides incentives for the maintenance of the status-quo.

The AU statement issued on July 7 spoke to the current 1.2 billion people in Africa and projected 2.5 billion by 2050 as a source of strength related to the realization of sustainable economic growth. Six years ago at the AU, the Agenda 2063 was affirmed aimed at economic integration and the adoption of a single currency on the continent.

Estimates indicate that with the actual operationalization of the AfCFTA program the region would become a \$3.4 trillion economic zone. The breaking down of borders and the lifting of tariffs would in effect facilitate internal African trade.

At present only 17% of trade in Africa is conducted with AU states. This can be contrasted with Asia where intra-continental trade stands at 59% and in Europe where it is 69%.

Moreover, the uneven development among various states must be transcended considering that countries such as the Republic of South Africa, the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Egypt encompass a sizable portion of the continental Gross Domestic Product (GDP). South Africa is by far the most industrialized state on the continent while countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Libya and Sudan are leaders in the extraction and export of petroleum.

Overcoming Dependency as a Prerequisite for Development

An indisputable historical fact is that Africa has been subjected to enslavement, colonization and neo-colonialism through the rise and dominance of imperialism since the middle decades of the 15th century. This cannot be overlooked in making any honest assessment of the capacity for genuine growth and development.

There has been significant growth within African economies since the beginning of the 21st century. However, the reliance on export-based economic planning is objectively related to the stated mandate of the AfCFTA. Until the challenge of continental integration is seriously addressed the much desired substantial take off will not materialize.

Today's neo-colonial existence is definitely a by-product of the post-independence era crises of continuing underdevelopment, imperialist exploitation as well as the ongoing military and intelligence interference in the internal affairs of all AU member-states. The nation of Niger has been a focal point of Pentagon and French military engagement.

Through the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Paris-engineered Operation Barkhane the imperialist governments not only have troops stationed on Nigerien soil. There is the presence of elaborate intelligence-gathering mechanisms including the positioning of highly-sophisticated reaper and predator drones in Niger. All across Africa, the Pentagon is in evidence under the guise of anti-terrorism and national security. Ultimately, Africa is responsible for its own security against reactionary elements which have their origins within the imperialist centers.

The above-mentioned AU statement on the launch of the operational phase of the AfCTFA emphasizes the link between security and development by stating:

“The Chairperson (Moussa Faki Mahamat of Chad) also highlighted the importance of peace building and security on the continent, adding that ‘it would be a delusion to talk of trade and development without peace and security.’ He also stressed that, for the AfCFTA to be effective, there is [the] need to open borders to other Africans. In this light, host President Mr. Mahamadou Issoufou (Niger), said the free trade area will tear down borders inherited from Africa’s colonial past and ensure full continental integration.”

Nevertheless, the presence of western military forces within AU member-states represents the antithesis of the progressive and revolutionary currents of Pan-Africanism emanating from the First All-African Peoples Conference (AAPC) of December 1958 in Ghana right through to the armed resistance phase to colonialism, the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor to the AU, and the burgeoning class struggle against a comprador elite propped up by international finance capital. Under the present circumstances, the imperialists are firmly positioned to stifle any economic development planning which views the dominance of the world capitalist system as the major obstruction to Africa making a decisive turn in the direction of its rightful trajectory towards continental unification based upon the interests of the majority of its people.

The Political Essentials of Continental Integration

Consequently, a struggle must be opened up against the role of Washington and Brussels where the base of African underdevelopment strategies originate. As many historical materialist theorists have articulated over the decades, the development of North America and Western Europe was carried out through the underdevelopment of Africa.

Fundamentally the character of U.S., British and European Union (EU) foreign policy has not changed since the period of the Cold War. Wall Street, London and the Eurozone states have no intentions of relinquishing their profit-making capacity where the foundation of the exploitative system is situated. The Pentagon, NATO and its auxiliary units are in Africa and other regions of the world to police the maintenance of existing structures in the international division of labor and economic power.

Of course there are other states and regional blocs vying for Africa’s attention in the contemporary world situation such as the People’s Republic of China, the Russian Federation

and socialist-oriented states in Latin America. The U.S. ruling class has intensified its economic and military wars against these countries which provide an alternative form of development strategies for Africa and its people.

The attacks by Washington and its allies against the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the Republic of Cuba are a case point. These two states along with Bolivia are attempting to build their own societies where the well-being of the majority of its people remains primary. Consequently, there are consistent attempts at subversion, diplomatic isolation and economic destabilization by the current administration of President Donald Trump.



African Union 12th Extraordinary Summit to Launch the AfCFTA in Niger, July 4, 2019

As it relates to China and Russia, the twin political capitalist parties in the U.S. view the increasing influence of Beijing and Moscow as a threat to imperialist hegemony. The imposition of trade tariffs, sanctions and disinformation campaigns will undoubtedly lead to another world war. What will the AU member-states role going forward be in this escalating hostile geo-political situation which threatens a protracted international conflagration?

Capitalism and its global outgrowth of imperialism cannot provide any viable solutions for Africa's development. The abolition of class society, the expulsion of western military interests from the continent and the broadening of trade policy inside and outside of Africa is the only way out of the foreseeable quagmire.

Socialism as an indispensable economic system to counter the imperialist states requires the organization and mobilization of the proletariat, farmers, youth and revolutionary intelligentsia centered on a program of immediate integration and unification. The rising problems associated with imperialist militarism, the potentially calamitous effects of climate change and its concomitant exigencies related to the acquisition of sustainable energy sources, clean water supplies, people-centered agricultural production, guaranteed healthcare and quality education requires the attention of all serious African organizations.

AfCFTA can only be realized when the full weight of the masses is thrown towards its enactment. There is no substitute for the creative genius of the people in their quest for total freedom and social justice.

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